World War I: The Eastern Front

Aside from the war in France, the most important front of the First World War was the three-cornered fight between Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Russia on the Eastern Front. In terms of strategy, the Eastern and Western fronts were intimately linked—events on the one invariably affected the military situation on the other. Since Germany was fighting on both fronts, the Germans were able, at least in theory, to utilize their interior lines of communication and their superb railway system to switch troops back and forth as needed. Despite many Russian disasters, despite the ultimate Russian defeat, there is little doubt that Russia contributed much to the final allied victory. It is quite possible to argue Russian military moves in the East saved the French army in the west on at least two vitally important occasions. During the first two months of the war, the surprising speed of the Russian attack on East Prussia forced Helmuth von Moltke to transfer 3 full corps of soldiers to the east at a time when every soldier was needed desperately in the West. This troop transfer weakened the Germans just enough to allow the French army to counter-attack Moltke’s forces successfully on the Marne, and thus defeat the Schlieffen plan. Two years later, at the height of the Battle of Verdun during the summer of 1916, the Russians launched a surprise attack against the Austrians. The unexpected success of this attack forced Erich von Falkenhayn to rush German reserves to the East once again to plug the gap: This depleted the German reserves at the height of the battle of Verdun. France was saved and the mystique of Falkenhayn was once and for all discredited. But to judge from the character of operations on the two fronts, one would, think the two wars were fought in different eras. The war in the East was characterized by unusual mobility and smashing, clear-cut, decisive tactical victories. In the East, there was even a role for massed cavalry in pursuit of retreating armies.

**Westerners vs. Easterners**

The most interesting strategic debate of the entire was the argument between “Westerners” and “Easterners” in the German High Command. The “Westerners” were those, like Erich von Falkenhayn, who thought that the key to victory lay in France. The Easterners were led by the team of Hindenburg and Ludendorff and their numerous supporters within the army. Indeed, Hindenburg and Ludendorff were enormously popular within the country itself. Colonel Max von Hoffmann summed up the viewpoint of the Easterners in Dec. 1914, when he said that: “The method of conducting the War in the West terrifies me. Falkenhayn is the evil angel of our fatherland and, unfortunately, he has the Kaiser in his pocket.”

In reality, the final decision lay in the Kaiser’s hands; in fact, this would be the most important role played by Kaiser William in the entire war. He sided with the “Westerners” largely because he genuinely liked Erich von Falkenhayn and because he despised and distrusted Hindenburg and Ludendorff. Nevertheless, the Germans, for the most part, tried to remain on the defensive in the west while amassing armies in the east large enough to knock Russia out of the war. The two exceptions to this rule would be the German attack on Verdun in 1916 (which you have read about in the *Horne* book) and the great Ludendorff offensives of spring 1918. On the German side, the great point of contention was always the precise weight of military power assigned to each front. Because both Falkenhayn and the Kaiser were cautious and concerned about holding the line in France, they never could bring themselves to take a chance of stripping...
the Western Front to raise a large enough force to deploy in the East. The acrimonious debate between “Westerners” and “Easterners” divided the German government and army for much of the war.

The German High Command concluded bluntly at the end of 1915 that no direct military approach could bring victory against Germany’s most powerful enemy: Great Britain. By the same token, no conceivable allied offensive in France seemed likely to overwhelm the German defenses. Adopting the tactical defensive in the West meant that the Germans had to devise defensive tactics effective enough to counter the growing Allied superiority in manpower. The answer was to dig, pour concrete, and work to create an ever-tougher defensive zone. Would this defensive system in France pay strategic dividends by freeing up enough men and guns to win a decisive victory in Russian that would force the Russians to sue for peace? Most historians have condemned Erich von Falkenhayn for his excessive caution, his strategic indecisiveness. Above all, Falkenhayn never took advantage of Germany’s one great strategic advantage: the ability to move troops rapidly from West to East to secure a temporary superiority. His principle was to cautiously secure the defense on both fronts. As the great British strategist Sir Basil H. Liddell-Hart wrote: “His actions and his mental attitude were those of a commander striving to ward off impending defeat rather than one whose mighty army had only missed decisive victory by a hair’s breadth.” (Horne, p. 33) In other words, German commanders, especially Falkenhayn in the key years of 1915-1916, were extremely competent operational leaders, but failed to pursue a consistent and coherent strategy for victory. As we shall see, Hindenburg and Ludendorff shared an inclination towards the opposite extreme—the tendency to gamble everything on one attack.

After the war, almost every military observer in the Allied countries could not understand why Germany had not taken some risks in the West in order to achieve a superiority against the Russians and possibly knock Russia out of the war a year earlier. The great British strategist Sir Basil H. Liddell-Hart argued: “If, after the Marne in 1914, or even later, she [Germany] had adopted a war policy of defense in the West, offence in the East, the issue of the war might well have been different.” (Liddell-Hart, p. 189) Winston Churchill concurred: “One-half the effort, one quarter the sacrifice, lavished vainly in the attack on Verdun would have overcome the difficulty of the defective communications [in Russia]. Russia might have been knocked out of the war a year earlier; even if she staggered on, with the wheat and raw materials of the Ukraine tucked beneath their belt, the Central Powers could have prolonged the fight, undismayed by the Royal Navy’s blockade. Fortunately for the Allies, it was Falkenhayn, not Ludendorff, who held the reins in 1916.” (Horne, p. 35)

Let’s turn now to an early and fairly typical example of Warfare in the east, the battle of Tannenberg in August, 1914. (Break down the Battle)

Tannenberg: was typical of Eastern Front warfare in many important respects:

1. First it demonstrated, that the German army enjoyed a marked superiority over the Russians -- The Germans were more mobile, better disciplined. They had much more efficient Staff-work and planning and their weaponry was superior:

2. The campaigns in the east were often campaigns of maneuver --- The front was not frozen into the kind of siege warfare on a gigantic scale that characterized the Western front.
3. On the Eastern front, decisive tactical victories were possible: One hallmark of a truly decisive victory is always the capture of large numbers of prisoners—at Tannenberg for example, The Germans captured or destroyed Samsonov’s entire army; These kinds of decisive tactical results were impossible to achieve in the West;

4. And yet, as in the West, even the most dramatic tactical victories like Tannenberg could not and did not lead to a strategic decision; the Russians lost more men at Tannenberg than the French did at Sedan in 1870, yet the war dragged on.

Why was this so? Here are three factors that impacted German and Russian armies on the Eastern Front: Geography, Socio–political problems, and Technological gaps between the opposing forces.

**Geography**

In the West, the front extended about 450 miles over an area with rolling hills, many rivers, many forests, and firm chalky soil. Under the conditions of the First World War, France was good defensive ground. In addition, the Western front was manned by very large opposing armies—well over 10,000,000 men on both sides. The soldiers on the Western front, for the most part, were well-trained and well-equipped draftees and volunteers representing modern industrialized societies. This combination of men, equipment and geography were ideal for the development of the most sophisticated defensive positions in the history of warfare. However, in the East the situation was very different. The front was much more fluid and the distances involved, were vast. The front extended from the Baltic Sea south to the Carpathian mountains, then East to the Caucasus mountains—all told a distance of nearly 1800 miles! In other words, the Eastern Front was nearly 4 times as long as the front in France. There were far more soldiers in the east, about 15,000,000 men but there are still not enough men to hold the Front in a continuous, unbroken series of defensive systems. In general, the soldiers in the east fought without the degree of massed artillery support that characterized the war in France. Furthermore, the land itself was not suitable for defensive warfare, much of the territory involved was flat plains broken by occasional large rivers and pine forests. This land was ideal for cavalry operations but hard to hold. Unlike France, where a defensive line could be anchored by the Channel and the Alps, there were no geographic features upon which to base a defense. The soil itself in the East tends to be sandy and much less suited for earthworks and trenches.

Two of the three armies involved in the Eastern Front suffered from grave internal and political weaknesses. An offensive against either the Russians or the Austrians had far more chance of success than an attack against the Germans.

**The Russian Army**

The Imperial Russian army could muster millions of soldiers, often poorly-trained by modern standards, but remarkably brave and obedient. In the words of John Keegan: “The Russian officer corps united two classes which scarcely knew each other, a broad mass of company and battalion commanders that took orders from a narrow upper crust of aristocrats.” (Keegan, p. 141) The Imperial Russian military system was characterized by favoritism,
corruption and inefficiency and none of these factors changed for the better during the war. As a result the Russian soldier was usually hungrier and equipped with fewer and poorer weapons than his German opponents. The highest officers of the Russian army often were incompetents who gained their post through influence at Court. Russian Staff and organizational work was left in the hands of incompetents as well. Even during the war, the Staff College was closed for up to ½ of each month for holidays. Despite these obvious disadvantages, the Russian Army began the war with a sense of confidence. Numbers alone seemed to indicate that German fears of the Russian army had a solid basis. In August 1914, Russia invaded East Prussia with 98 infantry divisions and 37 full divisions of cavalry! (Ibid)

The Austrian Army

In some ways the situation was far worse in the Austrian army. However, the Austrian military system was somewhat better than the Russian army if only because the command structure was largely staffed by Germans. About 75% of all officers were German! The ordinary soldier wearing the uniform of Franz Josef’s army might be Polish, Italian, Czech, Slovakian, or Hungarian. More to the point, he might now even speak German, the official language of the army and the government. The army of Austria-Hungary is a case study of the effects of ethnic differences on military effectiveness. In 1914, the Austrian army was a welter of different and often disaffected ethnic groups. Many Austrian soldiers felt more of a sense of solidarity with the enemy than with their German-speaking officers. As John Keegan puts it:

Of the nine language groups of the army, 44% were Slav (Czech, Slovak, Croatian, Serb, Slovene, Ruthenian, Polish and Bosnian Muslim, 28% German, 18% Hungarian, 8% Rumanian and 2% Italian. The Germans were always dependable; the Hungarians, privileged co-equals, remained reliable until defeat stared them in the face, the Catholic Croats had a long record of loyalty to the empire, the Poles, hating the Russians were loyal. Once war ceased to be a brief adventure, the Austrian army became for its soldiers a ‘prison of the nations’ with the ubiquitous German officers acting as jailers. (Ibid, p. 156)

The deep ethnic differences that divided the empire’s society divided its army as well; the net effect of all this was that desertion became a gigantic problem for the Austrian army. The power of Nationalism can be a disruptive force as well as a cohesive force within an army. By 1915, General Ludendorff could complain that the German army was “shackled to a corpse.” In other words, Germany had a very unreliable ally. This accounts for the fact that the Austrian army often did not fight very well and in defeat had a tendency to dissolve with large numbers of prisoners deserting to the Russians. To ethnic minorities like the Czechs: desertion became almost a patriotic duty

Technological

Perhaps the most important single reason why the war in the east was more mobile was the immense German superiority over Russia in technology. This technological gap between the German and Russian armies was so extreme that the Eastern Front would have some of the
characteristics of Colonial warfare. The Germans were almost always successful when and where they chose to attack, unlike the Western Front where the Germans faced armies as sophisticated as their own. The technical backwardness of the Russian army was staggering esp. when combined with their inadequacies of command, communications and supply. In 1914, the Russian army was equipped with 7 batteries of field artillery in each division while the Germans have 14 batteries. The entire Russian army had only 60 batteries of heavy artillery (guns over 150 mm), the German army had 381. One time in 1915, when the Germans concentrated 200 heavy guns against the Russian Third army – They could only muster 4 heavy guns in response. Tactically, this superiority in heavy weapons meant that the Germans could lay down one of the famous “Creeping barrages” that would literally protect their attacking infantry behind a wall of moving explosions and project them into and through the Russian trenches.

The situation for small arms was even worse; the Russian army had only 650,000 modern rifles in 1915 and over 10,000,000 men. There are many accounts of Russian units sent into attacks unarmed -- the men were told to take weapons from their dead and wounded. Even if there had been enough rifles to go around, they would still have faced the problem of finding ammunition. The Russians Faced catastrophic shortages of ammunition throughout the War. During the first year of the war, Russian industry was only able to produce 550 million rounds of small arms ammo – the army was expending 250 million rounds per month.

Due to these factors, the German army was usually able to smash through the Russian defenses with ease—a situation unknown on the Western front.

Both the Germans and the Russians themselves were well aware of the relative backwardness of the Russian army—the Russians tried to compensate for their technical inferiority by designing their tactics to make use of their greatest asset: Manpower. Russian soldiers have long been famous for their dogged persistence, their solid willingness to endure physical hardships, and their unquestioning courage. But this had always been Russia's principal military asset -- along with the almost limitless territorial expanse of Western Russia. Russia can usually trade space for time and wear down any attacker. These factors in 1812, along with the Russian winter, explain why Russia was such a formidable opponent to Napoleon Bonaparte. But this manpower was much less of an advantage in the technological climate of 1914. The German army, equipped richly with artillery, magazine rifles and machine guns were easily able to offset the traditional Russian advantage of numbers. Unfortunately for the Russians, the German tactical superiority in weapons and mobility proved, decisive. But unfortunately for the Germans, not even this superiority proved decisive enough to bring about a strategic victory that would knock Russia out of the war. The German army was a magnificent military machine. The Germans were well-armed, well-trained and supplied by an extensive RR system. In the command team of Paul v. Hindenburg, Erich Ludendorff, and Max v. Hoffmann, the Germans clearly had the best operational commanders of the war. How did Russia endure? Once again, the simple answer lies in the fact that Germany had to fight a two-front war and the German general staff could not agree on how to concentrate enough forces in the East to win a strategic victory. Due to the never ending demands for more men and guns for the Western front, there were never enough men and material available for the east. In the event of a tactical victory or breakthrough, there were never enough reserves available to exploit the breakthrough and push on towards Moscow.

The First World War was a railway war. It had long been a German strategy to use the railway to move large number of men to the flanks, or even behind the flanks of the enemy at
the beginning of a war. This strategy led to victories against Austria in 1866 and France in 1871. It almost worked again in the form of Schlieffen Plan in 1914. But the Germans were unable to exploit the Russian railway system to pull off something similar. The reason for this was the French advisors who helped Russia build their military railroads in the 1890s made sure that Germany could not have easy access to the net in case of a quick victory. During construction of the Russian railroads, the Russians deliberately chose to build their railroads on on a different gauge; in other words, Russian railroads were wider than the standard European gauge. This meant that the Germans would be unable to use their locomotives and rolling stock in Russia.

As a result of all this is the emergence of distinct military pecking order on the Eastern front, but this too leads to a strategic stalemate.

1. The German army repeatedly proves able to smash the Russian defences and push them back to the limits of German supplies, communications and endurance.

2. The Russians are vastly inferior to the Germans, but extremely stubborn and perservering. More importantly, Russian manpower reserves are sufficient to replace even the heaviest losses. And finally, after 1916 the Russian supply situation begins to improve.

3. The Austrian army is much better equipped than the Russian but suffers from ethnic liabilities even more crippling than the Russians. The Austrian army is falling apart from within into its component nationalities.