

operating on the Ancre front while the Third Army attacked from the north-west about Arras. These converging attacks, if successful, would pinch off the whole salient, and would be likely to make the withdrawal of the enemy's troops from it a very costly manoeuvre for him if it were not commenced in good time.

The front of attack on the Arras side was to include the Vimy Ridge, possession of which I considered necessary to secure the left flank of the operations on the south bank of the Scarpe. The capture of this ridge, which was to be carried out by the First Army, also offered other important advantages. It would deprive the enemy of valuable observation and give us a wide view over the plains stretching from the eastern foot of the ridge to Douai and beyond. Moreover, although it was evident that the enemy might, by a timely withdrawal, avoid a battle in the awkward salient still held by him between the Scarpe and the Ancre, no such withdrawal from his important Vimy Ridge positions was likely. He would be almost certain to fight for this ridge and, as my object was to deal him a blow which would force him to use up reserves, it was important that he should not evade my attack.

(3) With the forces at my disposal, even combined with what the French proposed to undertake in co-operation, I did not consider that any great strategical results were likely to be gained by following up a success on the front about Arras and to the south of it, beyond the capture of the objectives aimed at as described above. It was therefore my intention to transfer my main offensive to another part of my front after these objectives had been secured.

The front selected for these further operations was in Flanders. They were to be commenced as soon as possible after the Arras offensive, and continued throughout the summer, so far as the forces at my disposal would permit.

(4) The positions held by us in the Ypres salient since May, 1915, were far from satisfactory. They were completely overlooked by the enemy. Their defence involved a considerable strain on the troops occupying them, and they were certain to be costly to maintain against a serious attack, in which the enemy would enjoy all the advantages in observation and in the placing of his artillery. Our positions would be much improved by the capture of the Messines-Wytschaete Ridge and of the high ground which extends thence north-eastwards for some seven miles and then trends north through Broodseinde and Passchendaele.

The operation in its first stages was a very difficult one, and in 1916 I had judged that the general situation was not yet ripe to attempt it. In the summer of 1917, however, as larger forces would be at my disposal, and as, in the Somme battle, our new Armies had proved their ability to overcome the enemy's strongest defences, and had lowered his power of resistance, I considered myself justified in undertaking it. Various preliminary steps had already been taken, including the necessary development of railways in the area, which had been proceeding quietly from early in 1916. I therefore hoped, after completing my spring offensive further south, to be able to develop this Flanders attack without great delay, and to strike hard in the north before the enemy realised that the attack in the south would not be pressed further.

(5) Subsequently, unexpected developments in the early weeks of the year necessitated certain modifications in my plans above described.

New proposals for action were made by our French Allies which entailed a considerable extension of my defensive front, a modification of the rôle previously allotted to the British Armies, and an acceleration of the date of my opening attack.

As a result of these proposals, I received instructions from His Majesty's Government to readjust my previous plans to meet the wishes of our Allies. Accordingly, it was arranged that I should commence the offensive early in April on as great a scale as the extension of my front would permit, with due regard to defensive requirements on the rest of my line. The British attack, under the revised scheme, was, in the first instance, to be preparatory to a more decisive operation to be undertaken a little later by the French Armies, in the subsequent stages of which the British Forces were to co-operate to the fullest extent possible.

It was further agreed that if this combined offensive did not produce the full results hoped for within a reasonable time, the main efforts of the British Armies should then be transferred to Flanders as I had originally intended. In this case our Allies were to assist me by taking over as much as possible of the front held by my troops, and by carrying out, in combination with my Flanders attacks, such offensives on the French front as they might be able to undertake.

(6) My original plan for the preliminary operations on the Arras front fortunately fitted in well with what was required of me under the revised scheme, and the necessary preparations were already in progress. In order to give full effect, however, to the new rôle allotted to me in this revised scheme, preparations for the attack in Flanders had to be restricted for the time being to what could be done by such troops and other labour as could not in any case be made available on the Arras front. Moreover, the carrying out of any offensive this year on the Flanders front became contingent on the degree of success attained by the new plan.

(7) The chief events to note during the period of preparations for the spring offensive were the retirement of the enemy on the Arras-Soissons front and the revolution in Russia.

As regards the former, the redistribution of my forces necessitated by the enemy's withdrawal was easily made. The front decided on for my main attack on the Arras front lay almost altogether outside the area from which the enemy retired, and my plans and preparations on that side were not deranged thereby. His retirement, however, did enable the enemy to avoid the danger of some of his troops being cut off by the converging attacks arranged for, and to that extent reduced the results which might have been attained by my operation as originally planned. The rôle of the Fifth Army, too, had to be modified. Instead of attacking from the line of the Ancre simultaneously with the advance of the Third Army from the north-west, it had now to follow up the retiring enemy and establish itself afresh in front of the Hindenburg line to which the enemy withdrew. This line had been very strongly fortified, and sited with great care and skill to deny all advantages of position to any force attempting to attack it.