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# THE IMPROBABLE ALLIANCE: THE CENTRAL POWERS AND COALITION WARFARE, 1914-1918

by

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*(What can be learned about Coalition Warfare from the way in which the Quadruple Alliance (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Turkey and Bulgaria) functioned? Where does the blame lie for its failure? Was the Alliance a nonstarter from its inception? Did the partners bite off more than they could chew? Did the partners expect more from the partnership than it was capable of yielding? What are the lessons for today and for the future?)*

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"...it was said that we held Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and Turkey by the throat, so to speak, ready to strangle them if they did not do exactly as we wished. Yet there could not be a greater perversion of the truth than this assertion. I am convinced that nothing showed the weakness of Germany, in comparison with England, more clearly than the difference between the political grip each of them had on her allies."

—Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg  
*Out of My Life*

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Wartime allies, like mistresses, should be selected with circumspection and deliberation. To enter into hasty or emotion-inspired transitory attachments, be they for private or public reasons, is to invite disaster embracing a relationship marked for persistent turbulence that begins with misunderstanding regarding intent and ends with vexatious dissolution. There must be present sufficient and complementary characteristics, accord as to goals, and mutually compensating strengths and weaknesses to reinforce the liaison against perverse external forces.

While both alliance statecraft and love affairs may be risky undertakings, the analogy grows somewhat indistinct: alliances usually involve more than two "contracting parties"; the global scrutiny accorded coalition partners far transcends the notoriety accruing to couples in illicit trysts; the demands upon union are broader and deeper; and the stakes are inestimably higher, involving populations, treasuries, boundaries and national destinies.

The exigencies, frustrations, and complexities of coalition warfare are exemplified by the evolution and operations of the Quadruple Alliance (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Turkey and Bulgaria) during the Great War, 1914-1918. There are several excellent lessons inherent in the functioning of the "Central Powers," a coalition of states characterized by extremely divergent war aims, radically different socio-economic structures, and contrasting strategic capabilities. The cultural and geographic differences were enormous. Unless one reviews the historic setting and events leading to the cataclysmic days of August 1914, he would conclude that the alliance was a most improbable one; that these states had no business coalescing for the purposes of hemispheric conquest. Yet, in spite of the



U.S. SIGNAL CORPS

*Von Hindenburg, Kaiser Wilhelm II, Ludendorff*

disparities, the alliance, as a military endeavor, performed remarkably well throughout the war, achieving a degree of harmony and collaboration which eluded its adversaries until the spring of 1918. While their practice of statesmanship and the formulation of strategic guidance were significant shortcomings, the four powers were signally successful in the conduct of combined military operations against the Allies on several fronts.

#### **THE STRATEGIC SETTING: 1879-1915**

While the origins of the war have been exhaustively treated by scholars, it is necessary to review the key events leading to formation of the alliance in 1914 and 1915. Germany was the linchpin of the coalition and fountainhead of strategic guidance, moral

sustenance and financial largesse; therefore, any evolutionary historical trace should focus on her manipulations.

By virtue of history and geography, Germany feared two adversaries—France and Russia. Bismarck, the Master Pilot of German affairs, had laid the cornerstone for German-Austro Hungarian unity in 1879, with the Dual Alliance, a preventive arrangement against Russia and some "other power," presumably France. In 1882, the alliance was expanded to include Italy and was redesignated the Triple Alliance. This time France was specifically named as a potential aggressor. It was intended by Bismarck that these treaties should keep Britain in "friendly isolation." While the Dual Alliance effectively bound Germany and Austria-Hungary until 1918, Italy, arguing that Austria's action against Serbia in July

1914 was incompatible with the agreement of 1882, withdrew by a declaration of neutrality. Interestingly, she became a belligerent in 1915, but on the opposing side.

In 1890, Kaiser Wilhelm dismissed the patriarchal chancellor and embarked upon a series of provocative acts which, over the years, heightened tensions throughout Europe and alienated the heads of every major state.

Despite the solidarity of Berlin and Vienna's "Nibelung Compact" (as it came to be called after 1879), Germany's military arrangements with Turkey were not completed until the eve of war, and with Bulgaria not until a year later. This reflects growing German apprehension of being isolated and overwhelmed by a major coalition and a frenetic search for partners of any sort, even those whose strategic credentials were somewhat questionable.

The foundation for cooperation between Bulgaria and Turkey was laid in 1913, by the Treaty of Constantinople. On June 24th, in an *aide-memoire* to Berlin, the Austrians essentially proposed an expanded alliance incorporating these powers. German Chancellor Bethman-Hollweg attempted to induce Bulgaria into the camp by postwar territorial offerings (Thrace and Serbian-held Macedonia). This price was contested by Allied counterproposals while the Bulgarians vacillated into mid-1915, but leaning more toward promises emanating from Berlin and Vienna. Germany capped her courtship of Sofia with a loan of 400 million francs, to close the deal. On September 6, 1915, Bulgaria, a veritable "bonus-baby-with-deferred-payment," signed on with the Central Powers.

Germany's groundwork with Turkey was less frenetic and more calculated. Here, joint commercial interests extended back to 1898, the year in which the Deutsche Bank secured Turk concessions relative to deployment of the Baghdad Railway, encroaching into the strategic backyards of Britain and Russia. Friction with England over the Palestine-Egyptian boundary, the ascendancy of the revanchist "Young Turks," and Russian aspirations for Bosphoran hegemony resulted in a burgeoning Turkish affinity for Germany.

From Constantinople, in 1914, Germany looked very much like a winner.

The Germans spared no efforts to impress the Turks that this was indeed the case. In June 1913, cables were dispatched to Constantinople concerning the acceptability of a German Military Mission to Turkey to vitalize the primitive but potentially energetic Turkish army. The Turks consented, and in November the Kaiser dispatched Major General Liman von Sanders and a contingent of 42 advisers to Constantinople. Von Sanders, like most enterprising professional career officers, set about finding things to do, extending his authority over Turks and Germans alike, with both beneficent and detrimental effects for coalition harmony. (If numbers are any criterion of quality of effort, which they often are not, by mid-1918, the advisory strength would reach 800.) Like Stilwell in China, Von Sanders' counterpart relations did not always reflect total harmony; antipathy and hostility often marked German-Turkish relations. The two powers concluded a secret alliance against Russia on August 1, 1914, while Constantinople officially remained "neutral," completing war preparations. The entrance of the German cruisers *Goeben* and *Breslau* into the Dardanelles served notice to the Allies of Turkey's probable wartime posture; hostile action in the Black Sea against Russian ports on 29 October confirmed her stance. Turkey was in.

#### **STATUS AND RELATIONS OF THE COALITION, 1914**

The alliance was handicapped from the outset by a plethora of shortcomings which persisted and were exacerbated not only by the actions of its enemies but by the nature of the coalition itself. There were such immense diversities and conflicts among the partners that it is remarkable that the entente functioned as well as it did through four arduous years of warfare. To her credit, Germany had tried to improve upon this dismal power picture by expanding alliance connections early in the conflict—Sweden, Holland, Greece, Italy (prior to her entry on

the Allied side) and Rumania were all approached but declined for one reason or another. Berlin was stuck with what it had created.

## GERMANY

Germany was geared for conflict and spoiling for war, although not of the magnitude in which she found herself by December, 1914. Her strategic balance was adequate, her armies were trained and supported by an excellent logistics system and backed by mobilizable reserves in depth. Her navy, though not of parity with Britain's was impressive. Her population was nearly homogenous, nationalistic, and seized with historical Teutonic optimism concerning her destiny to dominate Europe. Industrialization had gotten a running start and total national dedication simplified the transition of her factories to a wartime footing.

Germany's "Grand Design," although not articulated outside of chancellor circles, was to create a new state—"Mittel Europa"—extending from the Baltic to the Black Sea. According to historian Fritz Fischer, such German policymakers as Bethmann-Hollweg, General Falkenhayn, and Foreign Minister Jagow envisioned, in one variant or another, a Germany that occupied or controlled nearly the entire Central European land mass, including Russian Poland, most of Belgium, the French collieries of Longvey-Briey, and the Caucasus.

The future status of Poland became the central issue of dispute between Berlin and Vienna. Although there were many variants on the German theme, Berlin desired to retain Poland under German domination, displace some Poles eastward to allow for the relocation of Germans, and create an "independent" Polish state closely linked politically and militarily with Germany. Austria-Hungary desired to see created a truly independent Poland, tied economically to Austria by means of a Polish Austro-Hungarian customs union.

Throughout 1915 and 1916 the "Polish Question" would drive the two principal allies further apart, and would contribute to the

Dual Monarchy's fruitless quest for a separate peace in 1917 and 1918. On the military side, the Great German General Staff represented the model of martial efficiency in Europe, but not without shortcomings such as high command rigidity and inherent inflexibility. B.H. Liddel-Hart commented on the flavor of German Staff procedures in 1914: "Executive skill is the fruit of practice; and constant practice or repetition tends inevitably to deaden originality and elasticity of mind."

Walter Goerlitz described other deficiencies of the Staff, remarkably similar to problems besetting contemporary establishments: separate development of requirements by military and naval staffs, failure to exchange intelligence findings, and the reluctance of military departments to coordinate plans with concerned civil agencies.

German officialdom's view of its allies lacked consensus; there were as many opinions as there were proponents to express them. The Kaiser, while espousing a royal affection for Austria-Hungary's venerable Emperor Franz Joseph, was disdainful of the Monarchy's strategic capabilities. General von Hindenburg, latter-day Chief of Staff, appeared to respect the Austrian Army but in his memoirs suggests that Austrian statesmen had dragged a reluctant Germany into a Viennese-fomented conflict. Ludendorff was characterized as "tactless in his handling of the Austrians." General van Hoffman viewed German support of the Austro-Hungarians as a critical obligation. In sum, the prevailing attitude was one of paternal condescension, tempered by restrained pessimism.

The view toward Turkey was even more ambivalent, based upon two separate and usually conflicting sources of information—that of the German Embassy and the reports compiled by the resident Mission Chief, Liman von Sanders. Von Sanders' organization had been installed over the objections of German Ambassador von Wagenheim; therefore, the two agencies were at odds. According to Von Sanders, the Attaches, deskbound in Constantinople, transmitted roseate accounts of Turkish military capabilities. Von Sanders, with advisers throughout the structure, submitted

comprehensive reports of corruption, leadership shortcomings, abysmal sanitary conditions and lassitude, characteristic of the true state of affairs. Alas, the Kaiser, often bereft of good news from the Eastern or Western fronts, was more receptive to the optimistic Embassy dispatches. This eventually resulted in an unrealistic German allocation of tasks and resources to the Turks, with adverse results in the Mediterranean Theater.

Little is recorded of the attitudes in Berlin about her primitive ally, Bulgaria. Aside from the initial war loan, Bulgaria never received much in the way of material support. Strategically, Germany saw Bulgaria as an eventual land link with Turkey (which was achieved), and as a check upon Romania's accession to the Allies (which was not).

### AUSTRIA-HUNGARY

In 1914, the Dual Monarchy was in serious trouble, a condition exacerbated through the next four years by military defeat, economic debilitation and internal dissension. Throughout Europe, monarchy was in a death struggle with both republicanism and socialism. The specter of Pan-Slavism, emerging from St. Petersburg against the "Rotting West," led the Hapsburg Monarchy to perpetrate excesses against its heterogeneous population in a feeble effort to achieve national unity. Nine different major nationalities and eight smaller ethnic groupings comprised the Monarchy. German-Austrians were in a minority—12 of 53 million. To many common citizens of the empire, Belgrade, more than Vienna or Budapest, represented the political wellspring of the Balkan peoples.

Austria-Hungary's political *bete-noire* remained Serbia, whose destruction was desired above all other objectives (Austro-Serbian relations, Sarajevo and Austria's mobilization against Serbia during the frantic summer of 1914 had catalyzed the conflict); Germany, however, evidenced little interest in Vienna's strategic focus, concentrating instead upon the formidable tasks against Russia in the East and the Allies

in the West. German dominance of the alliance thus established the pattern from the opening days of the war, forcing the Monarchy to allocate most of its military resources against the Russian behemoth, with attendant high casualties and financial expenditures.

Of Austria-Hungary's forces, Liddel-Hart gives us the best brief appraisal:

The Austro-Hungarian Army, if patterned on the German model, was a vastly inferior instrument. Not only had it a tradition of defeat... but its racial mixture prevented the homogeneity that distinguished its ally. ... The troops within the borders of the empire were often racially akin to those beyond, and this compelled Austria to a political instead of a military based distribution of forces, so that kinsmen would not fight each other.

Austria-Hungary also lacked the vast industrial base, depth of managerial talent, and transportation infrastructure of the Germans—weaknesses that would reduce her effectiveness as a viable ally even before the end of the first year's conflict.

### TURKEY

Enver Pasha and the "Young Turks" harbored illusions of recreating, in some form, the Ottoman Empire, ignoring the realities of twentieth century power politics. The Turkish Revolution, Balkan Wars, a traditional economy, and internal disorder and terrorism until the eve of war did not exactly commend Turkey as a world power, although her strategic location resulted in courtship by most of the major European capitals. Kaiser Wilhelm's ambitions to extend Berlin's influence to India led to more German concessions than the alliance would ultimately prove worth.

The Turkish armed forces were almost as diverse as those of Austria-Hungary, but in a far more archaic state. Consequently, senior German officers assumed numerous command and staff positions in the Turkish Army,

upgrading Turkish combat capability considerably. This relationship continued through 1918 and makes for an interesting study in itself. (The experience of the German Military Mission exhibits some remarkable parallels to those of American advisers in South Vietnam from 1962-1965.)

Under German tutelage, Turks were to eject a British lodgment at Gallipoli, fight a very successful delaying action in 1917-1918, hold Russia in check in the Black Sea and thwart Allied linkup with its eastern partner. These were considerable accomplishments for the semi-feudal, poor and disheartened nation that was Turkey in 1914. Turkey's waterways remained objectives of Allied strategy throughout the war.

### **BULGARIA**

Historians have given only cursory treatment to Bulgaria's utility as a Central Power member in the Great War. Exhausted by the Balkan War, Bulgaria did not become an active participant until September of 1916, and then only after considerable German financial support and the promise of postwar territorial enticements. Despite the marginal nature of her military contribution, her political stability was noteworthy compared to that of Austria-Hungary.

Bulgaria's military effort was only regionally important in operations with her allies against Serbia (1915) and against Rumania (1917). While her relations with her allies were cordial, her marginal power status precluded her treatment as a full partner.

### **ORGANIZATION FOR COALITION WARFARE**

General authority for the direction of military operations for each national component was vested in its national authority, although operational control of specific field forces would, in numerous instances, pass to foreign commanders—an expedient measure to permit combined operations of limited objectives or duration. Even during those periods, each military commander retained rights of appeal (though seldom exercised) to his own superior

national authority. In an era when the generals had seized the controls, the Kaiser had no illusions about his role as a supreme commander, commenting on one occasion:

"... The General Staff tells me nothing. If people in Germany think that I am the Supreme Commander they are grossly mistaken."

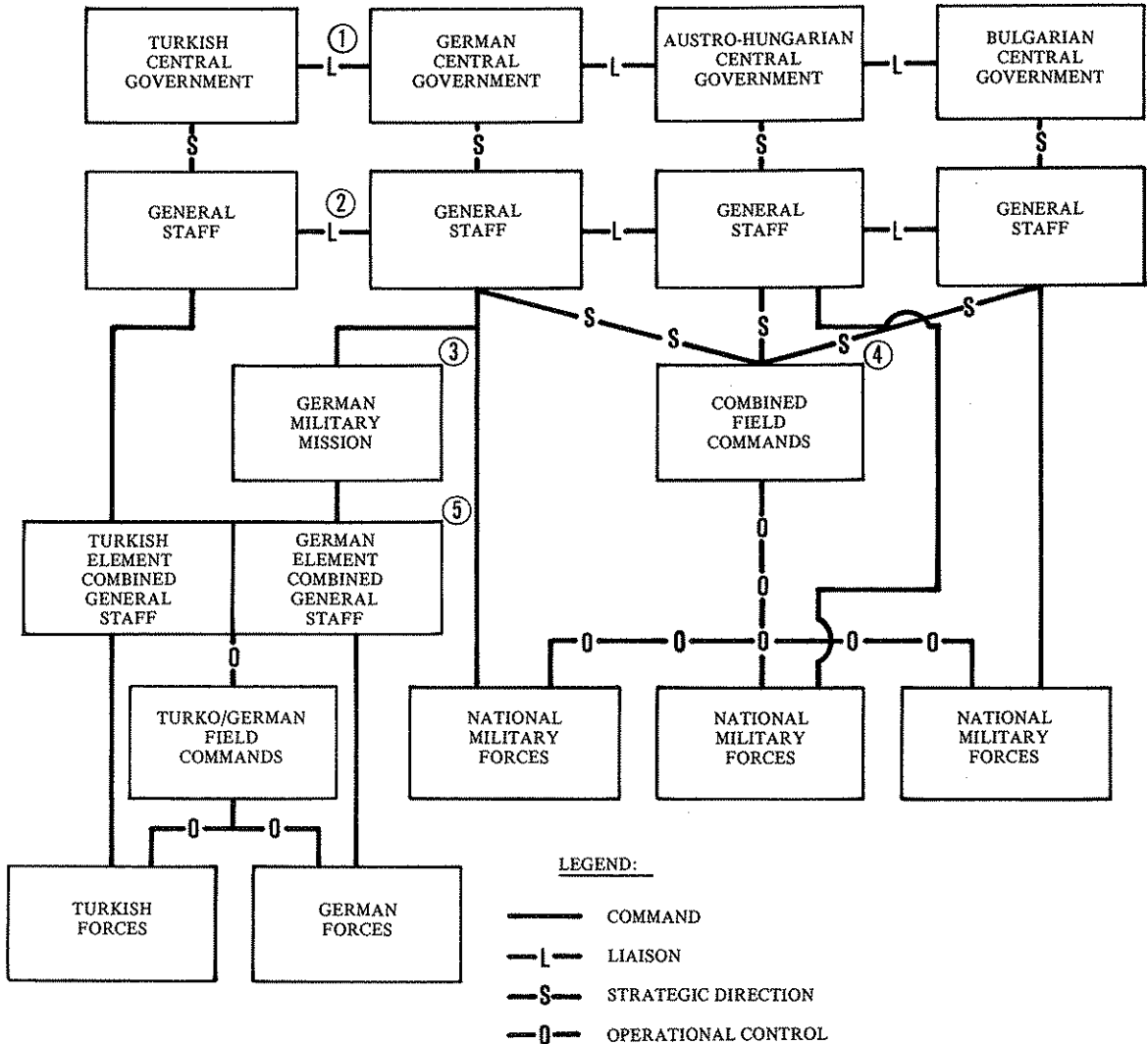
Strategic objectives and concepts were agreed upon most informally, usually during recurring protocol visits between the Chiefs of State in one another's capitals. For example, in Vienna in November 1915, the Kaiser and the Emperor Franz Joseph agreed that there would be no peace concluded unless the Allies sued for it, a compact which both were to regret with the passage of time.

The Kaiser did not always rest on protocol when he desired to issue a strategic dictum. On 23 August 1914, at a luncheon, he instructed the lowly Austrian Military Liaison Officer to begin an offensive against Russia. Fortunately, General Staff representatives were present to put this rather significant mandate into proper channels.

From sources available, Figure 1 has been prepared to represent the likely politico-military structure for conduct of the war and the various lines of authority, command and liaison contrived for prosecution of the war.

The relationships between the national executives and the military staffs did not differ greatly on either side. Both sets of antagonists employed highly structured formal organizations, delegating authority essentially by function and relevance to the war effort. The notable difference between the two was the relative absence of influence of the parliamentary branch, in the case of the Quadruple Alliance. In Germany and Austria-Hungary, governments did not rise and fall upon the capricious note of a national assembly as was the case in France and Britain. While one cannot argue that Germany's interests might have been better served by a less flamboyant figure than the Kaiser, the German system militated against changing horses in midstream. Figure 2 illustrates Germany's centralized but functional organization for war, a system

**EXERCISE OF STRATEGIC DIRECTION AMONG THE CENTRAL POWERS, 1915 - 1918**



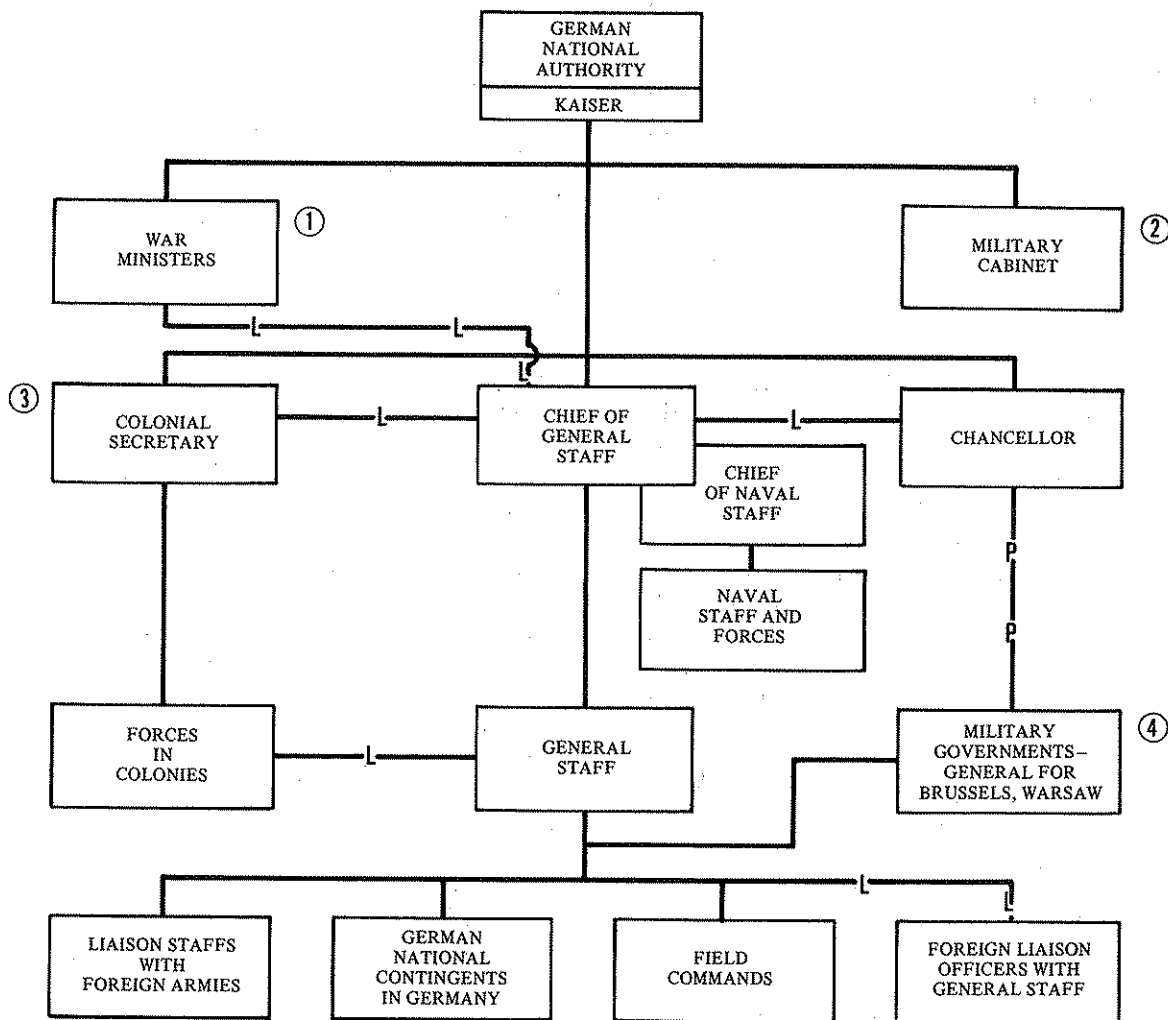
- ① INTERGOVERNMENTAL LIAISON, USUALLY ACHIEVED BY VISITS BETWEEN HEADS OF STATE, OR BY THE OPERATION OF THE RESPECTIVE DIPLOMATIC CORPS.
- ② MILITARY LIAISON, ACCOMPLISHED BY EXCHANGE OF SENIOR LIAISON OFFICERS COALITION COMMAND VISITS, CONFERENCES, LIAISON AMONG STAFFS, AS AMONG NATIONAL COMMAND AUTHORITIES INVOLVED ALL FOUR PARTNERS.
- ③ THE GERMAN MILITARY MISSION TO TURKEY WAS A SPECIAL CASE.
- ④ THE SUPREME COMMAND OF THE QUADRUPLE ALLIANCE WAS CREATED IN AUTUMN, 1916, INTERPOSING ANOTHER COMMAND LAYER. FOR DETAILS, SEE FIGURE 3.
- ⑤ TURKO-GERMAN COMBINED COMMAND WAS CO-LOCATED AND INTEGRATED.

Figure 1



GERMAN NATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR WAR

(ABOUT JANUARY, 1917)



LEGEND:

- NATIONAL DIRECTION/COMMAND
- L— LIAISON
- P— POLICY DIRECTION

- ① NATIONAL REPRESENTATIVES (COUNSELLORS) FROM STATES OF PRUSSIA, BAVARIA, SAXONY, WURTEMBERG. STATES ALSO HAD MILITARY REPRESENTATIVES ON GENERAL STAFF.
- ② THE KAISER'S PERSONAL MILITARY STAFF—HIGHLY INFLUENTIAL.
- ③ COLONIAL SECRETARY WAS ACTUALLY RESPONSIBLE FOR THE OPERATIONS OF FORCES IN THE COLONIES.
- ④ THESE GOVERNORS WERE OFFICERS WITH CIVIL/MILITARY FUNCTIONS.

Figur43

which elevated military influence and minimized political interference. This represented an advantage, at least in periods of stress, that Germany enjoyed over her opponents.

Below the Supreme Commander level, authority for direction of the forces was centered in the respective national military general staffs. Here the bulk of planning and coordination was achieved, directives issued, supervision accomplished, and *ad hoc* arrangements concluded among nations.

The preponderance of international military cooperation was effected through the exchange of military liaison officers among the Central Powers. While some authors, including Ludendorff, suggest that detailed wartime planning between Germany and Austria-Hungary commenced prior to August 1914, there is little documented evidence to affirm that such was the case. Certainly, it did not transpire between Germany and Bulgaria or Turkey because of the circumstances that dictated their late entrance into the coalition. Overall, the liaison exchange system prevailed, but was not without problems. Hindenburg describes the situation in 1916:

... My impression is confirmed that... the most difficult part of our tasks was not the great operations, but the attempt to compromise between the conflicting interests of our various allies. ...

Turko-German relations were an aberration to the general practice of informal strategic direction and the loose liaison system. The German General Staff had much greater direct influence on the conduct of operations in the Eastern Mediterranean than in any other theater in which Germany attempted combined operations; this influence is attributable to the bilateral agreement whereby the General Staff virtually dictated tactical maneuvers. While the manifestations of Turkish sovereignty were observed at the national level, the energies and initiative of the Military Mission Chief were such that an intendant-satellite relationship developed, an authority the Germans never assumed over

the forces of other allies. Despite the efforts of Turkish strongman Enver Pasha to achieve his recall, Von Sanders remained an authoritarian figure in Turkey until November 1918.

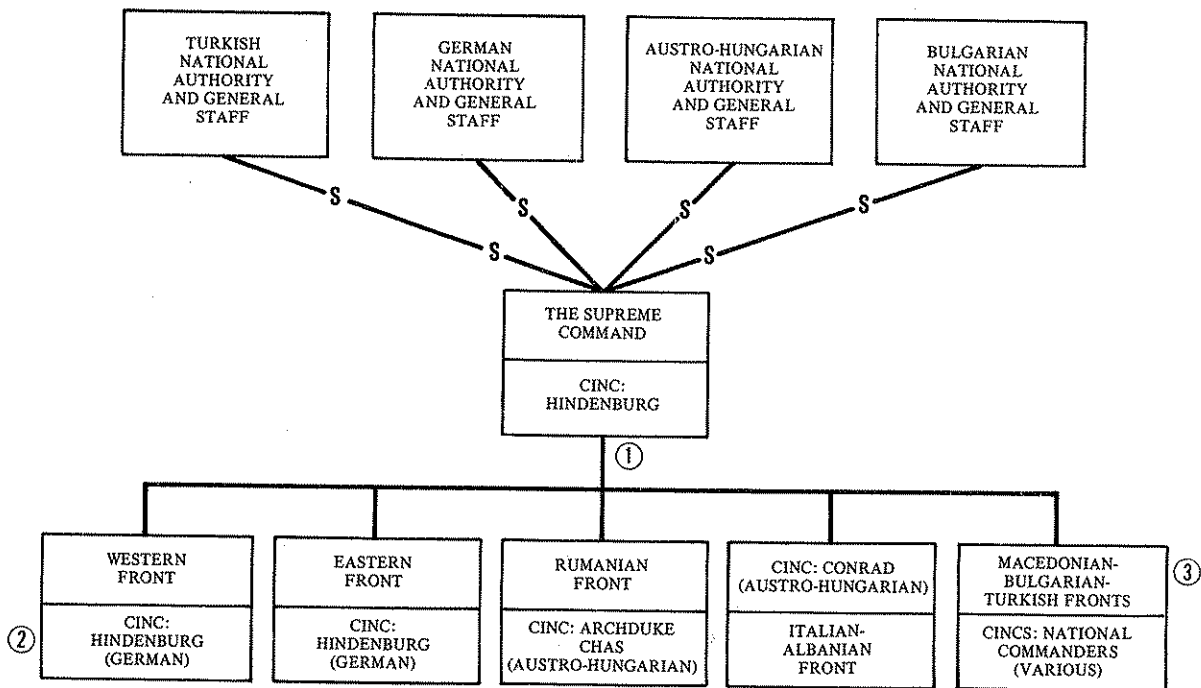
### **SUPREME COMMAND: A VISION UNFULFILLED**

A significant failure in the organizational endeavors of the Central Powers was their inability to achieve the subordination of the national prerogatives of the partner-states to the degree that insured genuine unity of effort and some centralization of the allocation of priorities and resources. By spring, 1916, the perennial Russian offensives against Galicia had nearly exhausted the forces and national will of Austria-Hungary. Hindenburg recognized that stronger measures were necessary to assure more judicious use of coalition forces than four separate general staffs had been able to devise. In June, at Pless, he broached the subject of creation of a Supreme Command, subordinating all forces of the Quadruple Alliance to a single commander. The Kaiser was noncommittal. Persistent reverses in Italy and on the Eastern Front during the summer and the opting of Rumania for the Allies reinforced Hindenburg's belief that only central direction could salvage Austria-Hungary. When he succeeded General von Falkenhayn as Chief of Staff in August, he pressed his proposal for a higher order of centralized command authority. This time, alarmed by defeats, the Kaiser and Franz Joseph approved the plan, and a multilateral command was created—in form, but unhappily, not in substance. (See Figure 3.)

Hindenburg was designated nominal Supreme Commander, but he never enjoyed the same international support as did Marshal Foch in France.

While Hindenburg presumably "commanded" Alliance forces on the Eastern Front, his real function was that of an "honest broker," reconciling differences among the respective general staffs and providing general outlines for forthcoming engagements. In effect, nothing had changed. This was as close as the Central Powers came

ORGANIZATION OF THE SUPREME COMMAND, 1916 . . . .



LEGEND:

- S— STRATEGIC DIRECTION
- COMMAND

- ① THEORETICALLY, HINDENBURG EXERCISED COMMAND OF ALL CENTRAL POWER FORCES ON ALL FRONTS; ACTUALLY HIS FUNCTION WAS THAT OF ARBITER AND CONCILIATOR. THOUGH NOT SHOWN, EACH FRONT COMMANDER AS WELL AS EACH NATIONAL CONTINGENT COMMANDER RESERVED RIGHT OF APPEAL TO HIS OWN NATIONAL COMMAND AUTHORITY.
- ② HINDENBURG HAD DUAL RESPONSIBILITIES—SUPREME AND THEATRE COMMANDER.
- ③ NO SINGLE COMMANDER WAS DESIGNATED FOR THESE THEATRES.

Figure 3

to achieving a genuinely effective combined command. There was no consuming spirit of cooperation in 1916 among the Quadruple Alliance partners as would evolve in France in 1918, when the Allies' backs were to the wall. While Austria had been whipsawed for three consecutive years by the Bear, her princes and generals were not ready to acknowledge, as had the Turks, German professional superiority in waging war with large forces. It is doubtful that even if a *bona fide* supreme command had been established, its impact on the war, in late 1916, would have been more than marginal. The Central Powers had waited too long; even adversity did not prove cohesive.

### **COMBINED OPERATIONS, 1914-1918**

If harmony and sincere cooperation eluded the statesmen and general staffs, this was generally not the case in the field commands. The local theater and area commanders, not faced with the enigmas of war aims, finances, and maintenance of national morale, achieved a notable degree of professional collaboration, resulting in a number of tactical successes. Unfortunately for the Central Powers, their coalition victories did not usually occur in strategically vital theaters or at critical times.

Interestingly, while Allied combined operations ultimately received chief emphasis and reached maturity on the Western Front, the Central Powers did not choose to employ multilateral forces there, utilizing them instead in the Balkans, the Mediterranean, and on the Eastern Front. Research discloses the presence of only two Austro-Hungarian divisions in France from 1914-1918. In the frenetic summer days of 1918, Hindenburg contemplated deployment of more alliance troops there, but apparently the idea was not pursued.

For purposes of illustration, several of the more exemplary combined campaigns are recapitulated here.

#### **1914: THE EASTERN FRONT**

While the Germans were achieving their classic victory at Tannenberg, their

Austro-Hungarian allies fell back rapidly under Russian pressure, abandoning homeland territory before the war's opening guns had cooled. Lemberg fell, as did the fortress city of Przemsyl; it looked as if all of Galicia would yield to Russia's General Brusilov. Upon Hindenburg's assumption of command of the newly created Ninth Army in East Prussia, he and his Chief of Staff, Von Ludendorff, endeavored to "coalesce" the German and Austrian field staffs. At an exploratory staffing session, working agreements for a coordinated counteroffensive were completed. To offset a shortage of field transportation, the Austro-Hungarians loaned a considerable number of horses for German use; the German XI Corps was "incorporated in" the Austrian Army, and the Austrians placed two cavalry divisions at Hindenburg's disposal.

Unhappily, subsequent disagreements on force dispositions marred the embryonic harmony and contributed to German General von Mackensen's withdrawal from Warsaw after initial successes. The Austrians had failed to inform the Germans of their retreat on 25-26 October, leaving Mackensen's flank critically exposed. The Central Powers had many more lessons to learn about combined operations. Galicia in 1914 was an appropriate forum and Mackensen and Company learned well.

#### **SERBIA**

Austria-Hungary would doubtless have preferred a role in the Great War that limited her to a punitive expedition against, and occupation of, Serbia, the Slavic bone in its throat. Unfortunately, neither Russia nor Germany allowed the Dual Monarchy to maneuver, parade-ground fashion, into its own backyard. Galicia became, and remained, a nightmarish meatgrinder that consumed the young men from the Danube with alarming regularity. So far as the Germans were concerned, Serbia was secondary and they kept the Austrian's noses to the Carpathian grindstone.

Nevertheless, with the entry of Bulgaria into the Central Power alliance structure in

1915, the Germans and Austro-Hungarians agreed that a propitious moment had arrived for a sortie against Belgrade. The Germans foresaw a wartime land-bridge to Turkey, via Serbia and Bulgaria; the Austrian objectives were obvious—revenge and eventual territorial expansion. General von Mackensen, by mutual agreement of the General Staffs of Berlin, Vienna and Sofia, was designated Commander-in-Chief of a combined task force. Planning started on 18 September, early enough to effect deployment of the forces (which were considerable):

- German Eleventh Army: 7 German divisions.
- Austro-Hungarian Third Army: 4 Austro-Hungarian, 3 German divisions.
- Bulgarian First Army: 4 Bulgarian divisions (ultimately 8).
- Austro-Hungarian Danube Flotilla\* (To support initial river crossings).

The operation commenced on 7-8 October with multiple German and Austrian crossings of the Danube from the north. Other Austrian troops entered Serbia from the west, via Bosnia. The Bulgars moved from the east on 11 October. Serbian fortified towns (including the capital) and communications centers fell in accordance with the coalition's timetable.

The Serbian Army was pushed steadily south by a coordinated effort. In response to a plea from Belgrade for assistance, a combined British and French force achieved a lodgment in Salonika in Southern Macedonia. This contingent crossed briefly into Serbia but was repulsed at the Vardar River, withdrew, and did not figure further in the campaign. Strategically, however, these forces were effectively "tied down" and could not be used in more critical allied theaters.

In two battles on 29 November and 8 December, the Bulgarians defeated the back-pedaling Serbians, capturing 17,000 prisoners and 50 guns. At this point Von Mackensen considered that his allies were performing so capably that he began to remove German troops for employment elsewhere.

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\*Note not only the combined, but joint features of this operation.

The campaign opened in October, closed in December. Its brevity, considering the terrain and the tenacity of Serbians fighting on their own soil and its irrefutable tactical successes for the coalition, reflects on the professional qualities of Von Mackensen, mustering as he did a tri-national force on short notice, and upon the spirit of cooperation manifested by the several alliance field commanders.

## GALLIPOLI

In early 1915, the Russians, hard pressed by a Turkish offensive in the Caucasus, appealed to their allies for relief—a diversion in the Dardanelles. The Allied War Council agreed and set in motion the ill-fated amphibious campaign, identified by historians as "Gallipoli."

In February, British naval probes in the Straits and the occupation of Lemnos Island alerted Constantinople concerning Allied intentions—to effect a lodgment, expand, and eliminate Turkey from contention.

British vacillation proved fortuitous for Enver Pasha and his adviser, the prodigious Von Sanders. Faced with impending disaster, they moderated differences and proved to the consternation of the Allies that threat compels strange bedfellows. Now the Pasha and the German had to get along.

Enver placed Von Sanders in command of the defenses, but directed that, with the exception of one additional German officer, the coordinating staff be composed of Turks. Von Sanders, decidedly mission-oriented, did not quibble. His tactical responsibility was for a Turkish Army consisting initially of the 5th and 9th Divisions, commanded by German officers, and the 3rd Division, under Turkish command. They prepared defensive positions on both the European and Asiatic sides of the Straits, capitalizing on the rugged terrain, natural fortifications, and time available before the first British landings on 25 April.

While the British experienced initial successes, severe problems of coordination and a stubborn, vigorous defense denied them more than a toehold. They continued to pour additional forces into shrinking beachheads throughout the summer, as casualties accrued on both sides. To offset losses, the Turks

received sufficient replacements to sustain their defense and defeat a British push at Anafarta in August.

Throughout the period of the campaign, German commanders continued to inspire dogged Turk troops on the heights, directing also the reinforcing divisions. The force artillery commander, a Major Lierau, acquired at least transient fame by his sinking of English war vessels with field artillery.

While the credit for the pertinacious defense must go to the Turkish troops, the token assistance of German and Austrian combat support units provided the flavor of combined operations. A German engineer (pioneer) battalion of 200 men joined the action in June, as did two Austrian artillery batteries in November. More German troops were programmed for a counterattack, but their arrival was preempted by the withdrawal of the invading force commencing on 19 December.

Regarding coalition tactics, Gallipoli is noteworthy in two respects. The first is the importance that personalities played in determining events. Had Enver and Von Sanders been less adroit at mutual accommodation in the face of serious personal differences, Gallipoli might have had a different outcome. The second is that, while subordination of Turk units to German commanders was doubtless a bitter pill for the Turkish High Command, that body was quick to acknowledge the value of professionalism and experience in the teeth of an invasion of the homeland by European troops.

Despite the tactical successes of 1915, all was not well with the Central Powers. One burning problem facing Germany and Austria was what to do about Poland. The divisiveness of the issue is exemplified by Von Jagow's acid recommendation:

So long as we have not definitely ceded Poland to Austria, we have kept in our hand the trumps to force Austria to give us the military and economic guarantees which we need to keep the whole Monarchy, including Poland, at our side... .

(And pundits referred to England as "Perfidious Albion!")

## 1916: RUMANIA

Despite prewar professions of neutrality, postwar territorial blandishments (Macedonia, Dobrudja, and chunks of Greece, if that state entered on the Allied side) inspired little Bulgaria to declare war on Austria-Hungary on 27 September 1916. Her greed exceeded her martial capabilities, however, for by 6 December of the same year her ardor had been somewhat blunted by invasion, destruction of her army, loss of her capital and occupation, in that order.

Again, the ubiquitous Von Mackensen, in a tactical display uniquely similar to the seizure of Serbia, achieved a speedy victory.

The Rumanians, despite a paucity of machine guns, mortars and artillery, had moved 12 divisions into Hungarian Transylvania in September, after mobilizing a force of 23 divisions. The Central Powers undertook initial combined planning at Pless on 28 July. After force contributions were determined, the German General Staff entrained five divisions from the Western Front, the Austrians sent two southward, and Enver Pasha despatched two Anatolian divisions from Turkey. The Bulgars mustered their forces on the frontier. Again, it was a three-pronged drive: Falkenhayn, the former German Chief of Staff, pushed the Rumanians out of Transylvania through the Carpathians. Von Mackensen stormed the Turticara River and moved east into the Dobrudja on the Black Sea; and the Bulgarians, with attached German forces, moved northeast, also into the Dobrudja. Ultimately, all three columns linked up and Bucharest fell. This campaign had the earmarks of textbook combined operations—early, coordinated planning by four powers; agreed-upon objective; and formation of combined task forces and rapid, multilateral execution.

The close of 1916 saw the coalition under more strain than a year previously. Ludendorff, in his memoirs, recalls the prevailing state of affairs:

... Austria-Hungary continued to be a drain on German blood and German war industries.... The same was true of Bulgaria and Turkey although the demand for troops was not so great, but their concern was for money, military equipment and transport material. Germans had to help them everywhere.... The whole gigantic burden lay on our own shoulders.

The fissure was widening.

### **1917:CAPORETTO. THE LAST BRIGHT FLASH**

Russia, defeated in combat and torn asunder from within, left the war in 1917. This strategic turn, freeing German divisions for use elsewhere, enabled the Central Powers to undertake one final brilliant combined operation before 1918, when exhaustion and relentless Allied pressure from the south and west ended the debacle.

Italy, as an allied partner since 1915, had engaged in ten battles on the Isonzo River, trying to claw her way into Austria's geographic vitals, but in two years had advanced only ten miles. In defense of General Cadorna, the Italian Commander, the stalemate was due as much to denial of resources by the Allied Supreme Command as it was to the lack of tactical finesse of the Italian Army.

In any event, General Ludendorff reinforced the Austrians on the Isonzo with nine German divisions, whose morale was doubtless favorably influenced by their redeployment from Russia.

Austrian Field Marshal Archduke Eugene was designated commander of a combined force and opened an assault on 24 October. His objective was to push the Italians behind the Tagliamento River from the Isonzo. He experienced remarkable success, for the Italians passed the Tagliamento and continued rearward to the Piavo, where they finally checked the coalition's advance, losing 300,000 men as PW's and 2300 artillery pieces. The campaign was over by 9 November. Again good planning, aggressive forces, timing and leadership had scored for the Central Powers in their last successful combined operation. Next it would be the

Allies' turn. Ironically, in 1918 the coordinated efforts of the Allies in France, the Balkans and Turkey would bring the Central Powers, themselves the earlier proponents of combined operations, to their knees.

### **CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS**

If coalition warfare failed the Central Powers, the blame must be laid at other doorsteps than tactical execution. The field commanders of all four partner states cannot be excoriated, as the cases of Serbia, Gallipoli, Rumania, and Caporetto demonstrate. The Allies would have done well to emulate these examples earlier than they did.

The alliance was probably a nonstarter from its inception. Divergent and even contradictory war aims, geographic separation and a tremendous disparity in strategic capability should have suggested the potential obstacles. There just wasn't enough horsepower. Ultimate success was highly tenuous, dependent upon the occurrence of too many events which the partners were unable to effect—the entrance of Italy, Rumania and Greece on the side of the Central Powers, or at least their assured neutrality; early defeat of either France or Russia, neither of which happened; coincidence of national objectives; and an early, genuine strategic amalgamation of forces.

The fundamental premise for failure was that the partners bit off more than they could chew, separately and collectively. Germany fought in all theaters; Austria-Hungary deployed to east and south; and Turkey, at times, had forces on three fronts. All were realizing only marginal success against an ever-increasing array of opponents. America's entrance into the war rendered the overwhelming preponderance of sheer power that the coalition could no longer absorb.

In conclusion, the partners probably expected more from the partnership than it was capable of yielding in light of the odds. In 1914 and 1915, they were unwilling to pay the price of total strategic unanimity when it could have paid the best dividends. Coalition warfare did not fail the Central Powers. Their leaders did.