

The French Withdrawal

by

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The slow, methodical advance of the French Army to positions on German soil during the early days of the war gave no evidence of this movement being other than minor warfare. Even after the farthest advance had been attained—3 to 5 miles—there was still no indication that the French were preparing for a major offensive in this sector. In fact, the elaborate “field works” which the troops were constructing for several weeks in consolidating their positions seemed impressive evidence that the limited-objective advance governed the French Army push on German soil.

Such assumptions are borne out by the recent French retirement. This movement, although made under pressure of the German forces, bears no evidence of a retreat—on the contrary, it is in every sense a withdrawal. The main difference between these actions is that the “retreat” is not voluntary while the “withdrawal” is distinctly a planned retrograde movement designed particularly to improve the tactical situation, or to conform to strategic requirements.

The falling-back movements of the Polish Army in its recent campaign were distinctly the result of German attacks and quite involuntary. Therefore, they were “retreats” which at times grew very costly in men and material and in many instances developed into routs, or disorderly retreats. The great master of the art of war, Napoleon, said: “Retreats always cost more men and materials than the most bloody engagements, with this difference, that in battle the enemy’s loss is nearly equal to your own whereas in retreat the loss is on your side only.”

A retirement behind the Maginot Line would give the Allied forces the advantage in defensive fighting, if there is to be a fight, behind a well-organized and prepared position comfortably equipped for the winter season, thus obviating reliance on an improvised line on German soil defended by field fortifications.

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Another probable factor in the withdrawal is the fact that the holding of forward positions too long sometimes brings dire results. Advance posts are always dangerous. There always comes the lure of that "one more hill" in front of the line to be held. The great danger in these "sentinel" positions lies not in their being taken by the enemy, for that must be anticipated, but in the moral effect of the retirement.

On the other side of the frontier, the German failure to follow up the "energetic pressure" exercised against the French in their retirement is proof conclusive that this was not a *military decision* but part of a definite political offensive which has been reported as an effort to wean France from her allied relationship with Britain. Thus endeth what the German communiqué significantly called "the first phase of the war."

As for the situation in general, the front from Luxembourg to Lauterbourg is still the sector which must be watched. However, reported concentrations in other zones by both belligerents may carry the theater of operations elsewhere. The French troops, with the exception of some few outposts, have retired from their farthest advance positions on German soil (see map on this page) to prepared defenses lying between their own frontier and the Maginot Line. The German troops are consolidating with field works the regained ground on their side of the frontier.

On the sea, the British Fleet continues its policy of blocking the German Baltic waters and maintaining open traffic lanes for its cross-ocean shipping, and is in the midst of a struggle with German planes and submarines for air and sea domination.

Unraveling the War News

THROTTLING BY BLOCKADE: The current struggle for sea control evokes many recollections of claims how the Allied blockade in the World War throttled Germany. There is such a thing as tightening the food belt of your enemy by blocking his supply routes, but when both have a common land frontier this cannot be done unless that enemy is held back from your own gardens and vineyards. Actually, victory in the World War was won on the land. Should the First Battle of the Marne have been won by the Germans, or had their spring drive of 1918 carried them to the Channel ports and to

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Paris, the seas would have been theirs and they would have finished the throttling. When they were stopped on land, however, it was easy for the blockade pressure to curtail prolonged endurance and resistance.

In the struggle today, should Germany win before the hunger factor really registers, the fertile fields of France and her colonies to the south would be at her command—and with this land would eventually go the seaports and the sea lanes.

SCAPA FLOW AND ROSYTH: The fact that a German submarine entered the Channel to Scapa Flow, destroyed the Royal Oak, and escaped must not be taken as a tribute—although daring in the extreme—of the increased scope and effectiveness of the submarine. Rather, it must be attributed to the old human letdown in alertness that comes from either overconfidence or gross carelessness.

The bombing of the Rosyth naval base by the German air forces may have been in the nature of a reconnaissance with definite missions—the trying out of certain type planes in oversea raids or the testing of the anti-aircraft defense system of the naval base, including gun range and ground locations. In any event, it must not be counted as a real air attack, which would have involved a large number of planes.