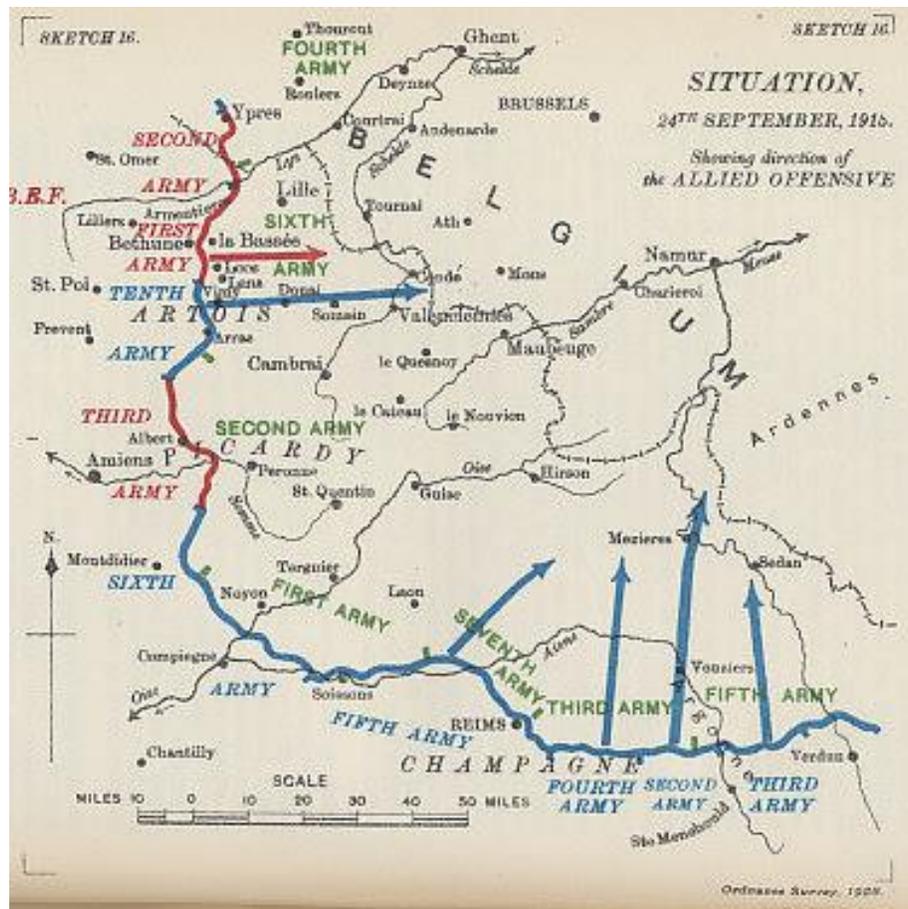


WWI Battles Champagne (2nd) & Artois (3rd)

In June 1915 every Allied nation had met in a conference to plan an offensive on all fronts. Represented were Britain, France, Belgium, Russia, Italy and Serbia. A Franco-British attack was decided in Champagne and Artois, an Italian attack on the Austro-Hungarians at the Isonzo River and a Russian offensive into Hungary. Though due to the [Gorlice - Tarnów Offensive](#) the Russian attack had to be canceled. The Italian attack at Isonzo failed to achieve anything as well.



Now it was up to France and Britain to launch their offensive, especially to relieve pressure off the Russians, who were getting pushed thoroughly back by the Austro-Germans. The British and French also sought to revive the war of movement and wanted to exploit the German inferiority of troops on the Western Front. The attack to start the 2nd battle of Champagne was decided to be launched on September 8 1915, but was delayed to September 25 due to preparations taking longer than expected. It would be carried out by the French. This attack would be supported by another French attack in Artois and a British at the town Loos, also located in Artois.



General Sir Douglas Haig (right), who would lead the British assault at Loos, wanted the British reserves close to the battlefield, to exploit a breakthrough on September 25 at Loos. But British Commander-in-Chief Sir John French (left) didn't want the reserves to be used until later, since they were reserves. French eventually agreed to move the reserves nearer to the front, but still didn't think they should be committed in the start of the attack. Haig was also angry at the shortage of artillery, which meant the bombardment of the German trenches wouldn't be good enough needed for a breakthrough.



On 25 September 1915, twenty divisions of the [Second Army](#) and [Fourth Army](#) of GAC, Central Army Group, attacked at 9:15 a.m. at Loos, with each division on a 1,500–2,000 yards front. A second line of seven divisions followed, with one infantry division and six cavalry divisions in reserve. Six German divisions held the line opposite, in a front position and a reserve position the *R-Stellung* (*Rückstellung*, Reserve Position) further back. French artillery observers benefitted from good weather but on the night of 24/25 September, heavy rain began and fell until midday.

The British used poison gas for the first time. The gas had mixed results; some places the wind direction changed and flew back to the British trenches, gassing the British soldiers. In the weaker places of the German defense the British managed to break through, and a general breakthrough looked promising. But due to communication problems in headquarters and, like Haig had predicted, reserves being too far back, the British were unable to exploit their breakthrough.

The German front position was broken in four places and two of the penetrations reached as far as the R-Stellung, where uncut barbed wire prevented the French from advancing further. The French took 14,000 prisoners and several guns but French casualties were also high; the Germans had anticipated the French attack, having been able to watch the French preparations from their high ground and outposts. The main defensive effort was made at the R-Stellung, behind which the bulk of the German field artillery had been withdrawn. A supporting attack by the French 3rd Army on the Aisne took no ground.



When the battle continued the next day the Germans had recovered and improved their defensive positions, stopping the British from advancing and inflicting thousands of casualties on them. Reports said that some of the German machine-gunners stopped shooting because they had so much sympathy with the British. By October 13 the attack was called off, the British having suffered 60,000 casualties compared to the German 26,000.



Meanwhile the French were also attacking in Artois. On September 21 they began a four-day artillery bombardment on the German trenches, and attacked on September 25. The left flank attack at Souchez went well, as they captured the village of Souchez by September 26, something they had failed to do in the [Second Battle of Artois](#). Though the French suffered many casualties in doing so. But the right flank attack at Neuville St. Vaast made little progress, meaning the left flank could be attacked from two sides. In spite of this the left flank managed to take the slopes of Vimy Ridge in heavy rain, but not the highest point where a German counter-attack pushed the attackers back.

The attack was called off on November 4, as troops were exhausted and the battlefield had turned into mud and rain. The French had suffered 48,000 casualties compared to the German 51,000 of whom 2,000 were prisoners.



Meanwhile the main French offensive in Champagne was taking place. The French had more than twice the men, 450,000 compared to the German 220,000. They fired 2,8 million shells on the German trenches, and were ready to attack. On September 25 the French infantry in Champagne went over the top and managed to break through in 4 places of the German lines, 2 of them reaching the German second line. But barbed wire and machine-guns prevented the French from advancing any further, and heavy rain began falling, turning the battlefield into a quagmire. The French had managed to take 14,000 prisoners but had lost thousands of men themselves due to the Germans being well prepared.

On October 3 French Commander-in-Chief Joseph Joffre decided to abandon the attempt at a breakthrough, and instead ordered the battle to become a battle of attrition, a battle where success was not measured in territorial gains, but in casualties inflicted on the opponent.



The offensive got suspended on November 6. Combined with the Third Battle of Artois, the French had lost almost 200,000 casualties in a little more than a month. The British and French had failed to break the stalemate of the Western Front and had failed to exploit the German inferiority in troops. As winter approached, offensive plans had to wait for Spring 1916, giving the Germans time to build up their army. After the failure at the Battle of Loos British Commander-in-Chief Sir John French got replaced by General Sir Douglas Haig himself.

Analysis

The offensive in Champagne had advanced the French line for about 2.5 miles at a cost of c. 100,000 more French and British casualties than German losses. The French had attacked in Champagne with 35 divisions against the equivalent of 16 German divisions. On the Champagne front, the Fourth, Second and Third armies had fired 2,842,400 field artillery and 577,700 heavy shells, which with the consumption in Artois during the Third Battle of Artois, exhausted the French ammunition supply. French methods and equipment were insufficient for the demands of trench warfare and a lull followed, as the French rested the survivors of the offensive, replaced losses and accumulated more equipment and ammunition. On 22 October, Joffre claimed that the autumn offensive had resulted in important tactical gains, inflicted many casualties and achieved a moral superiority over the Germans and that only a lack of artillery had led to a failure to achieve the strategic objectives of the offensive. To keep as many German troops as possible away from the Eastern Front, offensive operations must continue but troops in the front line were to be kept to the minimum over the winter and a new strategy was to be formulated.

The theoretical bases of the French offensives of 1915 had been collected in Purpose and Conditions of all Offensive Action, 16 April 1915 and its derivative Note 5779, which had been compiled from analyses of reports received from the front since 1914. The document contained instructions on infiltration tactics, rolling barrages and poison gas, which were to be used systematically in continuous battles to create rupture. Continuous battle was to be replaced by step-by-step advances, through successive German defense lines. Methodical attacks were to be made each time and would inexorably consume German infantry reserves. The German defenses would eventually collapse and make a breakthrough attack feasible. The slower, more deliberate methods,

would conserve French infantry, as they battered through the deeper defenses built by the Germans since 1914.

In the autumn battles, the Allies had outnumbered the German army in the west by 600 infantry battalions but had not achieved a breakthrough and after the first day, German reinforcements made one impossible. Several divisions had returned from the Eastern Front but were tired and of little value. The German commander in chief, General Erich von Falkenhayn had underestimated the possibility of an offensive and kept the OHL, German high command reserve spread all along the Western Front, rather than concentrating it in threatened areas. French reviews of the offensive found that reserves had moved close to the front, ready to exploit a breakthrough and had advanced on time. The troops had then become bunched up with the leading divisions, blocked the lines of communication and suffered many casualties, while held up. Communications failed and commanders had been in ignorance of the situation, artillery co-ordination with the infantry had been poor and rain grounded French artillery-observation aircraft. Many of the French commanders concluded that a breakthrough could not be forced in one attack and that it would take several set-piece battles, to make the defenders collapse and be unable to prevent a return to mobile operations.

The German report, *Experiences of the 3rd Army in the Autumn Battles in the Champagne, 1915*, noted that unyielding defense of the most forward positions had failed several times, because the attackers had severely damaged German field fortifications and cut the barbed wire obstacles in front of them, by long artillery bombardments. The second position had not been broken into and the 3rd Army reported that the decision to construct the second position had been vindicated, since the French had to suspend their attacks until artillery had been moved forward, which took until 4 October. The momentum of the initial breakthrough had not been maintained, because the French troops crowding forward had become disorganized, which made coordinated attacks impossible to arrange. French prisoners were reported to have said that there had been no methodical staging of the reserves to exploit a breakthrough and concluded with the view that a breakthrough might still be possible.

Lack of troops made it impossible for the Germans to respond with big counter-attacks but smaller hasty counter-attacks by local troops, had succeeded against French units weakened by losses, which had not had time to consolidate captured ground. It was recommended that such reserves should be made available by reducing the number of German troops in the front line, as one man every 2.2–3.3 yards in the front line was enough. Co-operation between all arms, assistance from neighboring sectors and the exploitation of flanking moves had defeated the French offensive. More intermediate strong points, built for all-round defense were recommended, between the first and second positions. Defense of the first position was still the intention but deeper defenses would dissipate the effect of a breakthrough and force the attackers to make numerous individual attacks, in areas where local knowledge and preparation of the ground would be advantageous to the defenders. Observation posts should be made secure from attack,

reconnaissance reports acted on promptly and communication links were to be made as robust as possible. A wide field of fire was unnecessary and to be dispensed with, to make each part of the position defensible by placing defenses on reverse slopes, concealed from ground observation



In his 1919, memoirs Chief of Germany's General Staff Erich von Falkenhayn wrote that the autumn battle showed that on the Western Front, quantity was not enough to defeat armies sheltering in field defenses and that the plans made earlier in 1915, for an offensive in France were obsolete. Falkenhayn needed to resolve the paradoxical lessons of the war since 1914, to find a way to end the war favorably for Germany, which culminated at Verdun in 1916, when Falkenhayn tried to induce the French to repeat the costly failure of the Second Battle of Champagne.

Casualties

The offensive had been disappointing for the French. Despite their new 'attack in echelon' they had only made quick progress during the time it took for the Germans to strip reserves from elsewhere and rush them up. They had lost 145,000 men, while the Germans had 72,500 casualties. The French had taken 25,000 prisoners and captured 150 guns. In Der Weltkrieg, French casualties in the Fourth, Second and Third armies from 25 September – 7 October were recorded as 143,567 men, with 48,230 more casualties in the Tenth Army from 25 September – 15 October and 56,812 casualties in the British First Army from 25 September – 16 October, a total of c. 250,000 casualties against c. 150,000 losses in the German armies, of which 81,000 casualties were suffered in the Champagne battle from 22 September – 14 October. The French Official History recorded 191,795 casualties in the fighting in Champagne and Artois.

[Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Battle_of_Champagne and <https://aminoapps.com/c/world-history> | September 2019 ++]