

PRIT BUTTAR

Author of  
*Battleground Prussia & Collision of Empires*

# GERMANY ASCENDANT

THE EASTERN FRONT 1915





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DEDICATION

*To Amit, a tireless if sometimes baffled helper.*

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PRIT BUTTAR



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Front cover: German soldiers with machine guns are pictured here in their lines at Johannesburg in the winter of 1914 (Topfoto)

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# CONTENTS

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<i>List of Illustrations</i>	7
<i>List of Maps</i>	9
<i>Author's Note</i>	10
<i>Dramatis Personae</i>	11
<i>Introduction</i>	16
Chapter 1: The Combatants	27
Chapter 2: The First Carpathian Campaign	57
Chapter 3: Winter in Masuria	78
Chapter 4: Springtime: Slaughter and Disappointment	118
Chapter 5: Mackensen's Breakthrough	157
Chapter 6: The Exploitation	201
Chapter 7: Lemberg	236
Chapter 8: Decisions and Departures	265

Chapter 9: The Great Retreat	293
Chapter 10: Volhynia: The End of the Leash	329
Chapter 11: The Fall of Serbia	361
Chapter 12: The Burden of War	389
<i>Notes</i>	407
<i>Bibliography</i>	427
<i>Index</i>	433

# LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

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## **Between pages 160 and 161**

Conrad von Hötzendorf.

Archduke Frederick.

Felix Graf von Bothmer.

Otto von Emmich and Ernest Augustus, Duke of Brunswick.

Erich von Falkenhayn.

Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolayevich.

August von Mackensen.

Alexei Andreyevich Polivanov.

Alexander von Linsingen.

General Mikhail Vasiliyevich Alexeyev.

Alexei Brusilov.

Radomir Putnik.

Nikola Pašić.

## **Between pages 304 and 305**

Russian trench, Przemyśl 1914–1915.

Russian artillery, Przemyśl.

Austro-Hungarian troops near Przemyśl, April 1915.

Austro-Hungarian dugout in Przemyśl.

Postcard from 1915 indicating the progress of the Central Powers across Russian Poland.

*k.u.k.* Army machine-gun team in the Carpathians, 1915.

Russian cavalry in the Carpathian Mountains, 1915.

Artist's impression of Austro-Hungarian troops attacked by Russian infantry in the Carpathians in 1915.

Tractor attached to a 305mm mortar in the Carpathians, 1915.

German cavalry fording the River Drina, late 1915.

German infantry column in Serbia, late 1915.

Serbian troops waiting for orders to move up to the front line in 1915.

Poles fleeing the fighting, summer 1915.

Artist's impression of Russian trenches in southern Galicia, 1915.

Troops of the *k.u.k.* Army in a trench in eastern Galicia, 1915.

German machine-gun company during the Second Battle of the Masurian Lakes.

Austro-Hungarian telegraph station in the Alps, 1915.

# LIST OF MAPS

---

The Eastern Front, January 1915	25
The First Carpathian Campaign, January–February 1915	69
The Masurian Campaign, February 1915	91
The Augustowo Forest, February 1915	103
The Carpathian Front, February–April 1915	121
Breakthrough at Gorlice, May 1915	179
The Advance to the San, May 1915	203
The San Battles, May–June 1915	215
Bukovina, May 1915	233
The Advance on Lemberg, June 1915	239
Bukovina, June 1915	249
The Second Battle of Kraśnik, July 1915	287
The Eastern Front, July 1915	295
Kovno, July–August 1915	307
Lublin to Brest-Litovsk	321
Black–Yellow Offensive	331
Russian Counterattacks, September 1915	339
The Invasion of Serbia, October–November 1915	370
The Danube and Save, October 1915	373
The Eastern Front, late 1915	399

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

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As usual, many people contributed to this work. It's unfair to single out individuals, but Amit Sumal was hugely helpful in obtaining documents for me. As ever, my thanks to my family for their forbearance.

# DRAMATIS PERSONAE

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## AUSTRIA-HUNGARY

- Arz, Arthur** – commander of VI Corps
- Berchtold, Leopold von** – foreign minister
- Böhm-Ermolli, Eduard Freiherr von** – commander of Third Army
- Boroević, Svetozar** – commander of Third Army, replaced by Puhallo, later commander of Fifth Army
- Burián von Rajecz, Stephan** – foreign minister
- Conrad von Hötzendorf, Franz Xaver Josef** – chief of general staff
- Dankl, Viktor** – commander of First Army, replaced by Kirchbach, commander of *k.u.k.* forces in Tyrol May 1915
- Frederick, Archduke** – commander-in-chief *k.u.k.* Army
- Joseph Ferdinand, Archduke** – commander of Fourth Army
- Kirchbach, Karl Freiherr von** – commander of I Corps, briefly commander of First Army, May 1915
- Kövesz, Hermann von** – commander of Third Army September 1915
- Krautwald, Josef** – commander of X Corps April 1915, replaced by Martiny
- Křitek, Karl** – commander of XVII Corps
- Kusmanek, Hermann von** – garrison commander, Przemyśl
- Martiny, Hugo** – commander of X Corps May 1915
- Meixner, Hugo** – commander of X Corps, replaced by Krautwald
- Pflanzer-Baltin, Karl von** – commander of eponymous army group, later upgraded to Seventh Army
- Puhallo, Paul** – commander of Third Army May 1915, then commander of First Army
- Roth, Josef** – commander of XIV Corps
- Tersztyánszky, Karl** – commander of eponymous army group, later Third Army, replaced by Kövesz

**Trollmann, Ignaz** – commander of XIX Corps

## BULGARIA

**Boyadzhiev, Kliment** – commander of First Army

**Ferdinand** – tsar of Bulgaria

**Radoslavov, Vasil** – prime minister

**Todorov, Georgi** – commander of Second Army

## GERMANY

**Below, Otto von** – commander of Eighth Army, later commander of Army of the Niemen

**Behr, Karl von** – commander 119th Infantry Division, commander of eponymous corps June 1915

**Beseler, Hans von** – commander of siege artillery, Novogeorgievsk

**Bethmann-Hollweg, Theobald von** – German chancellor

**Bothmer, Felix Graf von** – commander of eponymous corps, later commander of South Army

**Cramon, August von** – liaison officer at *AOK*

**Eichhorn, Hermann von** – commander of Tenth Army

**Emmich, Otto von** – commander of X Corps

**Fabarius, Friedrich** – commander of 82nd Reserve Infantry Division

**Falk, Adalbert von** – commander of 2nd Infantry Division

**Falkenhayn, Erich von** – chief of the general staff

**Falkenhayn, Eugen von** – commander of XXII Reserve Corps

**Gallwitz, Max von** – commander of Twelfth Army, later commander of Eleventh Army in Serbia

**Haefen, Hans von** – adjutant to Moltke the Younger and press officer at *Ober Ost*

**Hell, Emil** – chief of staff, Tenth Army

**Hindenburg, Paul Ludwig Hans Anton von Beneckendorff und von** – commander of *Ober Ost*

**Hoffmann, Max** – staff officer at *Ober Ost*

**Kosch, Robert** – commander of X Reserve Corps

**Lauenstein, Otto von** – commander of XXXIX Reserve Corps, commander of

eponymous army group April 1915

**Leopold, Prince of Bavaria** – commander of Ninth Army April 1915

**Linsingen, Alexander von** – commander of South Army, replaced by Bothmer, later commander of Army of the Bug

**Litzmann, Karl** – commander of XL Reserve Corps

**Ludendorff, Erich** – chief of staff, *Ober Ost*

**Mackensen, August von** – commander of Ninth Army, replaced by Prince Leopold; commander of Eleventh Army April 1915

**Marwitz, Georg von der** – commander of XXXVIII Reserve Corps, commander of *Beskidenkorps* March 1915

**Morgen, Curt von** – commander of I Reserve Corps

**Plettenberg, Karl von** – commander of Guards Corps

**Scholtz, Friedrich ('Fritz') von** – commander of XX Corps, later also commander of Eighth Army

**Seeckt, Hans von** – chief of staff, Eleventh Army

**Woyrsch, Remus von** – commander of eponymous army

**Ziethen, Alfred** – artillery commander, Eleventh Army

## RUSSIA

**Alexeyev, Mikhail Vasiliyevich** – chief of staff, Southwest Front, later commander of Northwest Front

**Balanin, Dmitri Vasiliyevich** – commander of XXVII Corps

**Bezobrazov, Vladimir Miklailovich** – commander of Guards Corps, replaced by Olukhov

**Bonch-Bruyevich, Mikhail Dmitriyevich** – commander of 176th Infantry Regiment, 44th Infantry Division

**Bobrinsky, Georgi Alexandrovich** – second governor of Lemberg

**Boby, Nikolai Pavlovich** – commander of Novogeorgievsk garrison

**Brinsen, Aleksandr Fridrikhovich** – commander of XXII Corps

**Brusilov, Alexei Alexeyevich** – commander of Eighth Army

**Bulgakov, Pavel Ilyich** – commander of XX Corps

**Churin, Alexei Evgravovich** – commander of Twelfth Army June 1915

**Danilov, Yuri Nikiforovich** – quartermaster-general

**Delvig, Sergei Nikolayevich** – artillery commander of IX Corps, commandant of Przemyśl garrison

**Dimitriev, Radko** – commander of Third Army, replaced by Lesh

- Dragomirov, Vladimir Mikhailovich** – commander of VIII Corps, later chief of staff, Southwest Front, replaced by Savich
- Epanchin, Nikolai** – commander of III Corps, replaced by Zegelov
- Evert, Alexei** – commander of Fourth Army, later commander of Western Front
- Gerngross, Alexander Alexeyevich** – commander of XXVI Corps
- Gorbatovsky, Vladimir Nikolayevich** – commander of XIX Corps, later commander of Thirteenth Army
- Grigoriev, Vladimir Nikolayevich** – commander of Kovno garrison
- Gulevich, Arseny** – chief of staff, Northwest Front
- Gurko, Vasily Iosifovich** – commander of VI Corps
- Ivanov, Nikolai Iudevich** – commander of Southwest Front
- Kaledin, Alexei Maximovich** – commander of XII Corps
- Lechitsky, Platon** – commander of Ninth Army
- Lesh, Leonid Vilgelmovich** – commander of XII Corps, later commander of Third Army
- Litvinov, Alexander Ivanovich** – commander of First Army
- Lomnovsky, Piotr** – chief of staff, Eighth Army
- Myasoyedov, Sergei Nikolayevich** – intelligence officer Northwest Front, ally of Sukhomlinov
- Nikolai Nikolayevich, Grand Duke** – commander-in-chief
- Nostitz, Grigory Ivanovich** – chief of staff, Guards Corps
- Olukhov, Vladimir Apollonovich** – commander of XXIII Corps, later commander of Guards Corps
- Plehve, Pavel Adamovich** – commander of Fifth Army
- Polivanov, Alexei Andreyevich** – minister for war June 1915
- Protopopov, Nikolai Ivanovich** – commander of X Corps
- Radkevich, Evgeny Alexandrovich** – commander of III Siberian Corps, later commander of Tenth Army
- Ruzsky, Nikolai Vladimirovich** – commander of Northwest Front, replaced by Alexeyev
- Savich, Sergei Sergeyeich** – chief of staff Southwest Front May 1915
- Sazonov, Sergei** – foreign minister
- Selivanov, Andrei** – commander of siege forces at Przemyśl
- Shcherbachev, Dmitri Gregorovich** – commander of IX Corps, later commander of Eleventh Army
- Shchkinsky, Jakov Feodorovich** – commander of XXI Corps
- Sievers, Thadeus von** – commander of Tenth Army, replaced by Radkevich
- Skalon, Yestafy Nikolayevich** – city governor of Lemberg

**Smirnov, Vladimir Vasiliyevich** – commander of Second Army  
**Stelnitsky, Sergei Fedorovich** – commander of XXXIX Corps  
**Sukhomlinov, Vladimir Alexandrovich** – minister for war, replaced by Polivanov  
**Trofimov, Vladimir Onufreyevich** – commander of III Siberian Corps  
**Tsurikov, Afanasy Andreyevich** – commander of XXIV Corps  
**Yanushkevich, Nikolai Nikolayevich** – chief of the general staff  
**Zayontchovsky, Andrei Medardovich** – commander of XXX Corps  
**Zegelov, Alexander Alexandrovich** – commander of III Corps

## SERBIA

**Jurišić Šturm, Pavle** – commander of Third Army  
**Mišić, Živojin** – commander of First Army  
**Pašić, Nikola** – prime minister  
**Putnik, Radomir** – chief of the general staff  
**Stepanović, Stepa** – commander of Second Army  
**Živković, Mihajlo** – commander of the Belgrade garrison

# INTRODUCTION

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The war that engulfed Europe in 1914 was meant to be over by Christmas. All the combatants had expected a swift outcome, built on their ability to put huge armies into the field of battle, where sweeping offensive operations would crush their enemies. But the opening offensives that the Great Powers launched ultimately failed to deliver the expected outcomes, leaving all of the nations caught up in the war with a new set of problems, ranging from purely tactical and operational military issues, through logistic and training matters, to the industrial support that a prolonged war would need.

A great deal has been written about the failure of the Schlieffen Plan in the west, which left the armies of Germany, France, Britain and Belgium facing each other across a line of trenches running from the English Channel to the Swiss border.<sup>1</sup> The plan itself has been scrutinised in great detail, with varying theories about whether it was ever intended as an operational plan; when he wrote the plan, Schlieffen made no secret that he believed the German Army was not powerful enough to execute such a sweeping offensive.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of whether it was the plan itself or the execution of the plan that was flawed, the outcome was a bloody stalemate that would prove impossible for either side to overcome for many years. By contrast, events on the Eastern Front were far more fluid, though here, too, neither side was able to find a way to land a lethal blow. The reasons for this were very different from those in the west.

The nations involved in the war in the east had very different expectations of what they might achieve. The Russian Army was perhaps the only one that expected to win a decisive victory by Christmas; once the fabled Russian steamroller was ready, it was widely believed, the forces of the Central Powers would be crushed – or if they were to be saved, it would be by a major diversion of troops from the Western Front, which would open the door to a French triumph over Germany. Although the tsar's armies won decisive victories over the Austro-Hungarian forces in Galicia, the initial invasion of East Prussia ended in disaster, with Samsonov's Second Army being destroyed at Tannenberg and

Rennenkampf's First Army driven back with heavy losses in the First Battle of the Masurian Lakes in September 1914. Eventually, Grand Duke Nikolai, the commander of the Russian Army, managed to assemble a formidable force along the middle Vistula and, after beating off a German attack towards Warsaw from the southwest, launched his troops towards the German frontier. This great advance, which met little serious resistance, proved as illusory as the German attack towards Warsaw, and ground to a halt largely through supply problems exacerbated by the devastation of Poland's infrastructure by the retreating Germans. As winter arrived, a German counterattack at Łódź nearly ended in disaster, but the ultimate escape of the attacking German forces firmly established their military supremacy over the Russians in the minds of officers on both sides of the front line. Any lingering thoughts of a swift Russian victory vanished when the armies of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, assisted by German reinforcements, drove the Russians back from the approaches to Krakow in the Battle of Limanowa-Łapanów in December 1914.

The Russians had singularly failed to deliver the crushing blow against Germany that had been anticipated by many observers. It is difficult to measure the degree to which this caused disappointment in the tsar's court; for years, senior officials had been abundantly aware of the tendency of officers at all levels to tell their superiors what they thought their superiors wanted to hear, and as a consequence they had become accustomed to learning at a later date that matters were not as rosy as they had been initially told. On the evening of the first day of serious fighting, at Stallupönen in August 1914, Yuri Danilov, the Russian quartermaster-general, commented:

Thus we saw on the first day of fighting, the reopening of the old wound that had long poisoned the wellbeing of our army, a tendency to dissimulate facts. During the course of the war, this malady, never eliminated, repeatedly prevented us from seeing the situation clearly and correcting such errors in a timely manner, as they were detected.<sup>3</sup>

Like all armies of the era, the *k.u.k.* ('*Kaiserlich und Königlich*' or 'Imperial and Royal') Army of the Austro-Hungarian Empire was strongly imbued with the cult of offensive operations.<sup>4</sup> The strongest proponent of mounting offensives at all costs was Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf, the Austro-Hungarian chief of general staff, whose long involvement in training within the army ensured that a large proportion of the officer corps was also inclined to disregard the importance of defence. As was the case elsewhere in Europe, this obsession with attacking in

all circumstances – and launching immediate counterattacks with whatever forces were available – resulted in catastrophic casualties, with nearly a million Austro-Hungarian soldiers killed, wounded, taken prisoner, or succumbing to sickness in the fighting against Russia.<sup>5</sup> The problem was exacerbated by Conrad's belief that the purpose of attacking was to destroy the enemy's army rather than to take strategic geographical objectives. On the occasions that gaps were discovered or created in Russian lines, the doctrine of the *k.u.k.* Army was to use these to attack the exposed flanks of the enemy battle line, rather than to make any attempt to exploit into the rear areas. As a consequence, most battles – even those where the Austro-Hungarian forces achieved an advantage – degenerated into bloody face-to-face slugging matches, as it was usually possible for the Russians to reinforce their exposed flanks quickly enough to prevent the attackers from making much of their temporary advantage. Outflanking operations would only have succeeded if attacking troops had been permitted to penetrate deeply enough to evade any defensive realignment, but the formations of the *k.u.k.* Army lacked both the speed and the doctrine to achieve this. While Conrad appreciated the importance of locating and exploiting weaknesses and exposed flanks, he also insisted that the troops assigned to face the main Russian positions should attack constantly in order to try to pin down the enemy; in the context of 1914, such attacks achieved little other than greatly increasing the number of soldiers killed or wounded. There was no attempt to use the repeatedly demonstrated advantages of defensive firepower to allow stronger forces to be gathered elsewhere for decisive attacks – indeed, all the armies of Europe were slow to learn this lesson, even though more visionary observers had predicted such developments after analysing earlier conflicts, such as the Anglo-Boer War and the Russo-Japanese War.<sup>6</sup>

Whilst Conrad and his generals had not really expected to win the war against Russia on their own, they had hoped that the Germans would join them in mounting a major offensive against the Russians in Poland at the outset of the war. But given that the German plan had always been for victory over France before turning east in strength, this was little more than wishful thinking, and the reality of the situation was that Conrad's armies were always likely to suffer major losses while they diverted as much of Russia's strength towards them and away from the Germans, allowing Germany to concentrate its main strength in the west. Nevertheless, Conrad complained repeatedly that he felt let down by his allies, both in their failure to achieve a quick victory over France and their refusal to join him in early attacks on the Russians. Such criticism ignored the fact that Conrad was wishing for mutually exclusive things – any early German

attack in the east would have weakened the German presence on the Western Front and ensured no victory over France, while concentrating even more troops in the west to try to overwhelm France would necessarily have left the Eastern Front even weaker.

The highest levels of command in the Austro-Hungarian Empire continued to be dominated by Conrad. After the disasters in Galicia, the Germans proposed unifying command on the Eastern Front under a single figure, but whatever the views of Emperor Franz Joseph, Conrad refused to consider such a suggestion, aware that the role of the *k.u.k.* Army – and therefore of himself – would be subordinated to German control. From his headquarters in Teschen (now Cieszyn), he continued to insist on attacks against the Russians, refusing to accept any contrary suggestion. Like Hitler in a future war, he treated divisions and corps as if they were still at full strength, and took no account of the fact that many could barely muster half the men that their establishment specified. Similarly, he dismissed arguments from corps and army commanders about the weakness of Austro-Hungarian artillery. Neglected for years before the war, the artillery had declined even further after the losses of the opening months, both in terms of guns and trained personnel. Whilst a few weapons might have been regarded as world-class – particularly heavy howitzers – these were present in too few numbers to make a decisive impact. Austro-Hungarian mountain artillery, which was highly regarded, might be adequate in the mountains of Serbia, but against the Russians in the Carpathians, the mountain howitzers were too light, and too few.

If Austro-Hungarian expectations against Russia were limited, the same was not true of the Serbian front. Here, in the mountainous Balkans, the *k.u.k.* Army expected to overcome its weak opponent quickly, achieving revenge for the murder in Sarajevo that had started the landslide to war. To the surprise of most of the world though, the Serbian forces beat off the first Austro-Hungarian invasion in August, and followed this with an even more remarkable victory in December, when the Austro-Hungarian armies under Oskar Potiorek were driven back across the frontier in disarray, leaving behind 274,000 casualties. Whilst it was beyond the power of the Serbs to follow this up with an offensive of their own – the entire nation was exhausted by its remarkable achievement – the Serbian Army had achieved all that could be expected of it, and continued to hope for a Russian victory that would bring the war to a satisfactory conclusion.

Despite the great advances and retreats, the Eastern Front therefore remained as insoluble a military problem as the Western Front. Although the greater space allowed all armies to manoeuvre with a degree of freedom that rapidly disappeared

in the west, the constraints of logistics ensured that it was difficult for either side to achieve a major, sustainable advance in 1914. It was only in Galicia that a significant amount of territory changed hands, and even here, although the Russian forces reached the Carpathian Mountains and threatened to push through the passes to the Hungarian Plain beyond, there seemed little prospect of a decisive outcome. For all the Great Powers, the problem was that the very space that allowed them greater freedom of manoeuvre also ensured that significant objectives were further apart.

At a tactical level, too, there appeared to be few answers to the stalemate, but local, limited successes by all sides in the last months of 1914 left officers continuing to believe in victory through offensive action. Of the three main armies, the Germans had the greatest grounds for such confidence. Late in the year, their troops had launched a series of frontal assaults on Russian positions in central Poland, resulting in heavy losses for almost no gain, but in almost all their other operations, they showed great skill in probing for weaknesses and exploiting the relatively slow movement and reactions of their Russian foes. The Russian infantry showed considerable resilience in defensive fighting, but officers at all levels lacked the ability demonstrated by the Germans to react quickly to events on the battlefield. The Germans were greatly impressed by the accuracy of Russian artillery, but even after the first few months of the war, losses of well-trained artillery officers began to take a toll on the performance of Russian guns. An even greater constraint upon the Russian artillery was a crippling shortage of ammunition, caused by no provision for anything other than a short war.

Casualties on all sides had been far heavier than even the most pessimistic pre-war forecasts. As was the case all across Europe, the Austro-Hungarian officer corps had suffered proportionally heavier losses than lower ranks, with particularly serious consequences. Whilst all armies lamented the loss of so many highly trained officers, the impact in the multi-lingual armies of the Austro-Hungarian Empire was severe. Many replacement officers did not speak the language of their men, and few showed any inclination to learn. In such circumstances, alienation between the nationalities of Emperor Franz Joseph's fragile empire could only grow worse.

The almost universal expectation that the war would be over within months led to many miscalculations. By the end of 1914, the armies of all nations were reporting alarming shortages of artillery ammunition. The Russians had gone to war with the lowest stocks of ammunition, and discovered too late that foreign companies were unable to produce sufficient shells to replenish the rapidly emptying ammunition parks, not least because those companies were busy

producing war *matériel* for their own governments. Russia's own industry was simply not geared up to produce sufficient shells; in September, a French estimate suggested that Russian factories could produce perhaps 35,000 shells a month, at a time when *daily* consumption was close to 45,000 rounds.<sup>7</sup> Desperate to relieve pressure on their own depleted armies, the French constantly urged their Russian ally to maintain pressure on the Central Powers, even suggesting that if artillery ammunition was a limiting factor, attacks might nevertheless be made in the Carpathians, where the terrain was less favourable for artillery.<sup>8</sup> Such advice ignored the fact that, regardless of terrain, attacks made without artillery support were almost certain to fail.

Shell shortages in the *k.u.k.* Army were also critical by the winter, and despite Conrad's insistence on offensive operations at every opportunity, gun batteries were repeatedly told to reserve ammunition for use in the event of a Russian attack, rather than in support of Austro-Hungarian attacks. Attempts were made to divert production away from small arms ammunition to produce rounds for the artillery, but such changes would take time to bear fruit. In combination with the losses of guns during the 1914 campaigns, the ammunition shortage ensured that the *k.u.k.* Army's artillery reached its nadir in terms of efficacy during the first winter of the war.<sup>9</sup>

Ammunition shortages were not the only problem. The Russians struggled to produce sufficient rifles for the hundreds of thousands of men now serving in the front, a problem exacerbated by weapons being abandoned on the battlefield. Austro-Hungarian quartermasters faced similar difficulties, and although weapons being produced by the great Steyr armaments factory for Romania and Mexico were appropriated, this resulted in some units being equipped with rifles that fired different cartridges, making supply problems even worse. By early 1915, the Steyr arsenal had increased its production from 2,000 rifles per month in September 1914 to 32,000, but it would take time for this additional output to reach the front line.<sup>10</sup> Machine-guns, regarded by many traditionally minded officers before the war as little more than overly complex toys, were now widely regarded as critically important, and all armies tried to increase the number of such guns per battalion. At first, though, even replacing weapons lost in the opening months proved to be difficult.

Uniforms and boots, too, were in short supply. During the marches across Galicia in the opening weeks of the war, many Austro-Hungarian and Russian soldiers abandoned their heavy coats, and as the weather turned colder, shortages of appropriate winter clothing – as will be seen, particularly in the Carpathians – greatly exacerbated casualty rates. Even the supply of ordinary uniforms was

problematic; some Austro-Hungarian reservists were deployed in civilian clothing, with only a single black armband to indicate their status as combatants.

Inevitably, the unexpected casualties of the first few months of the war had a major impact on the morale of the combatants. On the Eastern Front, the German armies were perhaps least disheartened; although their losses – particularly in Ludendorff's futile assaults in central Poland in December – had been high, the Germans had repeatedly beaten off Russian attempts to penetrate into German territory, and only a small part of southeast Prussia was left in Russian hands. It is difficult to gauge the impact of the war on the Russian armies, as they contained large numbers of illiterate soldiers, and the stoical endurance of the Russian soldier was such a large part of popular culture that few raised their voices to protest at the heavy losses, which were greatly exacerbated by command and logistic failings. War-weariness was perhaps most pronounced in the *k.u.k.* Army, where the multi-national nature of Franz Joseph's empire created unique problems. Compared with their German and even their Russian equivalents, many of those serving in the Austro-Hungarian armies had a relatively weak sense of nationalist loyalty. Ethnic Romanian and Slav populations in particular began to show signs of strain early in the war, with Czech units apparently surrendering to the Russians en masse on more than one occasion. In the Czech homelands, Austro-Hungarian officials noted with alarm that proclamations that the Russians were coming as liberators were widely circulated, resulting in the first convictions and even executions for treason.<sup>11</sup> By the end of 1914, some of the Czech troops who had surrendered to the Russians had been organised into Czech Legions, though as yet there was no suggestion that they would be used as combatants. Nevertheless, their existence had a powerful propaganda effect on the restive population of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Many regiments had been raised from the Polish and Ruthenian populations of Galicia, an area now under Russian occupation, and the Russians made repeated calls for these men to desert, promising them a swift return to their families. To the relief of *Armee-Oberkommando* (AOK, the Austro-Hungarian Army High Command), few heeded the call. But whilst the generals expressed growing concern at the effect of civilian unrest on the reliability of the troops, the politicians shied away from harsher measures, fearful that a widespread crackdown would only make the problems of the empire worse. Only a decisive victory on the battlefield could reverse the growing centrifugal tensions in the empire, and during the first winter of the war, such a victory seemed increasingly remote.

By the end of 1914, the industries of all nations were struggling to catch up with events. The British naval blockade of Germany ensured that it was almost

impossible for the Central Powers to obtain large supplies of materials such as nitrates, which were essential for the manufacture of explosives as well as fertiliser, but in this respect at least, Germany's scientists had already provided their nation with alternative sources. Shortly after the turn of the century, Friedrich Ostwald, who was born in a Baltic German family in Estonia before moving to East Prussia, patented an eponymous process by which ammonia could be used to manufacture nitric acid, though this was at first little more than a chemical novelty due to the relative difficulty in obtaining large amounts of ammonia. A few years later, Fritz Haber devised a process by which atmospheric nitrogen could be used to manufacture ammonia on a large scale. The combination of these two processes by German industry resulted in the ability to produce nitrates in quantities that ensured Germany a sufficient supply of explosives, and also of fertiliser for agricultural use. Nevertheless, the conversion of these explosives into war munitions still required German industry to reorganise on a huge scale. A key man in this task was Walther Rathenau, an industrialist whose father was the founder of the German industrial giant, AEG, and his tireless energy contributed hugely to the rapid transformation of German industry to a war footing. The main obstacles that he faced were the reluctance of privately owned companies to cooperate, and personal antipathy – Rathenau was a Jew, in an era when anti-Semitism was widespread.<sup>12</sup>

Throughout Europe, the public rallied to support their nations. In Russia, anti-government strikes and protests on the eve of the war were replaced by demonstrations against Germany and in support of Serbia. Everywhere, mass mobilisation had taken no account of which personnel might be better left in their civilian jobs – with the expectation of a short war, it was anticipated that large numbers of men would be demobilised before Christmas, allowing the disruption of industry and agriculture to be kept to a minimum. As the reality of a long war became increasingly clear, the immediate consequence was that most European countries suffered widespread shortages of food and coal. The prospect of a winter with less to eat and houses far more expensive to heat did much to cool the initial enthusiasm of the public for war, especially after the shock of the terrible numbers of dead and wounded. The initial zeal for war in the Russian capital rapidly cooled, and even as autumn began, foreign observers noted that some officers who had returned to Petrograd\* to recover from wounds or illness showed no particular desire to return to the front line.<sup>13</sup>

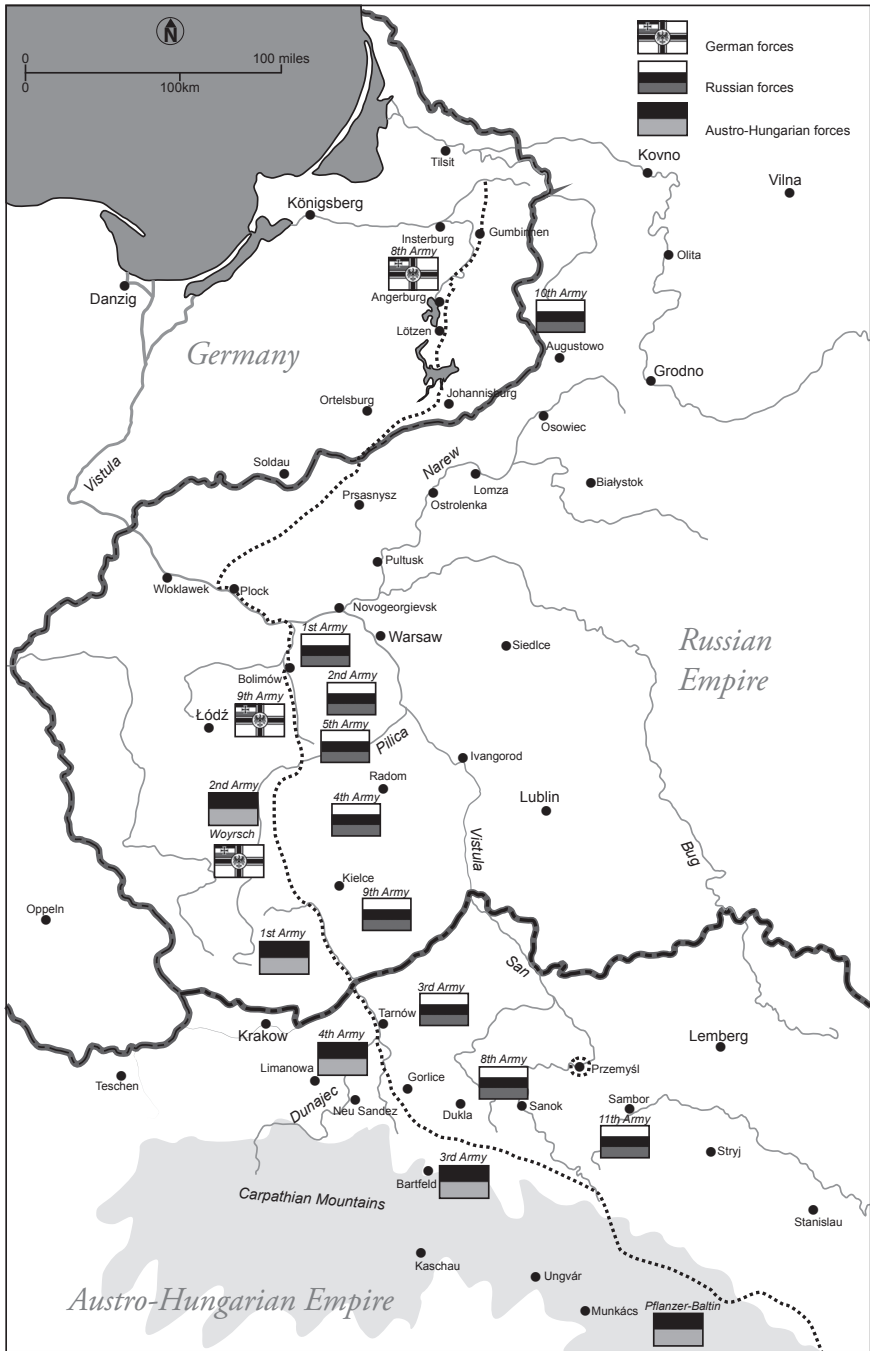
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\* The Russian capital St Petersburg was renamed Petrograd in August 1914, as it was felt that the name St Petersburg was too Germanic.

The coming year would see huge changes on the Eastern Front, whereas the situation in the west would remain almost unchanged. Just as important as the fighting on the ground was the bitter fighting within Germany and Russia, as different factions attempted to impose their will upon their nations' policies. Whilst there were already signs by the end of 1914 that many Germans had a low opinion of the value of their alliance with the Austro-Hungarian Empire, this would grow considerably as the year progressed, sowing the seeds for greater misunderstandings in 1916, which would have a major impact upon the course of the war.

As 1915 began, the sector of the Eastern Front that remained most active was also the one least suited to warfare during winter: the line of the Carpathian Mountains, separating Galicia from the Hungarian Plain. It was here that the first major battles of the new year would be fought, and more blood spilled, for almost no tangible gain.

# The Eastern Front, January 1915





## CHAPTER 1

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# THE COMBATANTS

The Russians entered the war in 1914 with mixed feelings about their prospects. Within the first few months, there was ample evidence to support almost any opinion about the Russian Army, and what it might achieve in 1915.

Shortly after the turn of the century, Russian and Japanese rivalries in Manchuria plunged the two nations into war. There was almost universal expectation amongst the Great Powers that Russia would rapidly overwhelm its Asian opponent, but events turned out very differently. By the time the war was over, the Russian Navy had lost both its Pacific and Baltic Fleets; the latter sailed all the way around the world and was then destroyed in the Battle of the Tsushima Straits. On land, the Japanese besieged Port Arthur (now known as Lüshun Port), and after capturing the strategic harbour drove inland to defeat the Russian Army in a series of bloody encounters. No combat arm of the army – infantry, artillery or cavalry – emerged with any credit, and the turmoil that followed brought the tsar's empire to the edge of chaos. It took many years and huge investment before the Russian Army began to rise from its nadir.

One of the problems that Russia faced in the years between the end of the Russo-Japanese War and 1914 was that almost every part of its armed forces required massive expenditure. The navy had almost ceased to exist, and the huge army required re-equipment with modern rifles and guns. Even within the army, there was endless argument on where money should be spent. A series of fortresses had been built to protect the western border of Russia, but were now widely regarded as obsolete in the face of modern artillery, and required substantial refurbishment. In 1908, fortress enthusiasts drew up a plan for modernisation; it was estimated that this would cost at least 800 million roubles, a sum equivalent to the entire army budget for two years. The plan would have resulted

in 90 per cent of Russia's artillery being deployed in static positions, and the opponents of spending so much money on the seven fortresses drew a little consolation from the fact that although modernisation of the fortresses was approved, it was not on such a lavish scale as originally proposed.<sup>1</sup>

With the benefit of hindsight, it is abundantly clear that the effect of concentrated defensive firepower had repeatedly demonstrated that massed infantry attacks would struggle to prevail. At the time, many observers did draw such a conclusion after the battles of the Russo-Japanese War and the Boer War, but the widespread conviction that it was only through offensive action that wars could be won continued to prevail, despite the desire to spend lavishly on fortresses. Evidence from recent conflicts was used selectively to justify preconceived points of view, with the result that armies entered the First World War with a completely unrealistic belief in what might be achieved by offensive operations. The Russians were by no means immune to this, and had the additional problem that their anti-German alliance with France – which expected to face the bulk of German power – required the Russians to mount early assaults in order to divert German forces to the east. In their own plans, the Germans had relied on relatively slow Russian mobilisation to give them sufficient time to overwhelm France, but there were great improvements in the years before the First World War, largely as a result of French investment in Russian railway lines, meaning that the Germans could now expect the Russians to be ready for war far sooner than they might have hoped. However, the new railways generally stopped at the Russian border. Critically, they did not extend across Russian-occupied Poland, which would ensure that in an era where the movement of supplies was largely dependent upon railways, the Russians would struggle to maintain momentum if they advanced towards Germany. The relative weakness of the railway network in Poland was, to a very large extent, a deliberate policy. It might hinder the Russians, but it would equally impede the Germans if they attacked across Poland. However, the overwhelming imperative of the Russian-French alliance was for Russian pressure on Germany, and the lack of good railways across Poland ensured that the only place at which the Russians could exert any early pressure was East Prussia, where the terrain was greatly in favour of the German defenders.

This failure to look at the consequences of logistic difficulties was more widespread than a lack of investment in railway infrastructure. Russian staff exercises before the war repeatedly ignored logistic aspects entirely, not least because the majority of Russian generals had a very poor grasp of such matters, and preferred to behave as if their armies were always adequately supplied.

Consequently, those planning the exercises – with an eye on their own advancement – ensured that such lowly matters would not embarrass senior commanders. Logistic and supply formations were usually given a low priority in mobilisation plans; typically, the first groups of mobilised troops were combatants whilst logistic units had to wait almost until the end of mobilisation before their ranks were filled, with the result that infantry, cavalry and artillery repeatedly struggled to deploy rapidly, having to pause while mobilisation could be completed. In the meantime, the few overworked units that were available laboriously brought all manner of basic supplies forward.

The most critical supply shortage of all related to artillery ammunition. Immediately before the war, the French held stocks of 2,000 rounds per artillery piece, while the Germans doubted that their 3,000 rounds per gun would prove inadequate; by contrast, Russia had not achieved even 1,000 rounds per gun, and much of this ammunition was held in large artillery parks centred on the border fortresses. The weakness of the army's logistic services ensured that moving these stocks to the front line would be a slow business, and when the Russian armies first crossed into East Prussia in August 1914, they took barely 400 rounds per gun with them.<sup>2</sup> In intense fighting, this would last less than three hours of continuous action.

At the outset of the war, the Russian Army's infantry was organised into divisions of four regiments. Each regiment consisted of four battalions, and the division had an artillery brigade of six eight-gun batteries. In peacetime, divisions had two cavalry brigades with a total of four regiments (each in turn composed of two or three squadrons of horsemen), but after the outbreak of war these were removed to create purely cavalry formations. They were meant to be replaced by reservist formations, mainly Cossacks, to give infantry divisions their own reconnaissance support, but these replacements were generally of poor calibre and the widespread lack of literacy throughout the Russian Empire meant that their usefulness in reconnaissance and communication was limited. The infantry divisions were grouped together in a series of corps, which combined to form armies. These armies were subordinated to two higher commands, Northwest Front and Southwest Front; broadly, these faced Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire respectively. Attempts had begun to reorganise the artillery into six-gun batteries, as it was widely accepted that a six-gun battery could provide as effective fire support as an eight-gun battery, but these met resistance in the ranks of the artillery, where the increased number of batteries that would result was regarded as unwelcome. Officially, this was because there might not be sufficient skilled officers to command the batteries, but in addition there were fears that such

an increase in the number of batteries might result in their being commanded by captains rather than majors, thus reducing the number of posts available to majors. Attempts to increase the number of howitzers per division from six to twelve also met opposition from unlikely sources. Many artillery officers regarded the howitzers as inferior to conventional artillery, and their usefulness in assaulting fortifications was rejected as somehow being an improper use of artillery.

The opening months of the war resulted in major casualties for Russia. Rennenkampf's First Army achieved a tactical victory at Gumbinnen in August 1914 but failed to exploit it in any meaningful manner, and thus contributed considerably to the freedom with which the Germans concentrated their forces against Samsonov's Second Army, effectively destroying it at Tannenberg just a fortnight later. Although the huge scale of Russian mobilisation, with some 4.7 million men swelling the ranks, meant that even the destruction of an entire army was little more than a setback, the loss of so many officers and NCOs, and of almost all of Second Army's equipment, would have serious repercussions. After their success, the Germans turned east again to chase Rennenkampf's army back to the border in what is now known as the First Battle of the Masurian Lakes. Thereafter, although the Germans attempted a brief advance into Lithuania, they were ultimately forced to fall back to the line of the lakes, where they established a defensive network of fortifications.

The main Russian effort fell on the Austro-Hungarian forces in Galicia, where forces came under the command of Southwest Front. Initially, the Russian Fourth Army marched south immediately east of the Vistula, with Fifth Army on its eastern flank, extending the line as far as the valley of the Bug. Both of these armies met early setbacks and were driven back, but the other two armies of Southwest Front – Third and Eighth Armies – won significant victories in eastern Galicia, leading ultimately to the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian positions throughout the province. Forced into a catastrophic retreat, the troops of the Dual Monarchy were driven far to the west, leaving almost all of Galicia in Russian hands. The fortress of Przemyśl was left isolated and besieged. Although the Austro-Hungarian forces appeared to be on the edge of rout, the Russians had been sufficiently weakened to prevent a crushing pursuit.

Before the war, much had been made of the huge size of the Russian Army. Once its forces were gathered, it would be able to advance and crush all resistance before it. With the Austro-Hungarian forces driven back in disarray, the Russians began to gather their armies near Warsaw with a view to striking west, but the Germans moved first. Showing a level of flexibility that was beyond the dreams of the Russians, the German Army concentrated forces in Silesia and thrust

northwest into Poland, advancing to the southern approaches of Warsaw while the Austro-Hungarian forces attempted to recover ground in Galicia. Eventually, the simple arithmetic of the battlefield – a substantial concentration of Russian forces near Warsaw facing a relatively small German force, whose eastern flank relied upon the Austro-Hungarian Army for protection – forced the Germans to pull back. Przemysł was once more besieged, and the Russians threatened to advance on Krakow.

Again, the Germans showed imagination and flexibility, shifting forces from Silesia and elsewhere into West Prussia. From here, they marched east and southeast in November, attempting to encircle and destroy the rebuilt Russian Second Army in Łódź. Despite early successes, the operation proved to be beyond the ability of the German troops, who had a remarkable escape after being encircled east of Łódź. Attempts by the Germans late in the year to force their way through to Warsaw from the west met with defeat along the lines of the Rivers Bzura and Rawka, but further south, the Austro-Hungarian armies won an important battle at Limanowa-Łapanów, ending the Russian threat to Krakow. For the moment, the Eastern Front ceased to be a theatre of mobile operations. By the end of the year, almost every formation included large replacement drafts, and as in every army in Europe, field officers expressed considerable dissatisfaction at the quality of these men. Their training was rudimentary, many were unfit for front-line service, and the level of equipment was poor.

Command in the Russian Army was a complex affair, greatly complicated by internal politics. The Russian minister for war, Vladimir Alexandrovich Sukhomlinov, was a controversial figure. He had spent many years before the war establishing a faction composed of his supporters and associates who attempted – with variable justification – to portray themselves as reformers. Opposing this faction was the traditional wing of the Russian Army. Historically, a large proportion of Russia's officers had come from families with a Baltic German background – names such as Rennenkampf, von Plehve, and von Saltza speak for themselves. These men formed the heart of the anti-Sukhomlinov faction, with widespread support amongst the Russian aristocracy. The inability of either faction to achieve a decisive advantage over its opponent left the army divided at almost every level, and it was commonplace before the war for army commanders and their chiefs of staff to come from opposing factions, resulting in arrangements that were both farcical and harmful: in August 1914, Rennenkampf was part of the anti-Sukhomlinov camp, but his chief of staff was a supporter of the minister for war, and the two men were frequently not on speaking terms, communicating only in writing even when they were both in the same room.

Once hostilities began, *Stavka* – the Russian high command – was established, and after minimal debate, Grand Duke Nikolai, a cousin of the tsar, was appointed as its commander, and therefore commander of all of Russia's forces. His hostility towards Sukhomlinov ensured that friction between the two camps continued after the declaration of war. There was general agreement that he was the right man for the post, even though his only military experience was in the 1877–78 war against Turkey. He had spent many years helping to modernise the cavalry, and had a reputation for promoting officers on merit, regardless of their background. He was strongly committed to the alliance with France, and pressed for an early attack on Germany; however, he had no part in drawing up the plans for initial Russian operations, and lacked both the strategic vision and the drive to impose himself upon the sprawling armies of Russia. The interventions of *Stavka* were frequently limited to choosing between the different plans of subordinate commands, and despite his personal high standing with his contemporaries, his impact upon the opening months of the war was minimal. Similarly, Nikolai Yanushkevich, the chief of the general staff, was an ineffectual figure; his appointment owed more to patronage than any military skill, and in any case Sukhomlinov had designed the Russian military system in a way that greatly circumscribed the power of the chief of the general staff when compared with Germany or Austria-Hungary. One of the most influential persons in *Stavka* was Yuri Danilov, the quartermaster-general, who struggled to reorganise Russian logistic services in the midst of the fighting. Perhaps his most important innovation was to disperse the stockpiles of artillery ammunition in the fortresses to create depots closer to the front line, in an attempt to ease the desperate ammunition shortage. However, whilst Danilov has generally been treated kindly by history, it is worth remembering that much of his reputation is based upon his own account of the war, which naturally portrays him in the best possible light.

By the end of 1914, Northwest Front was commanded by Nikolai Vladimirovich Ruzsky, who had started the war as commander of Third Army in Galicia. Here, he advanced with utmost caution, constantly urged on by both his front commander and *Stavka*, but when Yakov Zhilinski, commander of Northwest Front at the beginning of the war, was dismissed following the disastrous attempted invasion of East Prussia, Ruzsky was appointed as his replacement. It is difficult to understand the full justification behind this, as Ruzsky had performed at best competently in Galicia. It is probably relevant that the appointment occurred at a time when Grand Duke Nikolai was attempting to move men he trusted into key positions; Ruzsky was a member of the Sukhomlinov faction, and the minister for war

probably ensured that such a key role was filled by one of his supporters, rather than allowing Grand Duke Nikolai to strengthen the anti-Sukhomlinov group. It can surely have been no surprise to anyone that Ruzsky's performance in his new role proved to be equally indecisive. During the fighting around Łódź in November 1914, he oscillated between urging his commanders to attack recklessly and sending signals to *Stavka* about the dire state of his armies and their imminent defeat. In the aftermath of the campaign, he demonstrated the political footwork necessary for success in the tsar's army by ensuring that Pavel Rennenkampf, commander of First Army – and, of course, a member of the anti-Sukhomlinov faction – took all the blame for the failure to destroy the German forces that were briefly encircled east of Łódź.

The most northerly formation in Northwest Front was Tenth Army, commanded by Thadeus von Sievers. The son of a Baltic German family, he served in the tsar's armies in fighting against the Turks and Chinese, and commanded troops with distinction in the Galician campaign of 1914. When Tenth Army was then created, he was nominated to take command of it. In October, Sievers led his army into East Prussia, occupying Goldap and the southeast part of the German province, but repeated assaults against the strong German line running from the area to the northwest of Lyck to Wirballen resulted in severe casualties for almost no gain. On paper at least, Sievers commanded a strong army, with fifteen infantry divisions, but none was remotely close to its establishment strength. Relations between him and Ruzsky were inevitably strained, as they represented the two opposing camps in the Russian Army. In early 1915, Sievers repeatedly warned Ruzsky that his line was thinly manned, with almost no reserves held further back; consequently, he warned, his army faced the real possibility of being on the receiving end of the sort of German offensive that had thrown Rennenkampf's First Army back from the Masurian Lakes in September 1914. Ruzsky rejected the warning out of hand.

Some distance to the south was First Army, now under the command of Alexander Ivanovich Litvinov. The divisions of the army had suffered heavily in the fighting around Łódź and the subsequent futile German assaults on the Russian defences to the east of the city, as had Second Army, commanded by Vladimir Smirnov, who inherited the army from Sergei Scheidemann; the latter was judged rightly to have been too passive during the Battle of Łódź.

Another force that had been extensively involved in the Battle of Łódź was Fifth Army, commanded by Pavel Plehve, who had led the formation from the outset of the war. Alfred Knox, the British military attaché, visited Plehve's headquarters in early 1915, and wrote a typically acerbic pen-picture of the man:

Plehve was at this time nearly 65. In appearance he was a little wizened-up rat, but his intelligence was keen and he had an indomitable will. His staff spoke of him with admiration, but it was evident that they feared as much as they loved him. They said he had been a nuisance in peace, constantly interfering in detail and worrying over trifles, but that in war he was quite different, grasping the situation with extraordinary quickness and giving his decision rapidly and firmly. He never, to my knowledge, visited the trenches, chiefly, no doubt, because, though he rode well, he was too infirm for walking. I imagine, too, that to him the men at the front were merely pawns. He expected everyone there to do his duty, as he, their commander, did, by issuing strong and clear instructions ... His strong, dry character, and also, it must be confessed, his strong prejudices on occasion regarding individuals, made Plehve very unpopular with senior Russian officers, who ... could forgive mistakes in strategy sooner than a lack of geniality.<sup>3</sup>

During the often-chaotic fighting around Łódź in December 1914, Plehve was perhaps the only Russian senior officer who clearly understood the overall situation, and his swift march to the aid of the Russian Second Army was decisive in preventing a German victory. Like all Russian armies in the front line, his had suffered heavy losses, but he ordered his formations to keep substantial forces in reserve, both at division and corps level, ensuring that any German attack could be countered before a breakthrough could be achieved. In this respect, he was one of the few commanders in any army involved in the war to understand the importance of such reserves in a war where well-organised defences were almost impregnable. The combined strength of his army, and First and Second Armies to the north, was a little over thirty-three infantry divisions.

Immediately to the south of Plehve's men was Fourth Army. It suffered a serious defeat at the beginning of the Galician campaign, resulting in its first commander, Anton von Saltza, losing his post. His replacement was Alexei Evert, a longstanding friend and ally of Grand Duke Nikolai. Evert's eight divisions were, in the opinion of Quartermaster-General Danilov, in the best location to mount an offensive against the Germans, but they faced entrenched opponents.<sup>4</sup> In any case, none of the units on Evert's flanks were likely to be able to support any such advance, even if he had received sufficient reinforcements to refill his depleted ranks and – more importantly – sufficient supplies of artillery ammunition to make an offensive even remotely possible.

Southwest Front had been commanded from the beginning of the war by Nikolai Ivanov, who was one of the few Russian generals to emerge from the Russo-Japanese War with his reputation enhanced. In the years immediately after

the war, he commanded the Kronstadt Fortress near St Petersburg, a centre for dissident activity during and after the 1905 Revolution. Ivanov's suppression of dissenters further increased his standing, and in August 1914, his armies swept into Galicia. Despite initial Austro-Hungarian successes, the Russians won a major victory, capturing Lemberg (now Lviv) and encircling the fortress of Przemyśl. As with other Russian commands, there was dissent in the headquarters of Southwest Front, with Ivanov being a representative of the Sukhomlinov faction and Alexeyev, his chief of staff, being from the opposing group.

The division of the Russian forces facing the Central Powers into two Fronts was to a large extent dictated by geography. The difficult terrain of the Pripet Marshes divided the area into two, each with its own distinct network of roads and railways. Each front also faced a different opponent at the beginning of the war, with Southwest Front confronted by the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Northwest Front by Germany. Inevitably, this resulted in each front regarding its own sector in isolation, with little cooperation between them. Just as first Zhilinski and then Ruzsky wished to concentrate on Germany, Ivanov repeatedly insisted that the best prospects for Russian victory lay in a sustained effort against the Austro-Hungarian Empire, particularly after the opening rounds in Galicia. In the last weeks of 1914, though, such a decisive victory seemed as elusive as ever. Nevertheless, Ivanov remained determined to try to force a conclusion: if his armies could cross the barrier of the Carpathian Mountains into Hungary, there was every prospect of the fragile Austro-Hungarian Empire falling apart.

The boundary between the two Russian fronts shifted during the autumn of 1914, as *Stavka* tried to ensure that the armies operating in the central part of the long Eastern Front were under the command of the same front – without such rearrangements, there was no prospect of effective cooperation. Currently, the most northern army of Ivanov's front was Platon Lechitsky's Ninth Army, created with reservist divisions after the beginning of the war. Unlike their German counterparts, the Russians treated their reserve formations as markedly inferior to regular divisions and corps, sending second-rate officers to them and giving them low priority in terms of equipment and supplies, and perhaps as a consequence, Ninth Army had to date played little more than a linking role, completing the line between its neighbouring formations.

The line continued to the south with Third Army, which had originally been Ruzsky's command in August 1914. It was now led by the capable Radko Dimitriev, but had been badly cut up in the Battle of Limanowa-Łapanów. To his south was Eighth Army, whose commander was Alexei Brusilov. With a history of innovation in the traditionally minded cavalry formations of the Russian

Army, he took command of his army at the beginning of the war, leading it in an unbroken advance of over 90 miles (150km). For much of late 1914, he was left to protect the extreme southern flank of the Russian front line with barely adequate forces. Short of supplies of all sorts, he improvised as best he could, demonstrating that he was perhaps the best Russian commander of his era. To his rear was the Austro-Hungarian fortress of Przemyśl, and the siege was the responsibility of Eleventh Army. This last formation also had to provide troops to cover the southeast section of the Carpathian line. Like Ninth Army, it consisted of mainly reserve formations.

Danilov estimated that the entire Russian Army was about half a million men below strength, and many of its artillery formations were also in desperate need of re-equipment.<sup>5</sup> Whilst there was hope that there would be an improvement by the end of February, the front-line formations would have to do the best they could in the meantime. Such matters had to be taken into account when planning the next operations against the Central Powers. Concluding that the Russian Army lacked the strength and resources to strike at all possible objectives at the same time, Danilov felt that it would be necessary to select a single axis – either against the Austro-Hungarian Empire, or against Germany. Vienna was a little closer than Berlin, and there was a general appreciation that the defences of the Austrian capital were far weaker. Furthermore, a Russian advance on Vienna, even if only partly successful, was likely to encourage Italy and Romania to join the Allies, leading to pressure on the Austro-Hungarian Empire that would surely force its dissolution. Despite this, French pressure remained for further operations against the Germans, as it was felt that this was the best way to force Germany to dilute its strength in the west. But an invasion of Germany was a difficult proposition. As the Russians had discovered in 1914, the German railway network allowed them to move troops rapidly from one part of the front to another to oppose a Russian attack, and the geography of the Eastern Front meant that it was difficult for the Russians to press into Germany without exposing one or both flanks – East Prussia had proved impregnable, and however enfeebled the *k.u.k.* Army might be, it was unlikely to remain passive if presented with the possibility of striking into the southern flank of a Russian advance towards Germany. Therefore, logic dictated that an essential precursor to any such advance was the elimination of the threat to one or other flank, and given that the danger from German forces in East Prussia was greater than the danger from Conrad's battered armies to the south, Danilov returned again to a theme he had championed in 1914, the conquest of East Prussia:

I regarded the occupation of East Prussia in itself as an objective of the greatest importance: the war would be taken into the enemy's territory, the inevitable evacuation of the population would have repercussions to the very heart of Germany, while the capture of one of the most ancient parts of Prussia would serve as compensation for the occupation of part of our territories on the Vistula by the Germans. East Prussia ultimately represented the only sector of Northwest Front where one could expect tactical successes, the rest of the front being already strongly fortified and sufficiently well-held by enemy forces that there would be no prospect of success.<sup>6</sup>

To this end, Danilov wished to group together the three army corps not currently assigned to any army – the Guards Corps, IV Siberian Corps and XV Corps – and strike across the southern border of East Prussia towards Soldau and Ortelsburg. Tenth Army would protect the eastern flank of this force, while a mixed infantry and cavalry force centred on Mława would protect the western flank. Alternative options for operations against the Germans included a further assault in central Poland towards Łódź, but although Ruzsky expressed interest in this option, the disadvantages were numerous: the attack would be against perhaps the strongest part of the German line; a similar advance in the previous autumn had not yielded any major success; and there was no clear operational or strategic objective within reach. Consequently, at a conference in Siedlce in mid-January, it was resolved to pursue Danilov's suggestion of another East Prussian campaign. A new Twelfth Army would be created as the main strike force around Mława. The commander of this army would be Plehve, currently in command of the static Fifth Army in central Poland.<sup>7</sup>

Inevitably, Ivanov had no intention of allowing his Southwest Front to be allocated a secondary role. He repeatedly raised the need to deliver a knockout blow against the Austro-Hungarian Empire by forcing the line of the Carpathians. Once his troops entered Hungary, he insisted, the Budapest government would sue for peace, triggering the collapse of Germany's ally, and this would leave Germany in an impossible position. In order to prepare for such an operation, Ivanov advised *Stavka* that his front would require at least four additional divisions as reinforcements, because of menacing concentrations of Austro-Hungarian forces and the appearance of German formations in the Carpathians. Danilov, whose own preference was for Northwest Front to strike against East Prussia, later recorded that while the situation was indeed dangerous, this was partly due to the thinly held Russian line – pressure anywhere along it would inevitably create a major threat. Reluctantly, unable as usual to impose its will

upon its subordinate commands, *Stavka* agreed to dispatch XXII Corps to the south as reinforcements.

Ivanov had good reasons for believing that the *k.u.k.* Army was close to collapse. Its losses in 1914 had been catastrophic in every respect; the majority of its trained personnel, particularly officers and NCOs, was dead, wounded or taken prisoner, and even if artillery ammunition had not been in short supply, many formations had lost most of their guns. Casualties amongst the mobilised reservists were also appalling, and in any previous war, would probably have forced a nation to sue for peace. It was later estimated that nearly half of the officers and men who joined the Austro-Hungarian front line in 1914 were killed, wounded, sick or prisoners by the end of the year.<sup>8</sup>

Each regiment of the *k.u.k.* Army, recruited in a specific area, was sent reinforcements in the form of 'march battalions', in an attempt to keep the ethnic identity of the regiments intact. By the end of 1914, most regiments had already received four or five march battalions, and a sixth wave was en route for the front; like their predecessors, these battalions consisted largely of poorly trained recruits and reservists, with little in the way of equipment, and weak in terms of officers and NCOs. Given the almost exclusive use of railways as a means of moving large bodies of men to the front, it was inevitable that individual trains often contained more than one march battalion, intended for regiments that were broadly in the same part of the front line. It was equally inevitable that, when these battalions arrived in groups of three or four at the front, they were collectively pressed into use as ad-hoc regiments or brigades to deal with a local crisis. This policy might have been regarded as expedient, but it was badly flawed. Poor levels of training, inadequate leadership, and a lack of equipment resulted in these formations suffering crippling casualties, often shattering their morale even before they had reached their intended regiments. It also undermined the attempts of the *k.u.k.* Army to keep the ethnic identity of regiments intact – these improvised groups of march battalions often spoke very different languages, and this did nothing to engender any sense of unit cohesion. When officers were assigned to these groups, they tended to be exclusively German speakers, further alienating many of the recruits. Wherever possible, staff officers attempted to provide regiments with replacement drafts of the right nationality, but the uneven nature of reservist cadres created further problems. Some regiments in the upper Vistula valley grew from their peacetime strength of four battalions to as many as seven battalions, while regiments in the Carpathians were reduced to only two or three weak battalions, as there were insufficient reservists of the appropriate ethnicity available. Despite this, Conrad and many other senior staff officers consistently

treated units as if they were at their establishment strength, making little or no allowance for their losses or equipment levels.

In an attempt to provide sufficient manpower to keep the army in the field, older men in formations intended for defence of the homeland in the event of an invasion – *Landsturm* in Austria, *Honvéd* in Hungary – were dispatched to the front line, where their lack of training, fitness and equipment was cruelly exposed. As wounded and sick men – both from regular units and from the *Landsturm* and *Honvéd* – returned to their homelands, they spread tales of mismanagement and defeat. It is therefore small wonder that of the Great Powers involved in the war, the Austro-Hungarian Empire was the first to show worrying levels of war-weariness amongst the general public.

The artillery complement of the *k.u.k.* Army had been neglected during the period of Conrad's dominance. On the one hand, he was aware from the events of the Franco-Prussian, Russo-Japanese and Boer Wars of the importance in artillery in overcoming defences, but on the other, he believed in the supremacy of infantry pressing home their attack at close quarters, and insisted that this was the most important consideration. Whatever lessons were not learned about the resilience of well-organised defensive lines, all armies rapidly came to appreciate the frequently decisive effect of artillery in 1914, particularly howitzers, which had been generally derided in the years before the war. Once the fighting began, their ability to drop explosive shells into the midst of trenches repeatedly proved decisive in both attack and defence. In October 1914, the *AOK* sent a memorandum to the War Ministry calling for the creation of new light field guns, howitzers and field artillery, but there was no need – there were plenty of thoroughly tested guns available to choose from, and in early 1915, an artillery programme was adopted in which each infantry division would continue to have twenty-four field guns, but would also receive thirty-six light field howitzers, and a battery of four heavy howitzers. In addition, there would be three batteries of heavy artillery at corps level.<sup>9</sup> However, it would take many months before sufficient guns could be produced, and as has already been described, it was proving impossible to provide the existing artillery with sufficient ammunition. Nor was it clear where the trained personnel required for such an expansion of the artillery arm would come from. As an interim measure, several artillery pieces built by Skoda for China and Turkey were appropriated, but by the end of 1914, these had already been dispatched to the front line. Despite this measure, the losses of guns in the opening months of the war left the army perilously short of firepower, even before the ammunition shortage was taken into account.

Although Archduke Frederick was nominally the supreme commander of all Austro-Hungarian forces, the dominant figure remained Conrad, the chief of the general staff. He had been such a huge influence in the years before the war, presiding over training, organisation and war planning, that his reputation survived the catastrophic defeats of 1914. To an extent, he was helped greatly by the fact that there were no clear alternative figures who could replace him at the top of the hierarchy – Oskar Potiorek had been his great rival for many years, but by the end of the year he was a broken man, humbled and disgraced by defeat in Serbia, and his reputation tarnished further by the fact that he had been governor in Sarajevo at the time of the assassinations that triggered the war. Conrad had placed great importance on fostering morale, maintaining that it was this rather than the numerical strength of an army that mattered, and had written extensively about the role of officers at all levels in building morale and confidence in the rank and file, but by the first winter of the war, he was rarely seen even in army headquarters, preferring to remain at *AOK* in Teschen.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, this tendency for senior officers to avoid going to the front line became an increasingly common fact of life in many armies, but particularly the *k.u.k.* Army. It is striking that the first five months of the war saw thirty-nine Austro-Hungarian senior officers, of the rank of colonel or higher, killed in action; in the entire rest of the war, there would only be another thirty-one such casualties.<sup>11</sup> Much of Conrad's teaching had concentrated on the importance of local initiative, but unlike the German Army, the *k.u.k.* Army failed to produce men with sufficient training and knowledge to exercise such initiative effectively. The high losses of officers in 1914, and their replacement by men with even less experience and training, might have suggested the need to alter the doctrine under which the army functioned, but Conrad remained insistent upon delegating decision-making to lower levels. In 1914, this had resulted in officers trying to implement Conrad's own teachings on tactics, almost regardless of local circumstances, such was the reverence with which they treated their chief of staff. By 1915, the replacement officers lacked even the ability to attempt such slavish adherence to doctrine, and the army was left with orders from above that frequently appeared too minimal, while lower ranks lacked the ability to improvise to fill in the blanks according to local conditions.

In order to compensate for the weakened state of the *k.u.k.* Army, the German *Oberste Heeresleitung* (*OHL*, or Army Supreme Command) dispatched many units to reinforce the Austro-Hungarian line, resulting in these units becoming intercalated with the Austro-Hungarian formations. The most northerly of Conrad's armies was Second Army, commanded by Eduard Freiherr von Böhm-

Ermolli, consisting of IV and XII Corps. Unusually for an era where aristocrats still dominated the upper echelons of the armies of most European nations, Böhm-Ermolli came from relatively humble origins; his father was a sergeant in the Austrian Army during the First Italian War of Independence, winning an officer's commission as reward for bravery at the Battle of Novara. The original Austro-Hungarian war plan intended for Second Army to be deployed against Serbia, and although Conrad eventually changed his mind, switching the army to eastern Galicia, it was still sent to the Balkan front on mobilisation, and then transferred to face Russian troops in Galicia. Its divisions arrived in Galicia as the fighting around Lemberg reached a crisis, and were unable to prevent a comprehensive Russian victory. In November, as German troops that had advanced across Poland from Silesia to the southern approaches of Warsaw were forced to withdraw to their start line, Second Army was sent north to ensure continuity with the Germans massing before Łódź. In December, as the Germans advanced and captured Łódź to the north, and the Russians were driven back from the approaches to Krakow to the south, Conrad repeatedly urged Böhm-Ermolli to join the advance and to throw back the Russians on his front. Despite his best efforts, all of his attacks foundered in the face of stout Russian defences. The best that he could achieve was to tie down Russian troops that might have been moved to support the Russian lines in front of Krakow.

Immediately to the south of the Austro-Hungarian Second Army was a German force commanded by Generaloberst Remus von Woyrsch. Predominantly composed of Silesian *Landwehr* reservists, this corps had already distinguished itself advancing to the Vistula – twice – in 1914, before conducting an orderly withdrawal in the face of superior Russian forces. South of Woyrsch's command, which was under Austro-Hungarian control, was the Austro-Hungarian First Army. With II, I, V and X Corps, it was a strong formation on paper, but most of its divisions were barely at the numerical strength of regiments, and their fighting power was still weaker. The commander of this force was Viktor Dankl, who had led his men to an initial success in August 1914 at the Battle of Kraśnik before he was driven back. In October, he was part of the failed operation to secure the entire left bank of the Vistula south of Warsaw; while the Germans threatened the Polish capital, Conrad ordered Dankl to allow the Russians to reinforce their bridgeheads across the river, with a view to counterattacking and destroying them. This obsession with the offensive, when a determined defence along the river would have sufficed, was regarded at the time as a highly risky endeavour by the Germans, and they were not at all surprised when Dankl's counterattack failed with heavy losses. In the weeks that followed, First Army was

driven back towards the upper Vistula, and at times appeared in danger of being forced to retreat south, opening the way for a Russian thrust against Krakow, but through a mixture of timely reinforcements and over-extended Russian supply lines, the Austro-Hungarian forces were able to prevent the fall of the vital city. Dankl's successes in Galicia in August – little more than a tactical success – were no greater than those of Moritz von Auffenberg, whose Fourth Army drove back the Russians at Komarów, but while Auffenberg took the blame for the overall Austro-Hungarian defeat in Galicia, Dankl was regarded as a great hero, in an empire desperately in need of heroes to restore its self-respect.

To the south of First Army, the terrain changed. The rugged peaks and passes of the Carpathians formed a natural barrier between Galicia, now in Russian hands, and the great plain of Hungary and the Danube valley. Fourth Army had been on the southeast flank of First Army since the beginning of the war, and after the dismissal of Auffenberg following the September defeats in Galicia, it came under the command of Archduke Joseph Ferdinand. During the initial battles, the archduke had led a corps-sized unit with some distinction, before Conrad assigned him impossible tasks that would have required at least twice as many troops. His army contained XVII, XIV, and XI Corps, as well as improvised groupings of troops. These approximated to the strength of a corps, but were known in the *k.u.k.* Army as 'army groups', a term more often associated with much larger bodies consisting of several armies. These groups, eponymously named after their commanders – Křitek, Ljubičić, Arz and Králiček – were built around regular army divisions, but frequently contained improvised brigades of march battalions, with rudimentary rear area units such as logistics and medical support. Their durability in sustained operations was therefore limited.

Continuing the Austro-Hungarian line along the Carpathians was Third Army. Badly mauled near Lemberg, the army was now under the command of the capable Svetozar Borojević. In recent years, his ethnicity has become a subject of controversy; he always stated that he was Croatian, but many regarded him as Serbian.<sup>12</sup> He inherited a battered and defeated army, but managed to restore its fighting power sufficiently for it to contribute to the Austro-Hungarian advance in October, when the fortress of Przemyśl was briefly relieved. As the armies of the Central Powers retreated once more, Borojević struggled to hold the line of the Carpathians, receiving mutually incompatible orders both to eliminate Russian penetrations through the mountain passes and to strike northwest in support of Joseph Ferdinand's army near Neu Sandez (now Nowy Sacz). This battle marked the beginning of a period of difficult personal relations between Borojević and Conrad. The army

consisted largely of VII and XVII Corps, with some improvised groups. On its southeast flank, completing the long front line, was 'Army Group Pflanze-Baltin', primarily centred on the Uzso Pass.

About 42 miles (70km) behind the Russian front line was the city of Przemyśl, where the Austro-Hungarian garrison continued to hold out against encircling Russian troops. Built as a bulwark against Russian invasion, the fortress was performing the role that had been assigned to it in Austro-Hungarian plans: to tie down Russian troops and to hinder their lines of communication until it was possible for the *k.u.k.* Army to advance to lift the siege. Already, the city had been reached by an Austro-Hungarian relief column in October 1914, only to be besieged once again as the Central Powers were forced to give up their temporary gains at the end of the month. Now, with rations and other supplies beginning to run low, the probability of the garrison, a substantial force of 120,000 men, holding out until help arrived seemed increasingly unlikely.

Whilst the *k.u.k.* Army had endured substantial setbacks in Galicia, it had encountered complete disaster in its 1914 campaign against Serbia. The small, impoverished nation that was at the heart of the July Crisis after the Sarajevo assassinations had an army that was strong in spirit, but weak in modern firepower, and had not recovered from losses and ammunition consumption in the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913. In August 1914, when the Austro-Hungarian Empire unleashed Fifth and Sixth Armies, together with parts of Böhm-Ermolli's Second Army, the expectation was that the Serbs would rapidly be overrun. But the initial Austro-Hungarian assault, across the mountainous and heavily wooded Drina valley, ended in an ignominious withdrawal, and although a second offensive – over the same difficult terrain – finally succeeded in pushing into the heart of Serbia, supplies of guns and ammunition from France and Russia arrived in time to rejuvenate the Serbian Army, which launched a determined counterattack in early December. On 9 December, Oskar Potiorek, the Austro-Hungarian commander in Serbia, had to admit to Vienna that the campaign had run into serious trouble, and that he would be forced once more to retreat to the frontier. The outcome of many weeks of bitter fighting was that the *k.u.k.* Army lost perhaps 224,000 men dead, wounded, taken prisoner or through illness; the Serbs lost 170,000, which as a proportion of their smaller army was a far heavier blow, and during the winter that followed, tens of thousands of Serbs, soldiers and civilians alike, perished from illness. The Austro-Hungarian Sixth Army was disbanded, and Fifth Army was left as the only force covering the Serbian front. Overall command of the Balkan theatre was assigned to Archduke Eugen.

Much as was the case in the *k.u.k.* Army, the nominal commander-in-chief of the German Army – Kaiser Wilhelm – was no more than a figurehead. At first, Wilhelm had been desperate to be involved in military decision-making, and was dismayed and hurt by the brusque way that the professional officers of the army sidelined him. By Christmas 1914, he cut a forlorn figure, ignored by most of the staff of *OHL*, and almost pathetically grateful to anyone who would spend time talking to him about the war. The real power within the army lay in the office of chief of the general staff. At the beginning of the war, this post was held by Helmuth von Moltke, nephew of the great von Moltke who masterminded Bismarck's wars of German unification. After the failure of the German invasion of France, Moltke's nerves failed him, and he was dismissed and replaced by General Erich von Falkenhayn in mid-September. Born in West Prussia, Falkenhayn saw action in China during the Boxer Rebellion, and in the summer of 1914 was serving as minister for war in Berlin. Like many of his contemporaries, he saw the July Crisis as an opportunity to bolster the Central Powers, without necessarily triggering war across the entire continent, but when events escalated, he was perfectly prepared for such a conflict.

In his new role as chief of the general staff, Falkenhayn retained control of the War Ministry, though the German Chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg, successfully argued for the appointment of a new minister for war in early 1915; the new minister, Wild von Hohenborn, was a close ally of Falkenhayn, and had previously served as quartermaster-general.

Overall command of German forces in the east lay with Generaloberst Paul von Hindenburg, acting in the role of *Oberbefehlshaber der gesamten deutschen Streitkräfte im Osten* ('Supreme commander of all German forces in the east', usually abbreviated to *Ober Ost*, a term used for both the commander and his headquarters). In the years before the war, Hindenburg had been considered for the post of chief of the general staff, but was in retirement when hostilities began. After initial German setbacks in East Prussia, he was recalled and sent east to take command of the German Eighth Army, accompanied by his new chief of staff, Erich Ludendorff. It was the beginning of a relationship that would dominate Germany's conduct of the war.

The new command team could not have had a better start. Through a mixture of good judgement, good fortune, Russian mistakes, and wilful disobedience on the part of their subordinates, Hindenburg and Ludendorff won a crushing victory over the Russian Second Army at Tannenberg in August, and then chased the Russian First Army from East Prussia in September. Thereafter, the performance of German forces was less spectacular. The Germans pursued the

Russians from East Prussia, only to overreach their supply lines and fall back, conceding the southeast corner of the province. Hindenburg was appointed as overall commander on the Eastern Front, and a short time later Ludendorff became his chief of staff.

Much has been written about the relationship between the two men.<sup>13</sup> Hindenburg is often portrayed as the genial, calm strategist, the perfect foil for the highly strung genius of Ludendorff. Whilst there may be much truth in this picture, there is also no doubt that both men became the focus of a great deal of mythology and propaganda, and both did much to promote and propagate this. What is inarguable is that the sum was greater than its parts. On their own, neither would have accomplished a fraction of what they achieved together. Their good fortune in winning a glittering triumph at the outset of their partnership at Tannenberg secured them a great deal of prestige, which survived later setbacks and allowed them to become ever more powerful. Hindenburg's own assessment of their relationship is perhaps a particularly succinct summary:

It has been suggested that these relations [between the two men] find a parallel in those between Blücher and Gneisenau. I will venture no opinion as to how far such a comparison reveals a departure from true historical perspective. As I have already said, I had myself held the post of chief of staff for several years. As I knew from my own experience, the relations between the chief of staff and his general, who has the responsibility, are not theoretically laid down in the German Army. The way in which they work together and the degree to which their powers are complementary are much more a matter of personality. The boundaries of their respective powers are therefore not clearly demarcated. If the relations between the general and his chief of staff are what they ought to be, these boundaries are easily adjusted by soldierly and personal tact and the qualities of mind on both sides.

I myself have often characterised my relations with General Ludendorff as those of a happy marriage. In such a relationship how can a third party clearly distinguish the merits of the individuals? They are one in thought and action, and often what the one says is only the expression of the wishes and feelings of the other.

After I had learnt the worth of General Ludendorff, and that was soon, I realised that one of my principal tasks was, as far as possible, to give free scope to the intellectual powers, the almost superhuman capacity for work and untiring resolution of my chief of staff, and if necessary clear the way for him, the way in which our common desires and our common goal pointed – victory for our colours, the welfare of our Fatherland and a peace worthy of the sacrifices our nation had made.