

1917 – THE BREAKING OF ARMIES

By now it was clear that this was a war of attrition – a question of who could last longest. German submarine attacks were causing shortages and rationing in Britain, but our naval blockade of Germany was biting even harder. In the east the Russian Army still fought on bravely against the Germans while in the south the Italians fought the Austrians in the Alps for control of Trieste and the Trentino.

On the Western Front the British and French planned new offensives. The British attack at Arras achieved some success. Miles of tunnels were dug to allow our troops to reach Vimy Ridge unobserved by the Germans. On 9th April, in a snow storm, Canadian troops emerged from the tunnels and swept the Germans off the top of the ridge giving the Allies command of the land beyond. But the French offensive on 16th April at Chemin des Dames, led by General Nivelle, was a costly disaster. Demoralised by another useless sacrifice of lives, a large part of the French army mutinied. For several weeks the situation was critical until General Petain,



The War in the Alps

Nivelle's replacement, managed to persuade the soldiers to return to duty. Fortunately, the Germans had not realised what was happening and missed the chance to attack. But it was clear that the French army would not be up to any major action for some time.



Tsar Nicholas II and his family

Meanwhile, in Russia, growing war weariness led to the overthrow of the autocratic but inept Tsar Nicholas II in March. The new Provisional Government did try to continue the war, but the Brusilov Offensive in July was a failure and by September the Russian army was disintegrating. In early November a second revolution brought to power Lenin and the Bolsheviks. They condemned the war as a capitalist struggle, contrary to the interests of ordinary people, and promised to make peace with Germany as soon as possible.

On the Italian front too, things were going badly wrong. In October, with the help of German troops [including a daring young officer called Erwin Rommel] the

Austrians launched an attack at Caporetto. The Italian army collapsed, driven back 60 miles in a fortnight. The British and French had to rush troops to Italy to shore up their ally, thus reducing their reserves on the Western Front.