

This Day in History... March 21, 1918

German Spring Offensive

On March 21, 1918, Germany launched its Spring Offensive in the hopes of tipping the scales of the war before American troops and supplies could reach the front.

German plans for the Spring Offensive began as early as November 1917. The offensive, also known as *Kaiserschlacht* (Kaiser's Battle), was planned and executed by German General Erich Ludendorff, with little input from the German government or Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg.

The operation also didn't have a major strategy. Ludendorff had privately admitted that Germany couldn't win a war of attrition, but he was unwilling to give up the land they had gained in the West and East. Ludendorff wasn't seeking to reach the English Channel, rather he hoped to break through the Allied lines and crumble the flanks, taking whatever ports or railway junctions they could. The goal was to gain as much of the Allied-held ground as possible before the bulk of the US forces could arrive at the front.

The attack began on the first day of spring, March 21, 1918. The first phase of the offensive was Operation Michael, and it began at 4:40 a.m. with the largest artillery bombardment of the war. Over 1 million shells rained down on an area of 150 square miles for five hours.

Though German prisoners warned the British about the coming offensive, they were unable to defend against such a massive attack. British and French troops had prepared and dug-in at some of the more strategic locations. Others were less defended – and this was where the Germans attacked. The Allies were forced into a fighting retreat but still managed to deliver significant enemy casualties. Within three days, the Germans opened a 50-mile-wide gap on the front, the greatest advance for either side in four years.



WWI-era stamp depicting Britannia, as Britain – “a ruler of the seas.”

However, German Sturmtruppen (Stormtroopers) were leading the attacks. These elite soldiers carried few supplies so they could move quicker than regular infantry. But they ran out of ammo and food quickly, eventually resorting to looting or even killing their horses for meat, slowing their advance dramatically.

As the Germans advanced, they began taking towns outside of their primary objectives. After about a week, they refocused on their initial goal and launched a 29-division assault, which was beaten back by the British. The Germans then attempted to attack the French lines near Amiens. But the Allies managed to fight that attack off as well. The Germans then terminated Operation Michael on April 5. While they had gained a lot of ground, it was of little value and they had suffered high casualties.

Days later, the Germans launched Operation Georgette, aimed at capturing the ports of Calais, Boulogne, and Dunkirk. While the Germans saw early gains, the Allies mounted a stiff defense and the operation ended on April 29. This operation was followed by *Blücher–Yorck*, aimed at drawing French forces away from the channel. The Germans made it to the Marne River and came within striking distance of Paris, but again they suffered heavy casualties that they couldn't replace.

Two more offensives would follow – *Gneisenau* and *Friedensturm* – but in July, the French launched their own offensive on the German salient. By this point, the German line was stretched because they had formed several salients into Allied territory, and they didn't have the manpower to fully fill the line. The Spring Offensive ended in July and shortly after, the Allies launched their Hundred Days Offensive, which would bring about the end of the war. Casualties on both sides of the Spring Offensive were high – about 688,000 for the Germans and 863,000 for the Allies, but the Allies had large numbers of fresh American troops arriving.



Issued in 1919 to commemorate the Allied victory in the war.



Stamp honoring US participation in WWI.

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