

BATTLE OF AMIENS AUGUST 1918

The Beginning of the End

1. Background: Early 1918

By early 1918, the strategic situation on the Western Front changed dramatically. Germany's victory over Russia and the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk freed up around 50 divisions for redeployment to France and Belgium. For the first time since 1914, Germany briefly held a numerical advantage.

Ludendorff believed this advantage would not last. American troops were arriving in ever-greater numbers, and by late 1918 the Allies would be too strong to defeat. Germany therefore gambled everything on a massive offensive designed to win the war before summer.

2. The German Spring Offensives: Success and Collapse

The first attack, Operation Michael, launched on 21 March 1918, achieved dramatic gains. The British Fifth Army was driven back, and the Germans advanced further in a single day than at any point since 1914.

But the success masked deeper problems:

- The Germans advanced so fast their artillery and supplies could not keep up.
- Assault troops became exhausted.
- Casualties were enormous.
- The offensive lacked clear strategic direction once the initial breakthrough occurred.

Crucially, they failed to capture Amiens, the key railway junction linking the British and French armies. At Villers-Bretonneux, Australian and British troops halted the advance.

By June, German troops were physically exhausted and psychologically worn down. Senior commanders — notably Crown Prince Wilhelm and Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria — warned Ludendorff that their men were at breaking point. Wilhelm reported that many units were “at the end of their strength.” Rupprecht wrote that morale was “very shaky.” Ludendorff dismissed or downplayed these warnings, insisting the army could still attack.

By July, after further failed offensives, German morale was deteriorating rapidly. The army had spent its last reserves without achieving victory.

3. The Allies Regain the Initiative

The Allies, now reinforced by American troops, recognised German weakness. Under Ferdinand Foch, they planned a series of coordinated offensives to exploit the overstretched German line.

One key objective was securing the Paris–Amiens railway, vital for Allied logistics. The Amiens sector was chosen because:

- German divisions there were depleted.
- Morale was low.
- The ground was ideal for tanks.
- The Allies could achieve surprise.

4. Planning Amiens: Secrecy, Deception, and Modern Methods

The attack was entrusted to a powerful Allied grouping:

- British Fourth Army (Rawlinson)
- Canadian Corps (Currie)
- Australian Corps (Monash)
- French First Army (Debeney)

Secrecy and deception

The Allies went to extraordinary lengths to conceal the attack:

- Troops moved at night.
- Tanks were hidden in woods and moved only in darkness.
- Fake radio traffic suggested Allied units were leaving the sector.
- Crucially, there was no preliminary bombardment.

Artillery without ranging shots

Instead of ranging shots — which would have warned the Germans — the Allies used:

- Sound ranging
- Flash spotting
- Air reconnaissance

These scientific methods allowed them to pinpoint German batteries with remarkable accuracy. When the opening barrage began at 4:20 a.m. on 8 August, about 95% of German guns were hit or suppressed within minutes. Many were destroyed outright; others were silenced by counter-battery fire.

This was one of the most effective counter-battery operations of the entire war.

5. The Allied Plan: Tanks, Infantry, Artillery, Air Power

Amiens showcased fully integrated modern warfare.

Tanks and ground conditions

The dry Picardy chalk soil in August was ideal for tanks — firm, open, and not churned into mud. Over 600 tanks were deployed: Mark V heavy tanks, Whippets, and supply tanks.

Infantry followed behind the tanks, using them as moving shields and exploiting the gaps they created. This was textbook Monash: coordinated, timed, and mutually supporting arms.

Artillery

Thousands of guns fired a sudden, overwhelming barrage:

- A creeping barrage for the infantry
- Counter-battery fire that neutralised German artillery
- Smoke screens to blind defenders

Air power

Around 2,000 aircraft supported the attack:

- Ground-attack missions
- Reconnaissance
- Disruption of German communications
- Low-level strafing of retreating troops

The Germans had no comparable air strength in the sector.

6. 8 August 1918: “The Black Day of the German Army”

At 4:20 a.m., the attack began. The effect was immediate and devastating.

- The Allies advanced 11 km (7 miles) on the first day — a breakthrough unheard of since 1914.
- German artillery was largely silenced.
- Tanks smashed through the forward positions.
- Infantry followed rapidly, capturing strongpoints and villages.
- Air power harassed retreating German units.

Most striking was the collapse in German morale. Around 27,000 German soldiers surrendered during the battle — an unprecedented number. Many gave up without fighting, convinced the war was lost.

Ludendorff later wrote that 8 August was “the black day of the German Army”, because “its spirit and morale were broken.”

7. 9–11 August: Continued Gains

On 9 August, the Allies advanced another six miles, though tank losses and fatigue slowed progress (only 145 tanks available on 9 Aug). German reserves arrived but could not stabilise the situation.

By 11 August, the offensive had achieved all its objectives:

- A deep penetration of the German line
- Massive numbers of prisoners
- Heavy German casualties
- A collapse in German confidence

The scale of the advance dwarfed anything achieved in the previous four years.

8. Significance: The Beginning of the Hundred Days Offensive

Amiens was not just a victory — it was a turning point.

It marked the beginning of the Hundred Days Offensive, a relentless series of Allied attacks that:

- Drove the Germans back to the Hindenburg Line
- Shattered their remaining ability to resist
- Triggered political and military collapse
- Led directly to the Armistice of 11 November 1918

Amiens proved that the Allies had mastered modern combined-arms warfare. It revealed the fragility of German morale. And it showed that the strategic initiative had passed decisively to the Allies.

Summary

The Battle of Amiens was the moment the First World War changed character. After years of stalemate, the Allies achieved a breakthrough through planning, deception, technology, and coordination. German morale collapsed, thousands surrendered, and the path to victory opened. Amiens began the Hundred Days Offensive — the final chapter of the war.