

Strategic Moves of the War—May 3rd, 1917

By Our Military Expert

IN last week's review attention was called to the methods being employed by the Entente Allies to wear down the Germans by attacking first at one end of their lines and then at the other; these methods appear to be continued. Rather than attempt to break through the German lines at one blow—which, even, if successful, would be most costly in men and materiel—the present plan appears rather to be a strong attack, after artillery preparation, a re-arrangement and consolidation of gains and then a new attack in the same manner. In this way the former great losses in the bloody battles around Ypres, Loos and in the Champagne region would be avoided.

To understand thoroughly the new operations now being carried out after the first British advance and consolidation, it must be remembered that, when the first advance began this year, the British overran and pierced the German permanent system, from the northern end of the Vimy ridge to the vicinity of Croisilles on a front of 12 miles and to a depth of four or four and a half miles. They also gained a foothold in several places on a reserve line behind the permanent one, which line was known as the "Oppy line." This began at Lens and after passing through the town of that name, took in a number of villages—among them Arleux, Gavrelle, Fampoux, Roeux, Monchy and Guémappe—thence on to Croisilles. While a number of these villages, Monchy especially, were captured in the first rush, portions of the line continued to be held by the Germans and their possession is still hotly contested by both sides.

The latest news gives the storming and capture by the British on April 28th of Arleux, one of the northern portions of the line, and a drive forward on a front of ten miles clear down to the right bank of the Scarpe River. The capture of Oppy itself is also reported but not yet confirmed as the description of the fighting there states that—"wave on wave of German attackers move forward only to be mowed down under machine gun and rifle fire." Below the Scarpe heavy fighting is reported as far south as Monchy; on the north, British gains are reported all the way to the Acheville-Vimy road almost on the outskirts of Lens.

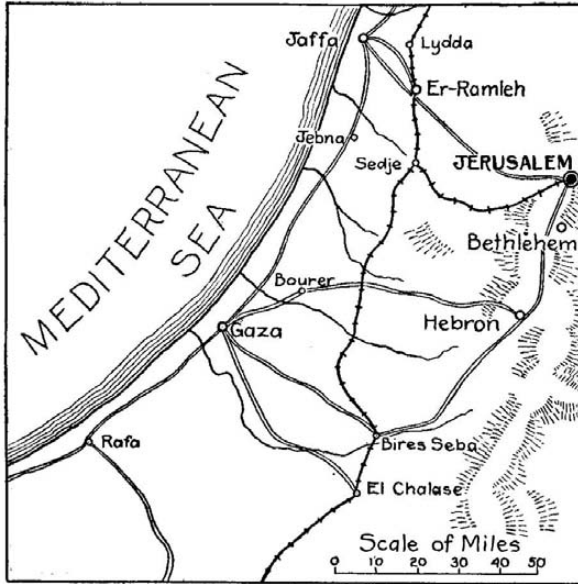
Arleux is only nine miles from Douai; in a strategic point of view, it menaces the trench systems of the northern end of the so-called Drocourt-Quéant switch line. According to rumors and general belief, the Germans are constructing or have constructed such a line of defense beginning at Hill 70 southeast of Loos and running south through Drocourt to Quéant, then joining the main line of defense. This switch line is generally parallel to the Oppy line and about three miles east of it. Everything points to the fact that the line is not yet completed and that the strong German counter-attacks are for the purpose of delaying their opponents until it is ready. Otherwise it is not possible to explain why such costly efforts should be made and should be so long continued with terrible loss of life. Monchy and Roeux are the keys of the Oppy lines; being held by the British as commanding positions, they have been the special object of these counter-attacks, which so far have been futile.

The direct object of the present British offensive movements is the breaking of the Drocourt-Quéant line; reports have led to the belief that the Germans were evacuating Lens but it is also stated that Marshal Hindenburg personally gave orders for its continued occupation. The risks of doing so must be known to him, for the position is a salient thrusting into the British lines; the sides can be crushed in or the town pocketed so that, if it is not finally hurriedly abandoned, the capture of the troops and guns within its area is a certainty. There must therefore be strong reasons for its retention. The main objective of the present British advance is of course Douai, some eight or nine miles east of their present front. They are moving toward that city along both banks of the Scarpe River that flows by both Arras and Douai. As they now hold the commanding heights that overlook the country toward Douai, no serious obstacle ought to be encountered over the intervening practically level terrain until the outskirts of the city are reached—certainly there is no position like that of Vimy hill which was so successfully stormed. However, the first forward movement was made with the assistance of secretly arranged and very heavy barrage fire; it was therefore not very costly in human life. But any assaults on new lines encountered in the forward movements will not have

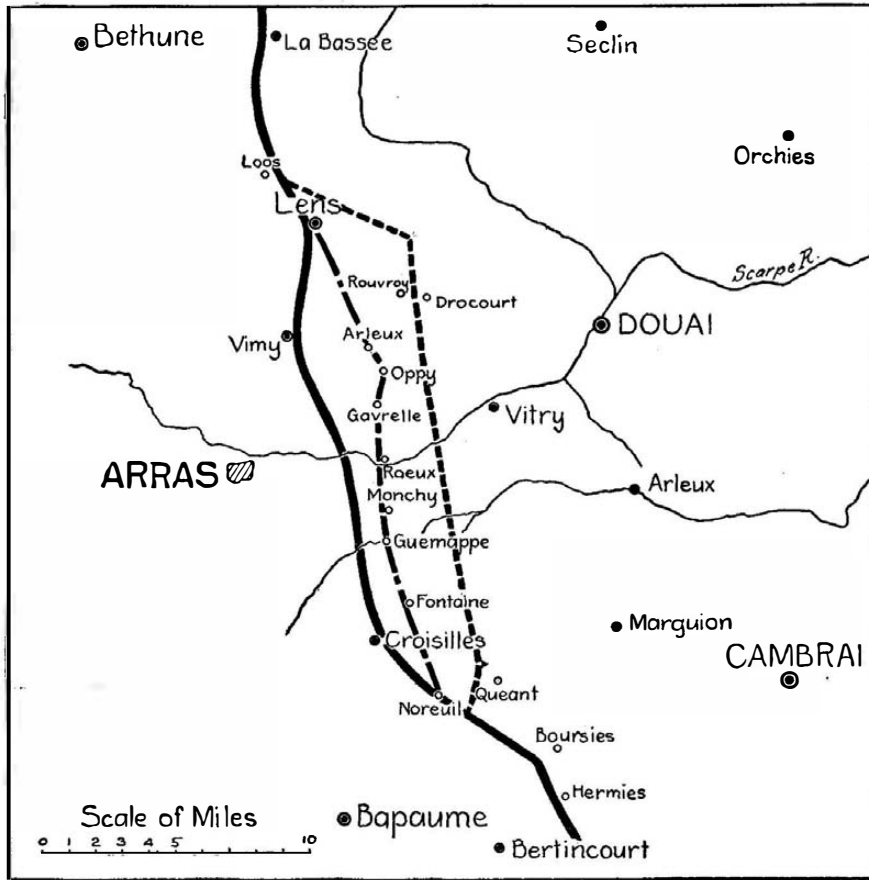
so efficient a support; the true test of strength will therefore come at that time.

If the Drocourt-Quéant line does not hold the British long enough to ensure the construction of other defenses nearer Douai, then the Germans will lose that city and must abandon their positions in France from Lille to the Meuse at Mézières and to the hills around Verdun. In other words, Douai on the north for the British and Laon on the south for the French are closely inter-related as regards their effects on the present campaign. If the French take the latter city, the Germans must go back to the Meuse; if the British take Douai, the Germans must withdraw to the frontier.

From the terrific and bloody fighting now taking



From Sinai Peninsula to Jerusalem
Railroads shown by crossed lines



Arras battle lines on May 3rd, 1917

place as the British move forward from Vimy and Arras toward Douai, it would seem that the maximum of German resistance can be expected here; a second defeat like that of the first battle of Arras would show that the German morale and German fighting power had so diminished that they might in the end lead to a collapse and an acknowledgment of defeat. The constant employment of massed formations for attack, as mentioned so often in press dispatches, must cause enormous losses of men that cannot be replaced; such formations can be described as only reckless unless the German leaders are suspicious of the staying qualities of their reserves if allowed too much freedom on the fighting line, and they therefore employ such formations as a means of prompt and secure control.

To the south, in the direction of Cambrai and St. Quentin, while some fighting is reported, nothing of serious import appears to have taken place. By the capture of Vendhuile mentioned in the last review and of all the high ground between it and the wood and villages of

Havricourt, Trescault and Gonnellieu, the valley of the Scheldt can be cleared up to the canal and river; the town of Marcoing on the river can also be taken. This last is only four miles from Cambrai and, once in British hands, the railroads entering the town both from the east and north will be within cannon range. It will not be so easy to go beyond Marcoing, for the river is an obstacle of great defensive strength. The British have made notable strides since the advance began; despite all efforts of the Germans to stop them, the latter have been driven back at all points and the end is not yet. Whether their military strength will soon be so sapped and weakened that an extended withdrawal through Belgium to the Rhine may be looked for, is taking many chances on a guess. That they are steadily being driven back and losing cannot be gainsaid. But predictions as to a military and economic collapse would not be safe at the present time. There are however signs now that the Germans' munition supply is seriously crippled and that it has been found necessary to use worn out guns.

On the Aisne front the French have apparently been consolidating their positions preparatory to making another advance—possibly as soon as the British, hammering at the other end of the line, have also had to stop to reorganize their own lines. Artillery fighting is reported as active in the vicinity of Cerny and Craonne west of Rheims, and German counter-attacks are reported in the vicinity of Mont Haut, where the point of the French wedge that is being driven into the German lines approaches the Nauroy-Moronvillers road. This wedge is the result of careful preparation and was gained by catching the Germans off their guard.

Little has been heard recently of operations on the Russian front and he would be a brave man, indeed, who would try to solve the present riddle of the situation in that country. Nothing is known that would make it safe even to hazard a guess. There can be no doubt that the Allies will all be benefitted by anything that Russia can do as a military power; but just now all its natural

strength must be given up to overcoming the socialistic and anarchistic tendencies fostered by German influence and German money. But, if the powers that rule can keep the army and navy loyal, Russia can maintain her lines on her western front and can thus hold there most of the Austrian army and many portions of the German strength that could be used to such great advantage just now on the western area. Even if her troops make no advance but remain in their trenches, they not only hold troops in the opposing armies, but also maintain the blockade of Germany as regards food, thus continuing the work of starvation. If, on the other hand, she should make a separate peace as has been so strongly urged, her food supplies would at once go into Germany; the latter's troops on the Russian borders would go at once either to the Western front, or to help the Austrians against Italy, or against the Saloniki army.

As regards the Mesopotamian campaign, the Turks, according to an official bulletin, are intrenching on the Tigris about fifteen miles north of Samara, *i. e.*, about ninety miles north of Bagdad. These troops (the 18th Army Corps) were heavily engaged in the recent fighting in the vicinity of Samara and their loss as a result has been placed at 4,000 men. The 13th Army Corps that was driven off to the east had been busy for several days fortifying a position on both banks of the Shatt-el-Adhem, a tributary of the Tigris that rises back of the Jebel Hamrin hills. Here they were surprised by the British on April 30th, were badly defeated, and were forced to retreat into the hills, where they have taken refuge. The British commander reports the capture of a number of officers, men and much materiel; he also mentions the continued pursuit by his cavalry of the retreating enemy. However, an advance on the Tigris to the north will now be all the more difficult as the northern end of the Bagdad railway has been probably reached at that place. If the road has been built farther north in the direction of Mosul or if it has been actually completed all the way through Mosul to Aleppo, then the transportation problem becomes for the British a relatively simple matter. With the Russians joining hands with the British on the Diala and Shatt-el-Adhem Rivers on the south and with the Russian advance upon Mosul from Persia on the north, there seems little chance of the Turkish armies opposing them to do anything else than surrender in the end.