

Meghen McCrae

*An Unexpected Ending: Allied Strategic Thought about How to End the First World War*

It came as a great shock to the leaders of both the Allied and German nations when, in the autumn of 1918, the German Empire collapsed. A year earlier the future had appeared bleak for the Allies. The French army seemed spent, bled white and crippled by mutiny, and revolution looked to take Russia completely out of the war. Even though the Americans had entered the war on the side of the Allies it would take many months before their troops were prepared to fight. Having rejected any thought of a negotiated settlement, the Allies saw no way the war could be won in 1918. Indeed, it was the accepted belief that they would not prevail until 1919 or even 1920, a belief that remained widely held as late as October 1918, only one month before the fighting ended. And yet this mentality has been ignored by historians writing about the ending of the First World War. The year 1918 is studied using the hindsight of the armistice with the assumption that all efforts were coordinated towards victory in 1918.

*In contrast my project aims to illuminate the mentalities of the Allies' political and military leaders by examining how they defined victory, how victory would be achieved and how these beliefs affected their strategy in 1918.* Utilizing the large amount of research material bearing on these questions, my project will focus on the Supreme War Council (SWC)—a venture by the British, French, American and Italian governments to closely coordinate their strategy—as its case study. I will analyze the workings of the SWC as an international body and an early example of modern alliance warfare, comparing the perspectives of the British, American and French representatives in their willingness and unwillingness to coordinate national needs with alliance ones.

Created in November 1917, the first responsibility of both its political and military members was to consider Allied strategy for 1918. The first phase of my research will begin here and continue until June 1918. It will consider how widespread was the belief that the war would continue into 1919 and how this mindset affected issues such as manpower, logistics and the Russian intervention in light of the need to balance immediate needs with future ones.

The second phase of my project will examine the June to December 1918 period; the main months when thinking about 1919 was transformed from mere beliefs into detailed war plans. It will illuminate the depth of these plans and the extent to which the Allies went to execute them, as well as how the Allies defined victory.

The final phase of my research will analyse how plans for 1919, which focused on defeating the Germans with a massive military offensive, affected the shape of the armistice terms. The SWC had a major influence over the conditions of the armistice, as it was the main body through which the Allies negotiated the peace. My project will consider the degree to which the Allies' definition of victory was met by the armistice, given that the terms reflected the Allied concern that Germany might resume the war.

This thesis will be the first study to examine strategy for 1918 without the distortions of historical hindsight. Challenging studies that examine 'how the war was won' through the lens of a single nation, this study will explore how the Allies thought they could win a total military victory by—and only by—forging a more tightly co-ordinated coalition. Its results will provide a more complete understanding of what happened in 1918, and how the war was concluded, while also illuminating the origins of modern warfare. Finally, it will investigate how people think about ending conflict by military means - a salient point in today's world.