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# Germany's Western Front Translations from the German Official History of the Great War

*Editor's Note: Germany's Western Front, edited by Mark Osborne Humphries and John Maker, is a multi-volume English-language translation of Der Weltkrieg, the German official history of the First World War. Originally produced between 1925 and 1944 using classified archival records that were destroyed in the aftermath of the Second World War, Der Weltkrieg is the untold story of German experience on the Western Front. What follows in the foreword, written by Hew Strachan, to the 1915 volume of the series.*

## Foreword

by Hew Strachan

War is a reactive business, a competition whose outcome is dependent not on some sort of absolute standard of excellence on the part of one side, but on the relative superiority of one side over another. It is this relationship, the dynamic between two opponents as each struggles to impose its will on the other, that should be at the heart of operational military history. But it rarely is. Military history, for all its massive progress in the last two or three decades, particularly in the English speaking world, remains far too national – and even nationalistic – in its approach. If the serious study of military history as a self-contained subject has a significant agenda for the future, it is this – to be comparative.

For no war and no front is this injunction more important or more pressing than it is for the First World War and its western front. The cycle of reaction and reaction between two coalitions, remarkably similar in their military organisations and

in the technologies they employed, produced a conflict that was not as static as the immobility of the trenches which dominated the character of the fighting suggested. It has now become axiomatic that “modern war” was conceived and developed through the experience of this titanic fight, and the lessons which it bequeathed. But the military history on which such arguments rest continue to be lopsided. English-language historians, not just Britons but also Americans, Australians, Canadians and New Zealanders, have done more than those writing in French and German to deepen our understanding of the conduct of operations on the western front. However, their research is too often written from the perspective of one side only. It pays little or no attention to the sources available for the Germans, for what they tell us about German intentions, German reactions, or even German perspectives on British or French efforts.

The gap is all the more extraordinary as the German official history of the war on land, *Der Weltkrieg*, is not a rare set of volumes, at least for the war up to the spring of 1917, a point it had reached with volume 12, published in 1939. By

then the pace of its authors was quickening: the events of 1914 had taken six volumes, those of 1915 three (and these are the basis for this translation), and of 1916 two. Two more volumes appeared to take the story to November 1918. Being completed during the Second World War, volumes 13 and 14 never gained a wide circulation. Five hundred copies of each were reprinted in 1956, but they did not sell out until 1975.

Such disappointing sales were themselves indications of two phenomena. First, the Second World War had made the study of the First World War deeply unfashionable throughout Europe, a trend that only changed in Britain in 1964, after the fiftieth anniversary of the war's outbreak, and in Germany not until the ninetieth anniversary in 2004 – if then. Second, German military history after 1945, in so far as it survived at all, stepped away from the operational focus embraced by the general staff historians of the Wilhelmine period and of which *Der Weltkrieg* was the final manifestation. This condition still pertains: operational military history does not have the respectability in German academic circles which it has now acquired in the English-speaking

world. The British official history has been reprinted, the German has not been, despite the scarcity of volumes 13 and 14.

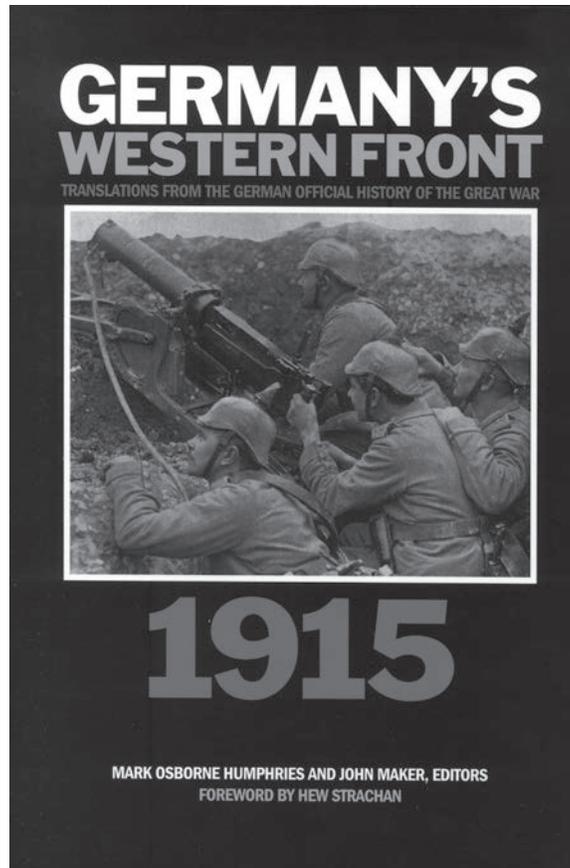
These two arguments may be sufficient explanations for the neglect of the *Der Weltkrieg* in Germany, but they do not apply to English-speaking historians. Their reasons for not consulting it more frequently are, presumably, linguistic. For monoglot scholars, this translation will be a boon beyond measure. It has been fashionable to rubbish the work of the official historians of the First World War of all languages. Sir James Edmonds, whose labours on behalf of Britain were not completed until 1948, and who has been criticised by David French, Tim Travers and Denis Winter, to cite three historians with very different perspectives, presided over an enterprise which may not conform to current expectations of historians, but which strove hard for objectivity. As Andrew Green has shown in *Writing the Great War: Sir James Edmonds and the Official Histories 1915-1948* (2003), this was team writing *avant la lettre*. Draft narratives were compiled from the documents and were then circulated to the surviving participants for their comments in the search for balance. Edmonds's creation could lay much greater claim to unbiased authority than could – say – Basil Liddell Hart's *The Real War*, probably the most widely read one-volume account of the war in the English language between 1930 and 1964. Markus Pöhlmann has produced a study comparable to Green's on the writing of *Der Weltkrieg*, to which this foreword is heavily indebted. *Kriegsgeschichte und Geschichtspolitik: der Erste Weltkrieg. Die amtliche deutsche Militärgeschichtsschreibung 1914-1956* (2002) shows that the

historians of the *Reichsarchiv*, the organisation set up in 1919 to produce the German official history, were as thorough in their construction of the operational story. The first head of *Reichsarchiv*'s section for the collection of documents, Theodor Jochim, distinguished its work from that of academic historians, contending that, "The events of the war, strategy and tactics can only be considered from a neutral, purely objective perspective

was subordinated to the Wehrmacht. It is has therefore been easy to condemn the later volumes of *Der Weltkrieg* as ideologically tainted. But this is both to exaggerate the effect of the Nazis on the writing of the history and at the same time to underplay a pre-existing issue whose roots date back not to Weimar but to Wilhelmine Germany.

After 1933, Jochim's goal remained the guiding principle for the historians of the *Wehrmacht* as it had been for those of the *Reichsarchiv*. Their careers were formed under the Hohenzollerns, and their function within the army, as it had been for the historians of the Prussian general staff, was not only to record but also to teach. Military history enabled officers of the future to learn from the examples of the past; they would not do so if mistakes committed by their predecessors were glossed over. *Der Weltkrieg* did not set out specifically to glorify the German soldier. His heroism in front-line combat was the subject of a separate, more popular series edited by Georg Soldan. *Schlachten des Weltkrieges* covered individual battles in a run of 36 much slimmer volumes, the last of them published in 1930, three years before Hitler came to

power. What did affect the writing of *Der Weltkrieg* was the course of Nazi foreign policy. The *Reichsarchiv* had established working relationships with the official historians of other powers, especially Britain. But contacts with the Soviet Union, which had provided training areas for the *Reichswehr* in the late 1920s, were broken after 1933, and the comparative input available for the earlier volumes began to wither. During the Second World War itself, volume 14 – dealing with the events of 1918 – was censored for fear of



which weighs things dispassionately and is independent of any ideology."

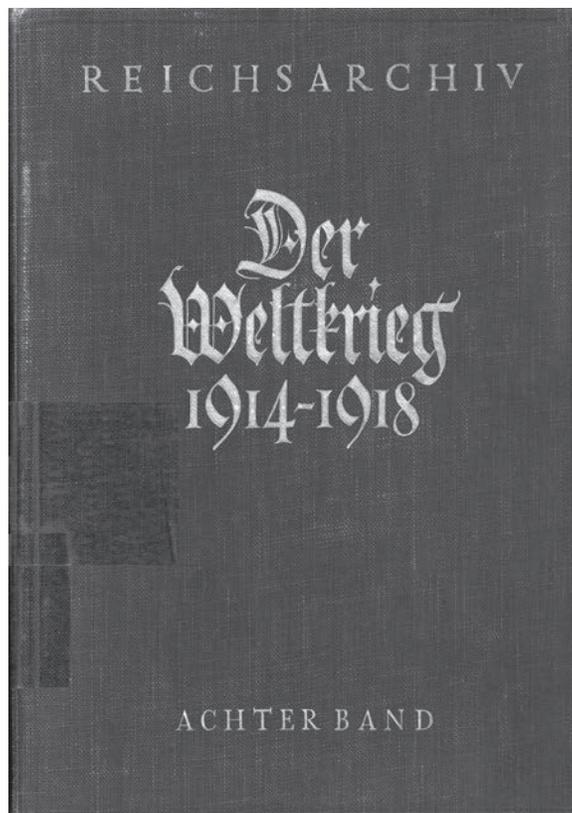
The Nazis' rise to power in 1933 would test this resolve. Volume 9, parts of which are included in the present translation, was published in 1933, and so was the last to appear under the old regime. The president of the *Reichsarchiv* in that year, Hans von Haeften, resisted flying the swastika flag over the office building. In 1934 the *Reichsarchiv*, which even though staffed by former army officers had thus far remained an independent body at least in name,

upsetting Romania (Germany's ally in the Second World War, if not in the First) and Bulgaria (an ally in both wars). These political pressures therefore drove the German official historians even more to a purely military narrative of events.

This focus on military history narrowly defined was a product not of Nazi rule but of a much older tradition in German military thought, to be found in the quarter century before the outbreak of the First World War in the famous dispute between Hans Delbrück, professor of history in Berlin, and the military historians of the general staff. Delbrück argued that Frederick the Great in the Seven Years War (1756-1763) had adopted a strategy of attrition, designed to wear out the coalition of France, Austria and Russia by manoeuvre, whereas the staff historians said Frederick's strategy was one of annihilation, using manoeuvre to seek battle. Both were right, because for each the focus of attention was a different level of war. Delbrück was concerned to put war in its political context; the staff historians were considering the operational aspects, the relationship between strategy and tactics. So determined were they that the conduct of war could be separated from its political objectives that they could not even see the point of Delbrück's argument. Aspects of the dispute with Delbrück lingered on after the war, until his death in 1929. Delbrück was one of ten academics appointed to the historical commission to oversee the work of the *Reichsarchiv*, the bulk of them in favour of putting the war in its political context. They were not helped when the foreign ministry refused to cooperate as it wanted to produce its own story, the better to rebut the terms of the Versailles

treaty of 1919. This suited the general staff historians, who by 1923 had established virtual control of the entire project, convinced that they could produce an adequate history of the war that was almost exclusively military in its focus.

Their hopes rested on an illusion: *Der Weltkrieg* could not in fact be apolitical. German officers – like those of many other armies – were wont to protest their political neutrality, Hans von Seeckt, the head of the surrogate



general staff between 1919 and 1926, providing a case in point. But both the German army and its chief of the general staff had too great a professional role in shaping German policy for that to be a deliverable aspiration. Germany had been united by war and its subsequent history until 1945 was shaped by it. The focus on operations carried its own implications for the formulation of German strategy between 1870 and 1945: operational excellence came to be seen as the tool which could cut through Germany's problems, its encircled position in Europe, its

quantitative inferiority in the First World War, and its "humiliation" at the peace of Versailles in 1919. The presumption in the didactic purpose of *Der Weltkrieg* was that there was a perfect solution to the conundrums of operations, that strategy and even policy could be subordinated to the operational level of war, and that a war conducted as the military experts thought it should be waged would produce the right outcome for Germany.

Erich von Falkenhayn, the chief of the general staff between September 1914 and August 1916, and therefore the central character in this book, became a prime target for the historians of the *Reichsarchiv*. Having served in China before the First World War, his career had not been shaped by Alfred von Schlieffen, the chief of the general staff between 1891 and 1905, and the principal architect of the army's approach to the operational level of war before 1914. Falkenhayn's overseas service had convinced him that Britain's maritime and imperial strength made it the centre of gravity of the enemy coalition, and that therefore it should be the focus of Germany's war effort. In the bitter debates between "easterners" and "westerners" (to borrow the vocabulary of the British memoirs of the wars and apply it to a more apposite context), Falkenhayn focused on the west because he realised that ultimately French and Russian capacity to carry on fighting rested on British economic strength. The trouble was that there was no operational solution to this strategic conundrum, as Britain's forte was naval and Germany's military. Joint planning was in any case a casualty of institutional division, since Falkenhayn as a soldier had no leverage over the navy. The best he could hope for

was to bring the war to a satisfactory conclusion before Britain deployed its "New Armies" to France. Unlike Schlieffen's, his solutions were not primarily operational, but political. He wanted a separate peace with Russia to free up the German army to concentrate in the west. This is the underlying thread of volumes 7, 8, 9 of *Der Weltkrieg*, whose sections relevant to the western front are here published in English for the first time.

Falkenhayn's grasp of the wider strategy imposed on Germany was not compatible with his own staff's focus on the operational level. Even his friends, such as Wild von Hohenborn, who succeeded him as Prussian minister of war, were not persuaded. Like the victors of Tannenberg in 1914, Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff, they could see the opportunity for operational success in the east. Envelopment battles of the sort so strongly advocated before the war by Schlieffen (who was now dead) could be carried through against Russia. Hans von Haeften, who had enjoyed a key role in the work of the *Reichsarchiv* since its inception, was appointed its president in 1931, and oversaw the production of volumes 7, 8, and 9 of *Der Weltkrieg*. He was not as unbiased in his views as the standards demanded by Jochim suggested he should be.

Heart problems had meant that he had had to forego active operational appointments on the general staff in November 1914. Instead he had become adjutant to Helmuth von Moltke the younger, Schlieffen's successor and the chief of the general staff at the outbreak of war. Moltke became the scapegoat for the defeat on the Marne in September 1914, and thereafter stirred the opposition to Falkenhayn, who had replaced him. Haeften began work on a history

of the eastern front even while the events described in this volume were unfolding. Shuttling back and forth to the east, visiting the headquarters of Hindenburg and Ludendorff, he became such a fierce critic of Falkenhayn that he was nearly court-martialled.

The operational perspective of the official historians therefore provided the ammunition with which *Der Weltkrieg* attacked Falkenhayn. Holger Afflerbach's



**General Erich von Falkenhayn, the Chief of the General Staff of the Field Army and head of the OHL.**

political biography, *Falkenhayn. Politisches Denken und Handeln im Kaiserreich* (1994), provides important correctives. Falkenhayn's operational efforts need to be set in their political context. They were accompanied by a sustained attempt to prise the Entente apart, but his efforts to persuade Russia to negotiate were incompatible with the predilections of either Germany's principal ally, Austria-Hungary, or of Hindenburg and Ludendorff. For them, the

weight applied to Russia in 1915 should be directly military, not diplomatic. Hindenburg's iconic role as a national hero created a political leverage which ultimately neither the chancellor, Theodor von Bethmann Hollweg, nor the Kaiser could resist.

It has been argued that *Der Weltkrieg* was written to glorify Hindenburg and (especially) Ludendorff, just as it has been said (wrongly, as Andrew Green shows) that Edmonds used the British official

history to defend Douglas Haig. In 1917-18, Haeften had worked on propaganda in the German supreme command, *Oberste Heeresleitung III*. But after the war Hindenburg and Ludendorff kept their distance from the work of the *Reichsarchiv*, and *Der Weltkrieg* barely mentioned Hindenburg in its account of the events of 1918. Wolfgang Foerster, who succeeded Haeften in 1934 as the director of what was now called the *Forschungsanstalt für Kriegs- und Heeresgeschichte*, was better disposed towards Ludendorff. He treated the victory at Tannenberg, whose site was both a focus for the commemoration of the First World War and a memorial to Hindenburg after his death, as a "model battle," on a par with the great German victories of Leipzig in 1813 and Sedan in 1870. But the lesson from all three

cases was that the use of envelopment as an operational method had led to a decisive victory. So the real influence on Foerster was not so much Ludendorff as Schlieffen. In 1921, he had published *Graf Schlieffen und der Weltkrieg*, a book designed to show how Schlieffen's legacy had shaped Germany's conduct of the war. The combination of Ludendorff's right-wing radicalism and mental instability increasingly alienated him from his former

colleagues on the general staff in general and from the *Reichsarchiv* in particular. The authors employed on *Der Weltkrieg* never subjected Hindenburg and Ludendorff to the sort of psychological profiling that they accorded to their predecessors, Moltke and Falkenhayn, but in 1952 Foerster published an independent study of Ludendorff's "psychological state in the final stages of the First World War," *Der Feldherr Ludendorff im Unglück*, in 1952.

Most of the papers which went into the writing of *Der Weltkrieg* were destroyed when the Royal Air Force bombed the depository in which the Prussian military archives were stored in 1945. This is the single most compelling reason for according the utmost seriousness to this book. Unlike the official histories of the other major belligerents of the First World War, that of Germany can never be written again, or at least not from a comparable primary source base. However, the military papers of the other states of imperial Germany have survived, and so too have collections of private papers belonging to those involved in the writing of *Der Weltkrieg*. Most importantly the papers which were still the subject of active investigation by the official historians were kept elsewhere and so not destroyed in 1945. Having been stored in Potsdam in the Cold War, they have now been united with the

military archives in Freiburg. From these it is clear that many facets of Germany's war effort other than the operational level of its conduct interested the *Reichsarchiv* and its successors. Although the volumes of *Der Weltkrieg* are Eurocentric, theatres outside Europe were covered briefly and were due to be the subject of

individual studies. Ludwig Boell's monumental history of the East African campaign, completed in 1944, was effectively recreated by its author after the war, and then privately published. Most weighty were the projected volumes of the economic history of the war, of which only the first, pre-war volumes, ever appeared.

Mark Humphries, John Maker and their team of translators, Wilhlem J. Kiesselbach, Peter Meinlschmidt and Ralph Whitehead, are to be congratulated on a major achievement. The year 1915 marked the moment when the fighting on the western front adapted to trench warfare, and when the armies of all sides began what recent British military historians have described as a "learning curve." This process was of course not a uniquely British phenomenon, but one in which Germans and French also shared, and to whose development the battles at Soissons and Neuve Chapelle, the gas attack at Ypres, and the offensives in Champagne and Artois all contributed. This volume will transform English-speaking historians' understandings of a crucial stage in the First World War. It might even make Germans take their own operational military history seriously.



**German soldiers with a rudimentary gas mask, circa 1915.**

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