

## Review of "The Forgotten Front: The Eastern Theater of World War I, 1914-1915" edited by Gerhard P. Gross

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Gerhard P. Gross. ed. *The Forgotten Front: The Eastern Theater of World War I, 1914-1915*. Translated by Janice W. Ancker. Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2018. Pp. 404.

In 2004, The Military History Research Office (now the Military History and Social Research Institute), in collaboration with the German Historical Museum, organised the Forty-Sixth International Conference on Military History. The goal of the conference, named *The Forgotten Front-The East 1914-1915: The Event, Its Impact, and Aftereffects*, was to foster greater historical understanding of the First World War's Eastern Front. The edited collection, *The Forgotten Front: The Eastern Theater of World War I, 1914-1915*, was the output of that conference and was published in German in 2006. This review is on the 2018 English translation by Janice W. Ancker.

*The Forgotten Front* examines the military operations, soldiers' experiences and remembrance of the Eastern Front. Much has been published on the First World War, the majority is on the Western Front with only a handful of works being published on the Eastern Front. It is this gap in publications that this work was originally set out to address. Still today, albeit there have been more English texts on the military operations on the Eastern Front, there is a gap in publications and our understanding of events on the Eastern Front. This work continues to be relevant through its coverage of war experience and remembrance and as an overview of the military operations. The reason for the lack of research is different for both Germany and Russia. For Germany the Eastern Front was overshadowed by the meat grinder of the Western Front; early victories in the East at Tannenberg and Gorlice-Tarnów remain in cultural memory, but the remainder of the Eastern Front has been overshadowed by the war of attrition on the Western Front. For Russia, the Eastern Front was of primary importance; however, the events of the October Revolution and Civil War and the political interests of the subsequent communist regime all overshadowed the remembering and articling of the events of the First World War.

This collection of essays does not intend to be the definite work on the Eastern Front from 1914-15, but rather serve as launching pad for further focus and study, which it does successfully. It brings together nineteen historians from eight countries, whose topics are divided into three main themes: military operations on the Eastern

Front 1914-15, direct (*Erlebnis*) war experience at the front, indirect war (*Erfahrung*) experiences on the home front and how the war was represented both during the conflict and in current museums and memorial sites.

Historians Stig Förster, Gerhard P. Gross, Boris Khavkin and Günther Kronenbitter contribute chapters to Part One of the book, which covers military operations on the Eastern Front. These chapters provide an overview of the military operations on the Eastern Front 1914-15. Gerhard P. Gross covers the German operations and how it related to the overall German strategy. Boris Khavkin provides a Russian perspective maintaining the common view of Russia as the ‘steamroller’ of the Entente. He goes on to argue that Russia achieved its pre-war objective of pulling German troops from the west and denying Germany victory on that front (p. 71). While in the strictest sense this statement is true as Russia did pull German troops off the Western Front and Germany did not win victory in France, Russia’s military defeats at Tannenberg and Gorlice-Tarnów did not cause Germany to shift significant material and resources to the Eastern Front to exploit these battlefield successes. In fact, these victories gave Germany breathing room in the east to pursue a breakthrough in the west culminating in the Race to the Sea and the Battle of Ypres. The Eastern Front would have to wait until early 1915 to see material resources and prioritisation.<sup>1</sup> Given the scale of the topic, these chapters do not go into great details about operations, or a detailed comparison of the armies involved; instead, they serve as a foundation for understanding why each country chose their respective strategies.

Günther Kronenbitter’s chapter is devoted to pre-1914 military talks of cooperation between Austro-Hungary and Germany, and how cooperation quickly deteriorated due to poor communication between German High Command (OHL) and Austro-Hungarian High Command (AOK). The decline of cooperation within the Dual Alliance was caused by personality clashes between Erich von Falkenhayn and Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf, as well as the lack of alignment in

<sup>1</sup> Holger H. Herwig, *The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary 1914-1918* (New York: St Martin’s Press Inc., 1997), 87, 116 and 130-34; Robert Foley, *German Strategy and the Path to Verdun: Erich von Falkenhayn and the Development of Attrition, 1870-1916* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 105-08; and Dennis Showalter, *Instrument of War: The German Army 1914-18* (New York: Osprey Publishing, 2016), 97-99, 114-16.

war aims. In the area of coordinated operations, the Central Powers were inferior to the Entente (p. 75). Kronenbitter argues “that the divergent war aims associated with the national futures of Ukraine or Poland were the consequence of structural differences between the German Empire and the economically underdeveloped, multiethnic Habsburg Monarchy” (p. 4). Having provided the military backdrop to the war in the east, the topics then shift to the experience of the soldiers, perception of the opposing countries and war remembrance.

Part Two addresses direct experience with the realities of war, the war experience as a learning process and how the war is depicted in literature (p. 4). Chapters around the perception of the enemy as well as perceptions around national identities were provided by Jörg Baberowski, Piotr Szlanta, Hubertus F. Jahn, Peter Hoeres. Eva Horn and Birgit Menzel focus their respective chapters on German and Russian wartime literature. Igor Narskij and Hans-Erich Volkman’s chapters focus on the experiences of the Russian and German soldiers on the Eastern Front. The final chapter by Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius titled “From Ober Ost to Ostland” looks at the German policies of the occupied lands in the east. Where part one of the book focuses on military operations, part two focuses on the experiences of the Russian, German and Austro-Hungarian soldiers and populations.

The major academic achievements of this work are particularly noticeable in this second section as the authors leverage German and Russian sources on topics that were not widely popularised in the English-speaking world. For example, Igor Narskij’s chapter addresses the myths surrounding the experience of the Russian soldiers. He argues, rather compelling through comparing the Russian experience with that of the other Entente powers and the use of Russian sources, that at the start of the war no country’s General Staff was ready for a long war of attrition and that no reserve system could keep up with the demands of the attritional warfare on either front (p. 194). An example of where all nations faced challenges were in the area of resupplying the frontlines in both men and material. On the issue of resupplying the Russian Armies, there were shortages of weapons, ammunition, clothing and boots; however, these deficiencies “...were overemphasised and overstated by historians, perhaps in the light of Russia’s pitiful collapse...” (pp. 194-95). Food supply, however, was not an area where the Russians experienced supply gaps, “the food supply for the Russian-Army was much better than that of its enemies, and in 1914 and 1915 it was even ‘absurdly wasteful’” (p. 195).

The third and final part of this work focuses on the depiction of the war and war experience of soldiers and the home front in museums, war memorials and modern media. The section on modern media focuses on the growth of websites dedicated to the study of the First World War. As one can expect, this section is dated (twelve years from German language publication to English language publication), which is acknowledged by the translator. When covering a topic that is constantly changing, such as websites, there is always a risk that the websites will quickly become dated. There are a number of websites referenced that are no longer active; however, the websites for the main museums, such as the British Imperial War Museum or the Deutsches Historisches Museum, are applicable. The remainder of the section still remains relevant as it addresses war presentation and remembrance in the various belligerents during the war and in the years that followed. The monuments, graves and museum displays, referenced in the remainder of the section, are used to illustrate how each country's citizens were addressing the realities of the war and remembering their fallen soldiers.

Christine Beil tackles the topic of how the war was presented to the German public. In this section she discusses the war exhibits, which were collections of captured British, French, Russian and Italian weapons that were displayed around Germany. During the war, the perception of these exhibits was not that they were propaganda, "but were thought of instead as occasions for enjoyment and learning" (p. 7). The sections by Rainer Rother and Kristiane Janeke address war memorials, specifically the impact of the graves of the unknown soldiers on Entente powers with no corresponding remembrance in Germany and the evolving treatment and suppression of the Moscow City Fraternal Cemetery.

The work closes with a section by Rüdiger Bergien that provides an overview of the volume and attempts to answer the question around continuity of the German Army's actions and treatment of Russians during the Second World War and their actions on the Eastern Front during the First World War. In his view, "there is still an insufficient empirical basis for addressing the question of what German soldiers actually experienced during the First World War" (p. 7). The reader is left with the impression based on the currently available sources that there is not strong continuity between the actions of the German Armies in both world wars.

*The Forgotten Front: The Eastern Theater of World War I, 1914-15*, successfully achieves its objective of bringing together three key themes of a less publicised part of the First World War: the military operations, the experiences of the soldiers and the home front as well as how the First World War is remembered in Germany and in the Entente Powers. Since the original publication of this collection in 2006, there have been several recent works, in English, published on the military operations of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia, a sign that the battles of the Eastern Front are getting greater focus. The strength of the work comes from the second and third sections on war experience and remembrance. *The Forgotten Front: The Eastern Theater of World War I, 1914-15* serves as a good introduction to many aspects of the Eastern Front from a variety of non-English sources, which makes this work worth a read for any person studying the First World War on the Eastern Front.

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