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978-0-521-51946-5 - The Final Battle: Soldiers of the Western Front and the German Revolution of 1918

Scott Stephenson

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1 Introduction: the divided army

Had we returned home in 1916, out of the suffering and strength of our experience we might have unleashed a storm. Now if we go back we will be weary, broken, burnt out, rootless, and without hope. We will not be able to find our way any more.

Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*¹

The German empire's defeat in the First World War was comprehensive. By late 1918, Germany military and civilian leaders had cause to wonder which would give way first, the enfeebled institutions of the Second Reich or the front held by its beleaguered army on the Western Front. The question was decided in late October, when naval mutinies at Wilhelmshaven spread to other naval bases and, in turn, launched a revolutionary tidal wave that swept irresistibly across a nation exhausted by war. The day after the sailors' uprising, Erich Ludendorff's replacement as First Quartermaster General, General Wilhelm Groener, told the imperial cabinet that the army's powers of resistance on the Western Front were nearly spent.² When the armistice came a week later, it found the German forces in France and Belgium, the *Westheer*, exhausted, depleted, and staggering under the blows of the Allied armies. If defeat meant a complete breakdown of an army's organization, one might argue that the German Army in the field still remained undefeated. Yet, such a standard for judging military outcomes is relatively useless. The resistance offered by the *Westheer* in late 1918 might ameliorate the final terms forced on Germany, but it had no hope of

¹ The quotation is a reflection on the last year of the war by Remarque's main character, Paul Baumer, in Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, trans. A.W. Wheen (New York: Fawcett Press, 1984; first published 1928), 253–4.

² "Only for a brief period can that resistance last which the Army will be able to lend against the assault of our outside enemies in view of their tremendously superior numbers and the threat from the direction of Austria-Hungary." Document No. 514: Extract Concerning Session of the Secretaries of State on November 5, 1918, Ralph Lutz, ed., *Fall of the German Empire, 1914–1918* (Stanford University Press, 1932), vol. II, 500–7.

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wresting the initiative from the Allies and reversing the inevitable outcome of the war. Had the German Army held out in 1919, the odds faced by the decimated divisions holding the German front were only going to get worse. A series of political and diplomatic events – the declaration of the republic in Berlin, the Kaiser’s abdication and flight to Holland, and, finally, the armistice agreement signed at Compiègne on 11 November 1918 – may very well have spared the *Westheer* from a humiliating battlefield collapse.

Foch, Haig, and the other Allied military leaders had been surprised by the German request for armistice at the beginning of October. Dogged German resistance along the front had led them to believe that the war would drag into 1919. They feared the Germans would use an armistice to regroup and prepare for further resistance, and they remained wary after the guns had fallen silent on November 11. A few weeks after the fighting had ended, Major General C.D. Rhodes, an American officer working with the International Armistice Commission in Spa, Belgium, offered additional reasons to doubt the totality of the Allied victory. In an urgent report to General Pershing, he wrote:

Observation of German troops passing through this city convinces me that a large portion of the German Army is in extremely fine physical and moral condition to resume active military operations east of the Rhine. It would appear that the *reports* of disorder and demoralization among German troops have applied only to second-line troops which were sent to the rear early in the present withdrawal. The first-line troops who have come under my observation have been well-disciplined, orderly and apparently still full of fight. Their transportation has been covered with evergreens and German flags and their retreat has been given the aspect of a triumphal return to Germany.³

If this American observer discerned a clear contrast between “second-line” German troops who had left the scene and the combat formations marching through Spa later, a German general on the staff of the Crown Prince’s army group recorded the same distinction. During the early days of the German revolution, Lieutenant General Hermann von Kuhl, an army group chief of staff, was gratified to find that front-line units had remained under the control of their officers but was appalled at the anarchy that prevailed in the army’s rear areas. There, he observed, troops plundered supply trains, released prisoners, and sold their weapons to Belgian civilians. The garrisons of the supply installations and replacement depots seemed to lose all trace

³ Historical Division, Department of the Army, *The Armistice Agreement and Related Documents of the United States Army in the World War, 1917–1919* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1948), vol. X, 148.

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of discipline. He observed in disgust, “Trucks filled with booty hurried toward the homeland.”⁴

The American and German generals drew similar conclusions. The German Revolution of November 1918 had apparently provoked dramatically different responses from the troops in France and Belgium and those elsewhere. The troops at the front remained under the control of their officers, while the troops in the rear overthrew their chain of command and replaced its authority with their own soldiers’ councils. However, the contrast went beyond the Western Front. The vast majority of German occupation units in the East and in the garrisons of the Home Army had also deposed their officers, established soldiers’ councils, and declared their emphatic support for the revolution. While the front-line soldiers in the West seemed relatively unmoved by the news of the revolution, the soldiers in the rear areas in Belgium and France, in the occupation forces in Russia, and the garrisons inside Germany were active in proclaiming their common cause with the mutinous sailors who had started the revolution. The differing reactions continued through the ensuing weeks. While soldiers in the Field Army’s rear areas often made their way home as individuals, improvising or confiscating what transportation they could find, the front-line troops marched west in well-ordered formations, following the demanding march schedule provided by the Field Army headquarters, the *Oberste Heeresleitung* (OHL) and its subordinate staffs.

The early stages of the German Revolution – the naval mutinies, the Kaiser’s abdication, and the proclamation of the new republic – also provoked vastly different reactions from the front-line troops and the rest of the German Army. These disparate responses highlighted the divisions that existed in the *Kaiserheer* in the last stages of the war, divisions that would have profound importance for the course of the revolution. On one hand, during the critical weeks of November and December 1918, the soldiers and sailors of the German armed forces provided the revolution with much of its energy and almost all of its armed strength. Inside Germany, the institutions of the old empire crumbled in face of the militantly revolutionary garrisons and the soldiers’ councils who led them. Many saw in these councils the same revolutionary potential as that manifested the year before in the soviets of post-tsarist Russia. On the other hand, the armed forces, in the specific form of the front-line divisions of the Western Front, also seemed to offer the greatest potential

⁴ Hermann von Kuhl, in *Das Werk des Untersuchungsausschusses der Verfassunggebenden Deutschen Nationalversammlung*, 4th series, *Die Ursachen des deutschen Zusammenbruchs im Jahre 1918* (Berlin: 1925–9), vol. VI, 23. Hereafter referred to as *UDZ*.

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for counter-revolution. When the combat troops marched across the Rhine, they were led by the old officer corps, and they marched, almost invariably, under the banners of the old monarchy. The apparent political separation between “front” and “rear” could hardly have been more profound. The rank and file of the military provided much of the initial impetus of the revolution, and, paradoxically, in the units manning the trenches on the Western Front seemed to offer the greatest potential to undo the achievements of the revolution, most notably the abdication of the Kaiser and the establishment of a socialist-dominated republic.

To a certain extent, the German Army’s complex and diverse responses to the revolution were to be expected. The German Army that fought the First World War was a complex and diverse social organism. Like the other mass armies of the war, it had evolved through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from the small, relatively simple regimental organizations of the dynastic period to a gigantic army with an abundance of organizational parts and functions, spread, by 1918, from the Caucasus to the English Channel. The size of the *Kaiserheer* and the lethal technology it wielded were based on an elaborate logistical and administrative organization. Whereas Frederick the Great’s eighteenth-century army was able to deliver “tooth” to the battlefield with relatively little “tail,” the front-line forces of the German Army of 1918 were significantly outnumbered by the support services, depot units, and homeland garrisons. These rear area support services included railroad engineers, bakers, truck drivers, nurses, supply clerks, signalmen, blacksmiths, and bridge builders, all of whom performed the vast number of tasks essential to the army’s maintenance in the field.

This intricate differentiation in soldier function necessarily resulted in the evolution of unique subcultures within the German military. The truck driver behind the lines inevitably looked at his military role in a different way from the machine gunner on the Western Front. The supply clerk issuing uniforms to new replacements in Munich or Dresden naturally felt himself a different kind of soldier from the *Frontschweine* (“front-pigs”), as the men in the trenches called themselves. The fairly standardized regimental culture of the Frederician period gave way to separate subcultures within the wartime army, though this development befuddled the senior military leaders as well as the Kaiser himself, who persisted in believing that the only “true” soldiers were those who bore arms in combat.⁵

The army was geographically divided as well, most significantly between East and West. Of the 6 million soldiers in *feldgrau* in 1918,

⁵ See, for example, Christopher Duffy, *The Army of Frederick the Great* (Chicago: The Emperor’s Press, 1996), 77–85.

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something like 3.5 million were deployed on the Western Front. The draconian terms of the Brest-Litovsk treaty had left Germany with an enormous protectorate carved out of the corpse of imperial Russia and, in order to secure this empire, Ludendorff left a massive army on the Eastern Front even as he was stripping that front of its best units to support his offensive plans in the West. Three-quarters of a million German troops served in outposts that reached from the Baltic coast to Georgia. Two hundred thousand troops were found in smaller German contingents that supported Germany's allies in such far-flung fighting fronts as Mesopotamia and Macedonia. Finally, the garrisons of the *Heimatheer* (Home Army) numbered 1.5 million men.⁶

The divisions in the German Army also reflected other aspects of the Second Reich's military demography. The one most scrutinized by historians has been the army's reflection of the iniquities within Wilhelmine society, with the noble class dominating the senior ranks, the middle class populating the junior and non-commissioned officer positions, and the proletarians and farmers' sons largely restricted to the enlisted ranks. Still other factors militated against the ideal of soldierly camaraderie, and a few generalizations suggest the nature of these divisions. For many, the concept of the German empire competed with their identification with the region of their birth. Bavarian soldiers were often suspicious of Prussians, and both Prussians and Bavarians were often very suspicious of Silesian Poles and Alsatians. Reserve officers outnumbered and envied the "active" officers of the prewar army, and both categories looked down on the "wartime" officers that dominated the junior levels of the officer corps by the end of the war. The older *Landwehr* soldiers tended to serve in quieter sectors than the other units of German infantry, but they had reason to be jealous of the even older *Landsturm* men in garrisons safely behind the line. Regular infantry envied the storm troop units which spent much of their time out of the line and were transported to the front by truck instead of foot march. The young replacements sent to the front in 1918 had a vastly different view of military service from their older brothers who had marched off to war in the fall of 1914. Finally, drill sergeants continued to find that Bavarian farm boys made more pliable (but less educated) human material than young fellows drafted from the industrial cities of the Ruhr.⁷

⁶ German troop strengths from Richard Bessel, *Germany after the First World War* (Oxford University Press, 1993), 68–74. Erich O. von Volkmann put the number closer to 8 million, *UDZ*, XI (i), 241. See "A note on numbers" at the end of this chapter.

⁷ The social patterns of front-line service are discussed in Benjamin Ziemann, *War Experiences in Rural Germany 1914–1923* (Oxford/New York: Berg Publishing, 2007), 29–71.

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Military function, geographical stationing, regional origin, length of service, age, along with previous civilian occupation and social background, may all have been factors in determining how soldiers responded to the revolution. None of these divisions, however, was as crucial to the early course of the German Revolution as the chasm that separated those who served behind the line and those who had endured the terrible experience of service in the trenches of the Western Front in the last stages of the war. Yet the behavior of the front-line soldiers in the critical weeks of November and December 1918 presents a curious anomaly. Why would they be restrained in their response to the revolution? Why would they continue to obey the orders of officers who continued to lead them into harm's way in a war that was hopelessly lost? Certainly, the men at the front had suffered the most in the cause of German militarism. Thus, apparently, they had the most to gain from the revolution. The revolution promised the combat soldier more than political reform; a successful revolution would be the guarantee of their physical survival. Under these circumstances, one imagines the *Frontkämpfer* (front-line fighters) would celebrate the revolutionary achievements of the sailors whose mutiny launched the overthrow of the Second Reich. Instead, as we will see, upon returning to the homeland, the front-line soldiers often expressed a special contempt for the sailors they encountered (a contempt, incidentally, that was often mutual). One also imagines the troops of the Field Army would extend whole-hearted support to the soldiers' councils in the homeland. The political program of these councils aimed at preventing old elites from reasserting their traditional authority, and no men had endured more under the old elites than the men at the front. Yet the weeks after the end of the war saw countless fistfights and, in a few rare cases, pitched battles between returning front-line soldiers and the revolutionary garrisons inside Germany.

Thus, the seemingly anomalous actions of the *Frontkämpfer* during Germany's defeat and its subsequent political upheavals present two puzzling questions. Why was it so and did it matter? Why were the men who climbed out of the trenches on November 11 so different from the rest of the army? Beyond that, how and why did these differing perceptions shape the early history of the Weimar Republic? This study proposes to offer answers to these questions by looking at what the front-line soldiers went through before and after the end of the war and by considering how these soldiers were led, manipulated, supported, and feared by the leaders of postwar Germany. It will argue that the terrible ordeal endured by German soldiers on the Western Front in the last stages of the First World War set them apart from the remainder of army. It shaped their

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response to the dramatic political events that accompanied Germany's defeat, and thrust upon them, through their response, a decisive role in determining the outcome of the German Revolution.

The historiography of the German Revolution usually assumes that difference existed between the front-line soldiers and the rest of the army without exploring the question of why it existed. West German historians have tended to be much more interested in the soldiers' councils created within Germany. For years, they debated whether these councils might have served as the basis for a "third path"⁸ for Germany's political destiny, offering an alternative, on one hand, to the Weimar Republic and its fatal compromises with the old elites, and, at the other extreme, the excesses risked in a Bolshevik-style regime. Though the front-line units often formed their own soldiers' councils, these associations rarely supported a revolutionary agenda and, thus, have seemed far less interesting to German scholars. When Western historians have looked at the political behavior of the front-line soldiers it was usually through the lens of what came almost two decades later, the ascent of National Socialism. However, the fact that the old *Frontkämpfer* seemed disproportionately represented in the early leadership of the National Socialists (including the *Führer* himself) overshadows the less conspicuous fact that most of the hundreds of thousands of combat veterans of 1918 marched back to their homes and returned, as best they could, to lives interrupted by the war, without involvement in extremist politics.⁹

Across the ideological divide of the Cold War, historians in the former German Democratic Republic were more attentive to the differences between front-line troops and the revolutionary soldiers in the rear. However, looking at these phenomena through a Marxist lens prevented them from examining the motivation of the *Frontkämpfer* with objectivity. Thus, East German accounts of the revolution portrayed the men who marched home under the control of their officers as ill-informed dupes or homesick pragmatists. That is, until some of these same men volunteered to serve in the *Freikorps*. At that point, the former front-line soldiers were transformed into bloodthirsty mercenaries and treacherous class enemies. There may be an important kernel of truth to this view, but, because of the ideological limits of East German analysis, it often seems more caricature than characterization.

⁸ See, for example, Reinhard Rürup, "Demokratische Revolution und der 'dritter Weg': Die deutsche Revolution von 1918/1919 in der neuen wissenschaftlichen Diskussion." *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 9 (1983), 278–301.

⁹ Bessel, *Germany after the First World War*, 257.

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A completely satisfactory explanation for the way soldiers behave under specific conditions of extraordinary stress must necessarily be elusive. Through the course of modern warfare and, especially since the First World War, psychologists, officers, and historians have struggled to understand why men act the way they do when their circumstances are dominated by danger and uncertainty. Though dated, Ulrich Kluge's *Soldatenräte und Revolution* provided the most comprehensive description of the political behavior of German soldiers during the revolution.¹⁰ Kluge suggested three material and political factors for the front-line troops' initially passive response to the revolution: (1) the German High Command successfully subverted the efforts of revolutionaries to agitate among the soldiers of the front; (2) the desperately difficult transportation situation during the return of the Field Army to Germany restricted the movement of revolutionary forces and prevented the coordination of revolutionary efforts; and (3) the soldiers' uncertainty over the situation in the homeland limited the appeal of political activists.¹¹

While Kluge's three factors certainly contributed to the failure of revolutionary elements to gain political power among combat units of the West, they are not, by themselves, completely persuasive. Kluge's explanation seems to beg additional questions. Why were the efforts of the OHL to subvert the soldiers' councils (*Soldatenräte*) not successful elsewhere within the army? If the difficulty of the retreat from France and Belgium limited revolutionary agitation within front-line units, why was this not the case in the more difficult withdrawal from Poland and the Ukraine? Finally, if uncertainty over the situation within Germany provoked soldiers to shy away from radical appeals, why were the occupation troops in the East not similarly reticent?

We return to the argument that the soldiers on the Western Front represented a unique cohort and their political outlook was, likewise, unique. As the armistice approached, the political objectives of the men in the trenches may be summarized succinctly: early peace and the fastest return to home and family possible. They were indifferent to such issues as the rate of socialization in German industry, the role of the workers' and soldiers' councils in sharing power with the central government, or the federal structure in the new German state. Theirs was the agenda of war-weariness, homesickness and despair. When the

¹⁰ Ulrich Kluge, *Soldatenräte und Revolution. Studien zur Militärpolitik in Deutschland, 1918/1919* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1975).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 104–5.

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end of the war made the first goal a reality and the second a near-term possibility, the political views of the *Frontschweine* saw little alteration or evolution. Why? Even generalizations can be risky. Nevertheless, this study will use six factors – exhaustion, isolation, alienation, selection, cohesion, and management – to explain the peculiar response of the German front-line troops to the dramatic events that took place in a period of about ten weeks between late October 1918 and the end of that year.

Clearly, at this point further elaboration of these concepts is necessary to establish the framework of analysis; thus:

- (1) *Exhaustion*, for our purposes, refers primarily to the mind-numbing fatigue that prevailed in German lines in the last months of the war, when incessant Allied attacks consumed German reserves and forced the OHL to leave units at the front for weeks without relief. It also refers to the profound war-weariness felt by front-line soldiers on both sides of No Man's Land in the fourth year of the conflict. By late 1918, two forms of exhaustion, physical and emotional, contributed to the dull indifference most front-line soldiers felt toward the world beyond the trenches.
- (2) *Isolation*, as a factor, encompasses both the geographical and informational separation of the German fighting men from the sources of revolutionary agitation. While the young replacements in the homeland casernes were exposed to a full array of anti-war and anti-military propaganda, and the soldiers in the East often had opportunity to fraternize with Bolsheviks, the front-line soldier in the West faced a different situation. Unless on leave, or convalescing from wounds in a rear area hospital, he was relatively insulated from such influences. This was especially the case after the army cancelled leaves and the mail service broke down in the last days of the war. This condition of relative insulation persisted through the difficult return march across the Rhine in November and December 1918. (Where the isolation broke down, however, the behavior of the combat units would begin to resemble the other elements of the army more closely.)
- (3) *Alienation* describes the sullen hostility felt by the *Frontschweine* towards those who did not share their misery and the constant danger besetting them. In broad categories, these included civilians on the home front (excluding, of course, the soldier's family), rear-area troops, and the officers who planned and directed operations on the various army staffs. It describes the phenomenon common to almost all modern armies in a lengthy war: the jealousy and resentment felt

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by those exposed to lethal danger towards those who were not. This alienation manifested itself not only in attitudes but, as the *Westheer* marched across the Rhine, physical attacks on the representatives of the soldiers' councils within Germany.

- (4) *Selection* includes two choices. The first is that choice made by the German High Command to put the most combat-effective units and the best-trained, most fit men on the Western Front. The second is the self-selection conducted by every front-line soldier when faced with the difficult choice of remaining with his unit under the command of his officers or, instead, seeking an escape from danger, a release from military coercion, and an opportunity to return home. For military reasons, the OHL put the men least susceptible to political agitation at the front (though this was far less the case in the last months of the war). War-weariness, homesickness, and despair pulled thousands of men out of the line when the last months of the war expanded opportunities for desertion, surrender, or some form of shirking. Thousands, however, chose to remain with their units up to the armistice and beyond.
- (5) *Cohesion*, in this essay, will refer to several related phenomena: the camaraderie between men who share difficult experiences together; the loyalty felt by soldiers toward a specific leader, the *esprit* a soldier may feel toward a unit; the relationship between officers and men (either positive or negative). Finally, the term encompasses the limited and rapidly waning influence of national patriotism after the failure of the Ludendorff offensives.
- (6) *Management* is the term used by this study to refer to what one Marxist historian called "special handling."¹² In the context of this argument, it will be the term offered in describing the active efforts of the German Army's chain of command to manage the perceptions and political outlook of the rank and file. The development of this factor will suggest the strength of Kluge's argument that the OHL "subverted" the effect of the revolution on front-line soldiers, but will extend this by attempting to show that every level of the officer chain of command had a role to play in this subversion.

A sociologist with an interest in military affairs could challenge the choice of terms and add or subtract from the six factors listed here. In the first place, these factors are interrelated and overlapping. As an example, an infantry battalion commander returning to Germany in

¹² Dieter Dreetz, "Rückführung des Westheeres und Novemberrevolution." *Zeitschrift für Militärgeschichte* (DDR), 1968, 586.