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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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## The Final Battle

In many ways the German soldiers who marched back from the Western Front at the end of the First World War held the key to the future of the newly created republic that replaced the Kaiser's collapsed monarchy. To the radical Left, the orderly columns of front-line troops appeared to be the forces of the counter-revolution, while to the conservative elements of society they seemed to be the Fatherland's salvation. However, in their efforts to get home as soon as possible, most soldiers were indifferent to the political struggles within the Reich, while the remnant that remained under arms proved powerless to defend the republic from its enemies. This book considers why these soldiers' response to the revolution was so different from that of the rest of the army, and the implications this would have for the course of the German Revolution and, ultimately, for the fate of the Weimar Republic itself.

Scott Stephenson is Associate Professor of Military History at the Department of Military History, US Army Command and General Staff College.

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## Preface

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Ninety years on, the Great War still casts a long shadow. Certainly no single event has done more to shape both the last century and the century we have just begun. One imagines, then, that the upcoming 100-year anniversary should serve to remind us of the war's enormous impact on modern history. It should also remind us of the terrible costs of the war and the unbearable demands the war made on the soldiers who suffered and bled in the trenches of the Western Front. As one of my teachers once observed, if war is privation and suffering, then the Western Front was "war distilled." Privation and suffering was certainly the experience of the million and a half soldiers who held the German lines in late 1918. This book examines the experience of those men in the final, terrible weeks of the war and the first weeks of the uncertain peace that followed.

I teach the history of war to men and women who have experienced war first-hand. Almost all of my students at the US Army's Command and General Staff College have recently returned from deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. Teaching them – or trying to teach them – military history can be exhilarating and exasperating. Exhilarating, because the experience of combat has given them insights my students rarely had before. These majors understand what Clausewitz meant when the famous military philosopher described the environment of war as one saturated by fear, friction, fog, and fatigue; I need no historical vignettes to illustrate these ideas. Exasperating, because my students are often very cynical, very tired, and frequently doubt that the past has much to offer them. My heart goes out to them but they are a tough audience. They remind me of why I find the story of the German soldiers on the Western Front at the end of the First World War so compelling. The fatigue and cynicism of my students serves as a point of reference for the way I have approached the experience of the *Frontschweine*, the war-weary "front hogs" in the German trenches of 1918.

My own experience has been important as well. I was commissioned as a second lieutenant of Armor in 1976 – the year after Saigon

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had fallen to the Communists – when the US Army was struggling to regain its moral focus, its sense of purpose, and its standing in American society. During that tumultuous time, the army was shaken by racial tensions, rampant drug use, and break-down in fundamental discipline. My peers and I discovered that, to survive in such an environment, an officer must become a student of soldier behavior and motivation, a sort of amateur psychologist. At the same time, I discovered that a modern army was a complex social system, a *mélange* of communities, tribes, and mafias. Thus, serving in a tank battalion on a tiny American caserne in Germany, I found that the values, experience, and attitudes on soldiering among my men were dramatically different from the “rear echelon” maintenance unit on the other side of the installation. It was these two insights – the need to understand soldiers and the divisions within an army – that shaped my approach to the historical problem posed in this study: why did German soldiers on the Western Front respond so passively to the German Revolution of 1918 when they stood to gain more from the revolution’s success than any other group in German society?

Fortunately for me, my approach was shaped by some very fine scholars as well. I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to my graduate adviser at Syracuse University, Dr. Fred Marquardt, and my first advisor at the University of Kansas, Dr. Carl Strikwerda. Beyond that, I owe a very special thanks to the current Director of the Department of Military History at the US Army Command and General Staff College, Dr. Jim Willbanks, who pushed me to take the research sabbatical that made this book possible.

The research for this project was supported by people who went beyond the scope of their duties as librarians, archivists, and friends to make my work possible. They include Ed Burgess and his staff at the Combined Arms Research Library (CARL) at Ft. Leavenworth. Among these, I offer heart-felt thanks to Ms. Sharon Strein, who supported my seemingly insatiable requests for inter-library loan support, and her predecessor in the ILL office, a truly special lady, Ms. Dorothy Rogers. The people at CARL have earned their worldwide reputation for gracious support of soldiers and scholars alike. I offer my sincerest appreciation to the archival staffs at the *Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv* at Freiburg, the *Bundesarchiv-Reich* at Berlin-Lichterfelde, the US National Archives at College Park, Maryland, and the Military History Institute at Carlisle Barrack. In particular, I must highlight the assistance of Dr. Mitch Yockelsen at College Park, who supported the efforts of a rookie researcher with both patience and the insight of a genuine subject-matter expert.

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In the last two years, as I began writing in earnest, my efforts brought me into contact with a number of scholars who blessed me with insights and collegial support. I thank Dr. Dennis Showalter for his encouragement and advice on an early draft of Chapter 5. I am grateful to Dr. Alex Watson of Cambridge University, who, via e-mail, offered me the critical insights of someone who has made the German soldier of the First World War his own area of scholarly interest. Dr. Jon House sacrificed many hours in reviewing my drafts and attempting to untangle my most egregious lapses in style and proofreading. I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to Dr. Jim Corum, who offered invaluable advice on navigating the German archives. I owe a similar debt to Dr. Gerhard Weinberg. Years ago, he headed the effort to catalogue the National Archive's holdings of German documents from the First World War. He made me aware of the holdings and pointed me to sources that ultimately proved invaluable.

One man, above all, made this book possible: Dr. Ted Wilson of the University of Kansas. Over the years, his guidance has opened the way for countless naïve officers to navigate the unfamiliar perils of academia. I am blessed to be one of them. As my advisor, he offered good humor, steady counsel, and a willingness to listen to my tales of woe. A number of times, I despaired of finishing this project, and each of these times, Ted intervened with a gentle nudge and a sage word of encouragement. He truly epitomizes what Germans mean by the word *Doktorvater*.

I am extraordinarily grateful to Michael Watson and Helen Waterhouse of Cambridge University Press for their encouragement and advice and especially for their patience with a rookie author.

Finally, no list of benefactors would be complete with mentioning my family. Along with love and guidance, my parents encouraged my enduring passion for history. My amazing wife Rose typed the original seminar paper I wrote on this topic. At the time, I was serving on the ROTC cadre at Syracuse University and trying to earn a Master's degree in history. During that same assignment, my daughters, Jennifer and Elena, were born in snowstorms common to that part of the country. It is a measure of how long this project has taken that, as this book was submitted to the editor, one of those daughters is finishing a Master's program and the other is a semester away from an undergraduate degree. My three ladies have endured my physical absences on research trips and my even more frequent mental absences when my mind was wandering down the trench systems of the Western Front or the wintry boulevards of Berlin in late 1918. I thank God for their love and loyalty.

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I conclude by emphasizing that any remaining errors are mine and appear in spite of the best efforts of the many wonderful people who helped me along the way. By the same token, if this work has any merit, let it be to the glory of Him who makes all things possible and all things new.

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## Abbreviations and glossary

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BA-B	<i>Bundesarchiv-Bild</i> (German picture archive in Koblenz)
BA-MA	<i>Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv</i> (German military archive in Freiburg)
BA-R	<i>Bundesarchiv-Reich</i> (German political archive in Berlin-Lichterfelde)
BT	<i>Berliner Tageblatt</i>
<i>Drückebergerei</i>	front-line slang for shirking
<i>Etappe</i>	support organization behind the front
<i>Feldheer</i>	Field Army
<i>Frontschweine</i>	“front hogs” (front-line soldiers’ self-deprecating nickname)
GKSD	<i>Garde Kavallerie-Schützen Division</i> (Guards Cavalry Rifle Division)
<i>Jäger</i>	light infantry
<i>Landsturm</i>	third-line units of older, unfit, or untrained men
<i>Landwehr</i>	second-line units of older men
MSPD	<i>Mehrheitssozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands</i> (Majority-[Moderate]-Social Democratic Party)
<i>Nachlass</i>	personal papers
NARA	National Archives and Records Administration (US archive collection in Alexandria, VA)
OHL	<i>Oberste Heeresleitung</i> (Supreme Army Headquarters)
RdV	Rat der Volksbeauftragten (the Council of People’s Deputies: the six-man “cabinet” of the provisional government that led Germany from November 1918 to January 1919)
UDZ	<i>Die Ursachen des deutschen Zusammenbruchs im Jahre 1918</i> (Reichstag investigation into the “Origins of the German Collapse in 1918,” published in multiple volumes)

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USPD	<i>Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands</i> Independent Social Democratic Party
VMD	<i>Volksmarinedivision</i> (People's Naval Division)
VZR	<i>Vollzugsrat</i> (Executive Council of the Berlin Workers' and Soldiers' Council)
VZ	<i>Vossische Zeitung</i>