

INTRODUCTION

On 26 October 1918 the Swedish military attaché to Germany, Colonel Nils Adlercreutz, called on Lieutenant Colonel Nicolai, the head of German military intelligence, who, like many Europeans at the time, was in bed with flu. He apologised to Nicolai for coming with an unusual but urgent request which was hardly in line with his duties as a neutral military attaché, but explained that after observing four years of ‘our fight’, he felt obliged to speak as a soldier and brother in arms. ‘He urged me’, Nicolai reported, ‘not to lay down our arms’, as ‘he knew the reports of his colleagues from Paris and London.’ Nicolai did not ask for details, but gathered that the governments in both those capitals ‘faced the same internal opposition to a continuation of the war, as we do. If Germany would just remain firm, the enemy’s will to fight on would collapse in the face of the Bolshevik danger.’ Nicolai thanked the Swedish colonel for his intervention, but it had come too late ‘because Ludendorff was dismissed this morning’.¹

Certainly, the end of October 1918 was an odd time to be calling on the German leadership to continue the war; but Adlercreutz was not the only one who thought Germany must fight on. Walther Rathenau, chairman of AEG, former head of the Raw Materials Department of the Prussian War Ministry and later Foreign Minister of the Weimar Republic, was dreaming even then of a *levée en masse* and a resurgence of the German will to fight;² and the German government and Supreme Army Command were discussing the possibility of further resistance in endless meetings. Even during those dramatic days, when empires were collapsing, armies of millions were disintegrating and whole societies were on the brink of revolution, there were many intelligent people who doubted that the German Reich had really been militarily defeated and that all means of resistance were finally exhausted. Rather, they decided that its leaders had lost their nerve too early, a notion that was soon to become, in the form of the ‘stab in the back’ legend, a powerful and dangerous myth.³

INTRODUCTION

Certainly, it was a myth that reflected the fact that many people had expected the war to end differently. Even those who had previously been considered to be pessimists were surprised by the violence and suddenness of the collapse. A few months earlier, Germany's opponents had seemed to be 'with their backs to the wall',⁴ and by early 1917 the social democrat Philipp Scheidemann, whose name was synonymous with a peace based on understanding, had concluded that Germany would retain its military superiority until the end of the war.⁵

By the autumn of 1918 events had given the lie to such prognostications. With hindsight, the defeat of the Central Powers seemed to be the most likely outcome of the war. Indeed, Jay Winter has argued that the real problem about the First World War was only how Germany and its allies could hold out so long.⁶ For us, who know how both World Wars ended, the idea that Germany might have seemed to many people invincible in the First World War may indeed appear bizarre. After all, the final verdict of history was clear: the First World War ended with a catastrophic failure of German politics and strategy and nothing can or should be allowed to detract from this truth. At the same time, however, perhaps our own *post hoc* assessment is influenced by our knowledge of the final outcome. The idea that Germany was simply doomed from the beginning to lose the First World War is itself unhistorical and ignores the fact that the outcome of the war was for a long time very much on 'a knife edge'. Indeed, this is one of the central arguments of the present book, which will not offer speculative approaches or deal in terms of 'what ifs' like General Max Hoffmann's 'War of Missed Opportunities'. It aims rather to show that the outcome of the war was for a long period very widely considered to be open;⁷ and that bearing this fact in mind is indispensable to understand the increasing radicalisation of the war, the insuperable obstacles in the way of a compromise peace, the harshness of the victors and the stubborn unwillingness of the vanquished to accept the result.

A whole series of further questions, all very important for understanding the war, are connected to this one, such as the links between military operations, overall strategy, and Germany's war aims proposals for a compromise peace. Were Germany's war aims the insuperable obstacle preventing an earlier ending of the war? What did German society want to gain politically from the war? There can be no simple answers to these questions, only answers that take into account the often competing and discordant decision-making centres of Imperial Germany and the changing military and political circumstances of four and a half years of warfare. Care and detail are necessary to show ruptures, developments and continuities in

INTRODUCTION

the German answers to the question as to what they were fighting for. For its analysis of German society, the present volume has drawn on Hans-Ulrich Wehler's model of Imperial Germany as a 'polycratic chaos', a collection of competing 'power centres' all involved in the decision-making process: the emperor and his court, the Reich Chancellor and the diplomats; the Reichstag as a mirror of the parties and the German public; the military leadership, especially the Oberste Heeresleitung (OHL; Supreme Army Command) and the heads of the navy.⁸

Of course, as military events were central to the question of how and why the German Empire lost the First World War, the present volume is also concerned with battles and their consequences, the arguments about important strategic decisions, and their supporters and opponents. It seeks to show how the various assessments of military capabilities by the 'power centres' influenced political objectives and how strategy was affected by the political and military structures of the German Empire and the personal peculiarities of key individuals.

Any book that focuses on only one belligerent power can only offer a partial perspective on what were European and global events; and there is no denying that virtually every 'war' is fundamentally a highly interactive event which asks for an international or transnational approach in the style of the histories of the First World War by Hew Strachan, David Stevenson, Jay Winter, Adam Tooze or Jörn Leonhard.⁹ Yet perhaps a 'national' perspective too offers insights which may contribute to an understanding of global events. It was, after all, the perspective of those who were taking the decisions at the time and must be of some relevance to the question of how and why they made them – not, of course, that analysing how decisions were made means automatically approving them or exonerating their authors.

Moreover, limiting the subject to Imperial Germany permits a more thoroughly detailed analysis of its war aims. It is perhaps impossible to define something as amorphous as the political will of 'the' German society of the First World War. Given that in 1914, Germany had about 65 million inhabitants of whom over 13 million were eventually drafted, such numbers alone mean that ultimately the only thing a historian can do is to collect and summarise impressions from multiple sources and offer plausibilities. The problem is to explain how certain views came to be reflected in political and military action; or, as Thomas Nipperdey would have said, to distinguish the 'secondary voices' from those 'leading voices' that really reflected the prevailing ideas of the day, and to do that amidst a huge chorus which makes such distinctions extremely difficult and questionable.¹⁰

INTRODUCTION

Whereas Jürgen Habermas and other denizens of the world of communications theory have written brilliant analyses of entire societies in terms of political debates and interactions,¹¹ the present book confines itself to the proven tools of the historian and simply attempts to reconstruct the decision-making process drawing on as many sources as possible, such as diaries, letters, parliamentary debates, autobiographies and occasionally photographs.¹²

A first reason for writing this book was to analyse the decision-makers in Germany, their ideas and concepts; to show the absence of a clear strategy and the conflicts and differences among the competing ‘power centres’ in trying to end the war.

A second reason was that, in my view, the standard accounts of German politics and strategy in the First World War offer distorted images of reality; and that attempts by a number of extremely competent scholars such as Georges Henri Soutou have never had much success against the mainstream.¹³ The prevailing consensus – to apply a rather crude generalisation to a truly vast amount of research – has been broadly to endorse Fritz Fischer’s view that the main ‘engine’ of the war was the German Empire’s attempt to realise its far-reaching plans for European domination. This idea is dominant in the English-speaking world in particular, where it is sometimes seen as justifying the enormous sacrifices of the First World War: if Imperial Germany was set on conquest, then there was no other option than to fight back to save freedom and humanity.

These questions were hotly debated decades ago, especially at the time of the Fischer controversy,¹⁴ which gave birth to what are still the standard works on the subject. The first of these, Fritz Fischer’s *Griff nach der Weltmacht* (*Germany’s War Aims during the First World War*), is the central book on German war aims, and the second, Gerhard Ritter’s *Staatskunst und Kriegshandwerk* (*Sceptre and Sword*) analyses the relationship between politics and the military in Germany in four volumes, two and a quarter of which are devoted to the First World War and a frontal attack on Fischer. Both books are lasting scholarly achievements, but obviously bear the marks of the time in which they were written – indeed, Ritter’s work is even described by some historians as ‘largely forgotten’.¹⁵ In the end, the bitterness evoked by the controversy was wearing the protagonists down – Ritter complained shortly before his death that he was ‘sick and tired of arguing with Fischer’¹⁶ – and by the mid 1970s the hotly debated topic was ceasing to hold the centre stage. Perhaps after decades of intensive research it was beginning to seem exhausted. Certainly it was a fact that the books by Fischer, Ritter and their contemporaries were based on broad research and editions of primary sources some of which had been published even before the Second

INTRODUCTION



Figure 1. Wilhelm II – a symbol of German imperialism. ullstein bild/Getty Images

World War. It was now beginning to seem that research on fundamentally different questions, such as the social history of the war, were now more urgent than yet more studies on strategy, war aims and politics; and from this point the centre of interest was shifting towards researching mentalities, ‘everyday’ history, cultural history, the history of home fronts, of women, minorities and deserters and finally towards the concept of a ‘history of violence’.¹⁷

Although this research resulted in a number of highly interesting and innovative studies that opened up new perspectives on what was happening during the war, they have, in my view, a central deficiency: as histories of the ‘victims’ of war they have little to say about the question of political ‘responsibility’. As regards the key political and military decision-makers, however, we are still relying on research which is by now sixty years old. This fact alone would perhaps not be a sufficient reason to revisit this topic. But a number of additional sources have now become available which provide new insights, notably, for example, the Lyncker war letters, an excellent

INTRODUCTION

seismograph for the views, moods and hopes in the German leadership; and the records of Lieutenant Colonel Nicolai, the head of military intelligence.¹⁸

We are now able to look afresh with a new perspective on German politics and strategy during the First World War, and one which is no longer distorted by the passions of those involved in it. The First World War is now history; a great misfortune, but one that is in the past; and it is no longer a question of assigning blame, or rejecting it, but of understanding how it could come about, and why the war developed the way it did.

This war could have ended in a draw, as I shall argue here, and the German leadership had to commit very serious mistakes to lose it. These mistakes, and their context, will be analysed here. The present volume seeks to explore the connections between political and strategic decision-making and the convictions and aims of German society. Furthermore, it seeks to show how the closeness of the outcome of the war was crucial for developments later in the century.