

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

“If Only This War Would End:” German Soldiers in the Last Year of the First World War

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

History

by

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(Chair)

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

“If Only This War Would End:” German Soldiers in the Last Year of the First World War

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This dissertation is concerned with questions of combat motivation in the First World War. Why did soldiers fight for so long, under such difficult and dangerous circumstances? Existing work on this subject understands the decision to fight primarily at the individual level; it attempts to reconstruct the soldiers’ attitudes and motivations. This approach has proven increasingly problematic, however. As a means of advancing the debate on this topic, I have examined a case which the existing approaches cannot explain – the case of the German army in the last year of the war.

In the first part of the dissertation, I argue that individual-centered arguments cannot explain the behavior of these soldiers. After three years of difficult and costly warfare, they were profoundly weary of the war. They no longer cared about seeing the war through to a successful conclusion, and in any case, they increasingly realized that victory was impossible. These men had no discernible “motive” for continuing to fight.

And yet they *did* continue to fight, even through the last and most terrible phases of the war.

In the second part of the dissertation, I develop a new approach to the study of combat motivation. Drawing upon the methods of labor history, I argue that any understanding of soldiers' behavior must account for the social processes that mediate between attitudes and actions. A soldier who was weary of the war could not simply stop fighting. Purely individual forms of resistance would be easily suppressed. Resistance could be effective only when it is collective. And collective action requires some level of social cohesion – mutual trust and shared goals. Such cohesion was increasingly absent from the ranks of the German army. Partly, this was due to the nature of industrial warfare. Heavy casualties caused enormous turnover, and material shortages exacerbated pre-existing social conflicts. Subjective factors also played a role. The energy needed to sustain social connections was drawn off by family commitments. At the same time, soldiers had fewer common experiences with which to fashion a sense of group identity, as the army grew larger and more internally complex.

## Introduction

For the soldiers of the German army, the First World War was a terrible experience. And the last year of the war – 1918 – was by far the worst period in the entire conflict. After three years of industrial warfare, Germany had reached the end of its resources. There were no more men to send to the front. And the economy, starved of resources by the army, and strangled by the Allied naval blockade, was increasingly unable to feed and equip the men in the field. It certainly was not able to match the production of its enemies, which could draw upon the vast resources of their colonial empires, and (since February of 1917), the enormous industrial capacity of the United States. What remained of the army – exhausted, underfed, outgunned – should have been handled cautiously by its leaders. But the German high command, now dominated by Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff, pursued another course. Only a decisive military victory, they knew, could win for Germany the kind of hegemonic position that nationalists coveted, and preserve the conservative social order on which the regime rested. They therefore pursued a strategy of all-out attack. The result, predictably, was a catastrophe, from both a military and a political perspective. The offensive failed to deliver any strategic decision, and it produced unprecedented casualties, even by the appalling standards of the First World War. In eight months of fighting, 1.8 million soldiers – nearly half of all German soldiers under arms – would be killed, wounded, or go missing.

The heaviest casualties were suffered in the very last phases of the fighting. By that time, the outcome of the war was beyond all doubt. Having squandered its last

reserves in an ill-advised offensive, it was clear to every sane observer that Germany was defeated. The high command, however, refused to confront this reality. Hoping for a miraculous turn of events, they continued to fight. What remained of the army was ground to pieces by continuous Allied attacks along the entire length of the front. Entire regiments were wiped out – literally worn down to nothing after months of ceaseless combat. At the same time, hundreds of thousands of soldiers were stricken with the “Spanish flu,” along with typhus, diphtheria, tuberculosis, and other diseases which ravaged the weakened army. Among those who escaped death in combat, many broke down under the mental and physical strains the fighting imposed. As the size of the army declined, the high command had little choice but to demand more from those who remained. Men were left in the combat zone for longer and longer stretches – often weeks – without rest or relief. The bloodbath continued right up until November 11<sup>th</sup>, when the civilian government finally overrode the military authorities, and signed what amounted to an unconditional surrender. In the last ten days of the war, the army suffered more than 60,000 casualties. In the last six weeks, the number was close to 400,000.

To a contemporary observer, it is impossible to understand the motives of these soldiers. Why did they fight under such terrible conditions? And why did they continue to fight, even when the situation was clearly hopeless? What could possibly have driven them to endure such overwhelming dangers to life and limb? The basic aim of this project is to find answers to these questions.

My broader purpose in examining this case is to address certain problems in our current theories about combat motivation – that is, why soldiers fight – in the First World War. In order to define these problems more clearly, let me begin by briefly describing

the state of the scholarship in this field, and how this body of work developed. Why soldiers fight, long a neglected topic among military historians, has been the object of growing interest over the past several decades. In part, this follows larger trends in the study of the war – the move away from political and operational history, and an increasing attention towards social and cultural topics.<sup>1</sup> But it also reflects a growing appreciation for just how important, indeed central, such matters are for understanding the war. Traditional military history had always viewed soldiers' behavior as a function of the officer-man relationship. Officers issued orders, and soldiers obeyed them; if soldiers evinced an unwillingness to fight, it must be because there was some problem in that relationship. From this perspective, there seemed to be little reason to study the attitudes and motives of individual soldiers. The course of events was determined by decisions made by top military and political leaders, not the rank and file. Such views began to change in the 1970s and 80s, when new research by social historians – above all, studies on strikes, mutinies, and other forms of grass-roots resistance – demonstrated that the relationship between officer and man was conditional.<sup>2</sup> Ordinary soldiers could, and often did, reject participation in the war, and refuse to go on fighting. In light of these findings, it became clear that the war could not be adequately explained in terms of political decisions alone. To grasp why events unfolded the way they did, it was necessary to understand the motives and perceptions of the millions of rank and file

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<sup>1</sup> For a more extensive discussion of this phenomenon, see Jay Winter and Antoine Prost, *The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 15-25.

<sup>2</sup> The key works here include: Guy Pedroncini, *Les Mutineries de 1917* (Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1967); Daniel Horn, *The German Naval Mutinies of World War I* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1969); Allan Wildman, *The End of the Russian Imperial Army, vol. I: The Old Army and the Soldiers' Revolt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); Douglas Gill and Dallas Gloden, *The Unknown Army* (London: Verson, 1985).

soldiers who were part of the war effort. We needed to know how and why they participated, and under what conditions they would cease to participate.<sup>3</sup>

Even as historians put greater emphasis on these questions, they struggled to find the most effective means for approaching them. There were no established methods for the study of ordinary soldiers, no established theoretical frameworks that they could simply pick up. Most historians, then, adopted a simple, commonsensical view of soldier's behavior. They tended to see the soldier as a more-or-less rational being, who was subject to intense and often conflicting pressures. Against his natural inclination to return home and to avoid combat, were set the whole array of pressures and inducements designed to keep him fighting. At any given moment, the soldier weighed these pressures and acted accordingly.<sup>4</sup> The main point of disagreement was over which kinds of pressures exerted the strongest influence. One group of scholars emphasized coercive forces. Soldiers, they argued, did not fight because they wished to. They fought because they were forced to do so. The most direct instrument of coercion was the formal apparatus of military discipline – the military police, the courts, and the disciplinary powers of the officer corps. The disciplinary powers of officers derived not only from their side arm, but from the social distance between officer and man, and by the cultures of deference and patriarchy which regulated their interactions.<sup>5</sup> This was supplemented

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<sup>3</sup> The classic discussion of this shift is in John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York: Viking Press, 1976), 45-53.

<sup>4</sup> This model is often expressed in terms of linear or mechanical metaphors: “when conditions reach point x, the soldier reacts with behavior y.” For an explicit example of this, see Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, “The French Soldier in the Trenches,” in *Facing Armageddon: The First World War Experienced*, eds. Hugh Cecil and Peter Liddle (London: Cooper, 1996), esp. 225.

<sup>5</sup> Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years: Australian Soldier's in the Great War* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1974); Gary Sheffield, *Leadership in the Trenches: Officer-Man Relations, Morale, and Discipline in the British Army on the Eve of the First World War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000);

by the effects of military training, the general purpose of which was to deactivate conscious thought and render obedience automatic.<sup>6</sup> In more recent years, scholars have also studied more informal mechanisms of control. Some examined state propaganda, which they found to be more sophisticated and broad-ranging than previously thought.<sup>7</sup> Others focused on the ways in which the war effort was abetted by non-military organizations – the church, intellectuals and universities, political organizations, the medical professions.<sup>8</sup>

A second group of scholars has emphasized the forces which persuade or induce the soldier to fight. Much of the work in this vein has focused on nationalism and militarism.<sup>9</sup> In this view, soldiers placed high worth on the military and its attendant

Alexander Watson, "Junior Officership in the German Army during the Great War," *War in History* 14 (2007).

<sup>6</sup> Hew Strachan, "Training, Morale and Modern War," *Journal of Contemporary History* 41, no. 2 (2006); Michael Geyer, "How the Germans Learned to Wage War," in *Between Mass Death and Individual Loss: The Place of the Dead in Twentieth Century Germany*, eds. Alon Confino, Paul Betts, and Dirk Schumann (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Wilhelm Deist, "Zensur und Propaganda in Deutschland während des Ersten Weltkrieges," in *Militär, Staat und Gesellschaft : Studien zur preussisch-deutschen Militärgeschichte*, ed. Wilhelm Deist (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1991); David Welch, *Germany, Propaganda, and Total War, 1914-1918: Sins of Omission* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000); Anne Lipp, *Meinungslenkung im Krieg: Kriegserfahrung Deutschen Soldaten und ihre Deutung 1914-1918* (Göttingen : Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003); Robert Nelson, *German Soldier Newspapers of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Gerd Krumreich, "*Gott mit uns*": *Nation, Religion und Gewalt im 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2000); Paul Lerner, *Hysterical Men: War, Psychiatry, and the Politics of Trauma in Germany, 1890-1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); Leo Van Bergen, *Before my Helpless Sight: Suffering, Dying, and Military Medicine on the Western Front, 1914-1918* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009); Roland Stromberg, *Redemption by War: The Intellectuals and 1914* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1982).

<sup>9</sup> Much older work on the war simply asserted the central role of nationalism, without offering much in the way of support. See for instance, Gerhard Ritter, *The Sword and the Scepter: The Problem of Militarism in Germany*, vol. 4: *The Reign of German Militarism and the Disaster of 1918* (Coral Gables, University of Miami Press, 1973), 370. For more developed arguments of this point, see Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, *14-18*, 10. A more complex version of this thesis, emphasizing the way that war provided a release from internal conflicts, is offered by Hew Strachan, *The First World War, vol I: To Arms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 103-110; see also Wolfgang Kruse, "Die Kriegsbegeisterung im deutschen Reich zu Beginn des Ersten Weltkrieges," in *Kriegsbegeisterung und mentale Kriegsvorbereitung*, eds. Marcel van der Linden and Gottfried Mergner (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1991).



values, such as duty, honor, and sacrifice. They believed, moreover, that the interests of the nation subsumed those of the individual. For these men, combat was not a burden; it was one of their most fundamental obligations, which they were ready to meet without question or deliberation. More recent work has studied the ways in which national and militarist themes were embedded into larger cultural currents. Modris Eksteins, for instance, has argued that combat motivation was tied to the spread of bourgeois ethics, and especially its central concept of duty.<sup>10</sup> Others pointed to the way in which the “warrior” identity became a part of bourgeois culture, or of bourgeois conceptions of masculinity.<sup>11</sup> A supporting strain of thought emphasizes the positive dimensions of the soldiering life – if the soldier’s life was hard, it was not so bad as to be intolerable. Tony Ashworth and Leonard Smith, among others, have studied how soldiers were able to improve the circumstances and minimize risks, by selectively interpreting orders.<sup>12</sup> Others have pointed to the role of small unit camaraderie.<sup>13</sup> Still others has examined the kind of psychological mechanisms that soldiers developed in order to cope with the

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<sup>10</sup> Modris Eksteins, *The Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Boston: Houton Mifflin, 1989).

<sup>11</sup> George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of The World Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Michael Adams, *The Great Adventure: Male Desire and the Coming of World War I* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Sarah Cole, *Modernism, Male Friendship, and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men’s Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Some excellent work has also studied the organizational mechanisms through which such ideas were spread. See Marilyn Coetzee, *The German Army League: Popular Nationalism in Wilhelmine Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Thomas Rohrkraemer, *Der militarismus der ‘kleinen Leute’: Die Kriegsvereine im Deutschen Kaiserreich 1871-1914* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1990); Roger Chickering, *We Men Who Feel Most German: A Cultural Study of the Pan-German League, 1886-1914* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1984).

<sup>12</sup> Tony Ashworth, *Trench Warfare, 1914-1918: The Live and Let Live System* (Houndsmills: Macmillan, 1980); Leonard Smith, *Between Mutiny and Obedience: The Case of the Fifth French Infantry Division during World War I* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

<sup>13</sup> Michael Howard, “The Great War: Mystery or Mistake?” *The National Interest* (Summer 2001); Hew Strachan, ‘The Morale of the German Army, 1917–18’ in *Facing Armageddon. The First World War Experienced*, eds. Hugh Cecil and Peter Liddle (Barnsley 1996), 388.

stresses and strains of combat. Benjamin Ziemann, for instance, has focused on how soldiers are able to ignore anything but the present moment.<sup>14</sup>

Despite this impressive body of work, there remains a widespread sense that these two kinds of explanations are not enough. No one would deny that soldiers' behavior was shaped both by coercion and persuasion. But for most thoughtful observers, these arguments do not entirely suffice to explain why soldiers fight; some element of this choice remains unclear or unarticulated. John Keegan, in his recent study of the war, ultimately concluded that the motives of the fighting men were the "central mystery" of the First World War.<sup>15</sup> The same language appears in the work of Stephane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, in a major reconsideration of the war published in 2000. An initial rush of enthusiasm might explain why soldiers answered the initial call to arms; but why, they ask, "wasn't the consensus of those first August days massively questioned in the following years? Much of the mystery of the Great War lies in that question."<sup>16</sup> Sophie de Schaepdrijver, in another recent article, put the most matter most directly. "What made them 'see it through,'" she argues, "remains a central mystery of the war to this day; indeed it is one of the questions that compel us to pay attention to the tragedy of '14-18."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Benjamin Ziemann, "Enttäuschte Erwartung und kollektive Erschöpfung. Die deutschen Soldaten an der Westfront 1918 auf dem Weg zur Revolution," in *Kriegsende 1918: Ereignis, Wirkung, Nachwirkung*, eds. Jörg Duppler and Gerhard Paul Gross (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1999); Alexander Watson, *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale, and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>15</sup> John Keegan, *The First World War* (New York: Knopf, 1999), 426-27.

<sup>16</sup> Stephane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14-18: Understanding the Great War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), 100.

<sup>17</sup> Sophie de Schaepdrijver, "Theirs was Precisely to Reason Why: On Slaughter, Sacrifice, and Shootings at Dawn," *In Flanders Field 2* (2000): 18.

This sense of ‘mystery’ derives, in large part, from new research which has cast doubt on some of the central premises on which the prevailing explanations rest. Coercion theories have been challenged by new work on the structures of military discipline. These studies have made it clear that discipline was not as harsh as has generally been assumed. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, most European countries liberalized their systems of military justice – reducing mandatory penalties, eliminating summary proceedings, and installing procedural protections for defendants.<sup>18</sup> During the war, most belligerents carried out only a handful of executions, especially in comparison to World War II and other modern wars.<sup>19</sup> Other work questioned whether there was any definite correlation between punishment and obedience, and attacked the notion that organizations could be held together by discipline alone. Even in the most repressive structures, power did not flow only one way; there was always some level of negotiation and interplay between different levels of the hierarchy.<sup>20</sup>

Consent theories come under equally severe challenge. The work of Jeffrey Verhey and others revealed that nationalist sentiment was by no means universal, even at the beginning of the war.<sup>21</sup> Many segments of the population opposed the war – the

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<sup>18</sup> For Russia, see the relevant sections in Wildman, *End of the Russian Imperial Army*, v. 1, 33-36. For Germany, see Christoph Jahr, *Gewöhnliche Soldaten: Desertion und Deserteure in Deutschen und Britischen Heer 1914-1918* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1998). There was perhaps less liberalization in Britain, but even here, many traditional punishments (such as flogging) were done away with. And during the war, discipline was relaxed as time passed, especially in conscript formations. See Gerard Orem, *Military Executions in World War I* (Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

<sup>19</sup> For instance, German military courts executed only 48 soldiers in World War I, compared to more than 30,000 in World War II. See Steven Welch "Harsh But Just"? German Military Justice in the Second World War: A Comparative Study of the Court-Martialing of German and US Deserters." *German History* 17, no. 3 (1999): 377, 385.

<sup>20</sup> See Ulrich Bröckling, *Disziplin: Soziologie und Geschichte militärischer Gehorsamproduktion* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1997).

<sup>21</sup> Jeffrey Verhey, *The Spirit of 1914: Militarism, Myth, and Mobilization in Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Ferguson, *Pity of War*, 174-211. See also Jean-Jacques Becker, *1914:*

weeks before the war saw massive anti-war demonstrations in cities across Europe. And even in those groups where nationalist sentiment ran the strongest, it existed alongside fear, shock, anxiety, and other negative emotions. In any case, belligerent nationalism, to whatever extent it actually existed, was swiftly undercut by the realities of war. It was drowned out by the horror of trench life, which was described in detail by John Ellis, Paul Fussel, and others.<sup>22</sup> It was simultaneously eroded by the material costs and social disruptions that modern war involved. In the last half of the war, patriotic jubilation had given way to hunger, crime, social unrest, and general exhaustion.<sup>23</sup> These findings were driven home by the accounts of ordinary participants, which have also begun to receive some attention from scholars. These sources indicate that most soldiers swiftly became weary of the fighting.<sup>24</sup> They displayed little concern for achieving specific outcomes; they simply wanted a swift end to hostilities, and to return to their peacetime lives.

Perceptive critics have also pointed out that existing theories do a poor job of explaining change. While soldiers mostly kept fighting, sometimes they did not. Minor

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*Comment les Français sont entrés dans la guerre, contribution à l'étude de l'opinion publique printemps-été 1914* (Paris: Presses de la FNSP, 1977).

<sup>22</sup> John Ellis, *Eye-Deep in Hell* (London: Croom Helm, 1976); Paul Fussel, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1975); John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York: Viking Press, 1976).

<sup>23</sup> This body of work can only be outlined here. Among the foundational works were Jürgen Kocka, *Klassengesellschaft im Krieg: Deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1914-1918* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1973); and Bernard Waites, *A Class Society at War, England 1914-1918* (Leamington Spa: Berg, 1987). Notable later additions include Richard Wall and Jay Winter, eds., *The Upheaval of War: Family, Work, and Welfare in Europe 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Roger Chickering, *The Great War and Urban Life in Germany: Freiburg, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert, eds., *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin 1914-1919* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997-2007); Belinda Davis, *Home Fires Burning: Food, Politics, and Everyday Life in World War I Berlin* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Avner Offer, *The First World War: An Agrarian Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989).

<sup>24</sup> See Benjamin Ziemann, *War Experiences in Rural Germany* (Oxford: Berg, 2007); Bernd Ulrich and Benjamin Ziemann, eds., *Frontalltag im Ersten Weltkrieg: Ein Historisch Lesebuch* (Klartext: Essen, 2008); Anne Lipp, "Freidensehnsucht und Durchhaltenbereitschaft: Wahrnehmungen und Erfahrungen deutschen Soldaten im ersten Weltkrieg," *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 36 (1996); Wolfram Wette, *Der Krieg des kleinen Mannes: Eine Militärgeschichte von unten* (Munich: Piper, 1992).

incidents of combat refusal were relatively common in all armies. And even major episodes were by no means rare. At least four of the major armies involved in the war – French, Italian, Russian, and Austrian – suffered major disciplinary breakdown, involving hundreds of thousands of men. Consent/coercion theories have a very difficult time explaining these episodes. They generally take the view that, when conditions get bad enough, soldiers will cease to fight; the motive of self-preservation will finally overwhelm the external pressures to go on. But such a view does not fit very well with the facts. The armies that suffered the worst conditions were not necessarily the first to give up – the German army being case in point. There are also problems of a more abstract character. At what point, exactly, do the hardships of combat overcome the will to continue? Exactly how bad is “bad enough”? And how does the actual decision take place? The logic of a consent/coercion model supplies no clear answer to these questions. If the decision is strictly an individual one, then it must hinge on the particularities of each individual – their own outlook, motives, and situation. And if that is so, it is hard to see how collective indiscipline happens. How do thousands or millions of individuals come to the same choice at the same time? And why does collective action assume different forms in different cases? The French mutinies, for instance, involved a more or less organized refusal to fight – something like a strike. In Russia, resistance often took the form of violent insurrection against the authorities, with political and social overtones. It is difficult to see how an individual-level model can account for these kinds of differences.

These critiques have not had much impact on discussions about soldiers’ motives, however, despite the mounting evidence behind them. There has been no general

reconsideration of approaches;<sup>25</sup> most new work continues to adhere to the consent/coercion model.<sup>26</sup> Research might cast doubt on the notion that soldiers fought out of patriotic duty; but in any given case, it is difficult to prove this definitively. And so it is very difficult to make firm conclusions about whether, or how, existing explanations fall short. To advance the debate, it would be useful to have a case where it is clear that the established theories do not work – a case which *forces* us to look for new approaches to the question of combat motivation. And here is where the German case comes in. There are other cases where it is hard to explain why soldiers fought. But to my mind, there is no other case where consent/coercion explanations so clearly fail. And the more closely we look at the details of the case, the firmer this conclusion becomes.

The soldiers of the German army endured one of the most costly and physically grueling campaigns in modern military history. Yet it is clear that these men were not forced into combat at the point of a gun. The German military system was (contrary to stereotypes about Prussian militarism), actually one of the more liberal systems in Europe. And punishments grew more lenient over the course of the war. Aware of the psychological strains that trench warfare involved, the authorities repeatedly revised the system of military justice – reducing penalties, and providing additional routes for appeals.<sup>27</sup> German soldiers rarely received significant punishments, even for the serious offenses like desertion. The primary instrument of discipline, the officer corps, was

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<sup>25</sup> For remarks about the seeming stalemate in the consent/coercion debate, see Winter, *The Great War in History*, 104-106.

<sup>26</sup> For example: two of the more important books on the war to be released recently are Alan Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction: Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (New York, Basic Books, 1999). Both describe combat motivation in conventional consent/coercion terms. In fact, the relevant chapter in Ferguson's book contains sections entitled "carrots" and "sticks." Ferguson, 339-366; Kramer, 244-50.

<sup>27</sup> Jahr, *Gewöhnliche Soldaten*.

meanwhile gutted by heavy casualties. By 1918, it was staffed largely by hastily-trained teenagers, who struggled to command the respect of their men.<sup>28</sup>

If it is clear that these men were not forced to fight, it is hard to see that they had any reason to fight willingly. These men were not nationalist zealots. They were mostly middle-aged reservist and teenage conscripts, pulled away from families and careers and forced to fight. Many of them were drawn from social groups hostile to the regime, or from provinces which were ambivalent about inclusion in the German empire.<sup>29</sup> These men were called upon to fight for an unpopular monarchy, and a conservative-aristocratic elite that disenfranchised and exploited the majority of the population.<sup>30</sup> The regime had not made the aims of the war clear. In fact, it had explicitly refused to discuss them, and suppressed public debate on the matter.<sup>31</sup> Its only articulated justification for fighting, self-defense, had become nonsense by 1918. By then, Germany dominated Eastern and Central Europe, having just imposed on Russia one of the most draconian treaties in modern history. By then too, the largest party in the Reichstag was the Fatherland Party, which endorsed further massive annexations. In any case, the aims of the war were increasingly moot. The German offensive strategy was never likely to succeed, and by the summer of 1918 defeat had become a certainty. The state tried to conceal the seriousness of the situation, but the truth could hardly be concealed from soldiers at the front. According the reports of police spies and mail censors, soldiers believed that

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<sup>28</sup> Constantin von Altröck, *Vom Sterben des Deutschen Offizierkorps* (Berlin: Mittler und Sohn, 1922); Alexander Watson, "Junior Officership."

<sup>29</sup> Ziemann, *War Experiences*, esp. 73-110; Hew Strachan, "The Morale of the German Army, 1917-18" in *Facing Amageddon: The First World War Experienced*, eds. Hugh Cecil and Peter Liddle (London: Cooper, 1996); David Stevenson, *With Our Backs to the Wall: Victory and Defeat in 1918* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2011), 278-92.

<sup>30</sup> John Röhl, *Wilhelm II: The Kaiser's Personal Monarchy, 1888-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), esp. 700-701.

<sup>31</sup> Welch, *Germany, Propaganda, and Total War*, 58-75.

further resistance was pointless, and were ready for “peace at any price.”<sup>32</sup> Battlefield commanders, likewise, constantly warned of the wretched state of morale, and expressed grave doubts about the ability of the rank and file to continue.<sup>33</sup>

If we are to explain the endurance of these soldiers, we must solve one problem in particular – that is, the apparent gap between soldiers’ *attitudes* and their *actions*. These men expressed nothing but disapproval for the war. And yet, they continued to fight, even under the most difficult and dangerous circumstances. Consent/coercion models cannot make sense of this gap, because they posit a fairly straightforward relationship between attitude and action. Soldiers, in their view, keep fighting until the costs of doing so outweigh the benefits. If we are ever to solve this problem, we must try and find a different approach to the problem. A useful perspective is provided by labor historians. These historians are also faced with explaining a gap between motives and actions: workers, they note, are generally unhappy with the exploitative system in which they live. And yet workers only rarely make any effort to alter that system. Labor historians’ solution to this problem has been to problematize the connection between discontent and resistance. Overt resistance poses a direct challenge to the established authorities. And individuals rarely mount challenges of that kind; it would carry enormous risk and little prospect of success. They will usually act only in coordination with others, as part of a group. From this perspective, the critical question is not the attitude of the worker, it is how workers coordinate their efforts. Their analytical focus shifts from individual choice

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<sup>32</sup> BA-MA, RH/61 1035, 17 Oct. 1918.

<sup>33</sup> Wilhelm Deist, “The Military Collapse of the German Empire: The Reality Behind the Stab-in-the-Back Myth,” *War in History* 3 (1996): 198.



to the complex social processes mediate between the desire to resist and the ability to do so.

This study applies these insights to the case of the German army. Its central question is not, “why did soldiers choose to fight?” Rather, it asks why personal opposition to the war was not translated into collective action against the war. The analysis is guided particularly by the theoretical framework provided by labor history, and by resistance studies in anthropology and social science. This body of work emphasizes the critical function played by low-level networks of “trust and familiarity” in enabling action. Individuals who are surrounded by those they know and trust feel more confident in challenging authority.<sup>34</sup> The networks also facilitate the construction of the kinds of practical and moral consensus that coordinated action requires. The bulk of the study then, is devoted to social dynamics within the rank and file, with an eye towards such networks. What kind of communities and identities did they construct? How were their social relations affected by the experience of war and combat, or by existing social conflicts, or ties to the home front? What forces bound them together? And in particular, which were the forces standing between them or pulling them apart? If group ties are the necessary foundation for resistance, they are also fragile. They are easily fragmented by internal conflicts, which are made all the more intense by the physical closeness of its members. They can also be disrupted from without, if circumstances impose radical change on their membership. When groups dissolve, collective resistance becomes impossible.

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<sup>34</sup> The relationship between networks and resistance is developed at length in the first section of chapter 4.

This is precisely the situation in which the German army found itself during the last phases of the Great War. By then, soldiers were profoundly weary of the war. But they continued to fight, because individual opposition could not be joined together into any collective action. The social fabric of the army was disintegrating. In part, this was due to the high casualties which were involved in industrial warfare – and especially the kind of high-risk offensive strategy the Germans pursued. Individuals passed in and out of the ranks at an incredible pace, as men were killed or wounded, and others took their place. The pre-existing divisions in German society played an important role too. Rapidly modernizing and but lately unified, German society was one of the most divided in Europe. The army drew its members from all of every class and segment of society, and forced them to serve side by side. This produced constant tension and conflict, especially given the army's biased policies, which distributed risks and rewards very unevenly. Soldiers also found that they had less in common with each other. The army was a vast and increasingly complex organization, with its members divided among dozens of different sub-branches and hundreds of different functions and specializations. The life of any individual soldier was often quite different from the men around him, even the men in his own unit. Myths of the *Frontgemeinschaft* notwithstanding, the soldier remained more closely tied to his family and to his pre-war social circles than to his immediate comrades. The relationship between soldier and family was one of mutual dependence – practically, economically, and emotionally. And as the war lengthened, their relationship only became more important. As times became harder, both soldiers and families leaned more heavily on one another.

Having laid out the argument in general terms, let me now describe the overall plan of the dissertation. Chapter One sets the background for the argument. It describes the course of events 1918, and what these larger events meant for the ordinary soldier. Special attention is paid to the particular kinds of hardships this campaign involved. Chapter Two studies how soldiers reacted to their circumstances. In particular, it tries to resolve certain unresolved questions about the extent of indiscipline in the German army at the end of the war, and it delves more deeply into the historiography on this moment. The ultimate conclusion is that, while discipline was clearly flagging, most soldiers kept fighting till the end of the war. Chapter Three describes in detail how existing consent/coercion theories fail to explain soldiers' behavior. The fourth chapter then lays out my social-dynamics approach to combat motivation, and describes the theoretical underpinnings of this method. It also begins to lay out the evidence for this position, by studying the rapid movement of individuals into and out of (and within) the army. The following chapters go on to consider other kinds of forces that work against the formation of group ties. In Chapter Five, I examine how pre-existing divisions were reproduced in the army, and the dynamics of conflict in the ranks. Chapter Six considers the evolving relationship between soldiers and their families, and the ways that this limits soldiers' interactions with each other. The subject of Chapter Seven is soldiers' sense of collective identity. Here, I argue for how this emerges out of the kinds of experiences that soldiers' share, and how the structure of the army produced a diffuse, essentially passive identity. The conclusion suggests further applications of this model. I am certainly not claiming to have 'solved' the problem of why soldiers fight. But I believe that the method I have put forward here might add to the study of combat motivation in other contexts.

The kind of detailed reconstruction that this study attempts must necessarily draw on several different kinds of sources. It draws partly on military documents, to help reconstruct the institutional context in which soldiers moved – for instance, the details of formal discipline, and the relationship between officers and men. These documents are also useful for tracking the social profile of the army, and its changes over time. Military records, however, have much less to say about social dynamics at the lowest levels, about person-to-person interaction among the rank and file. Military authorities were concerned with soldiers' behavior mainly from the standpoint of obedience. And in their view, obedience was almost entirely a function of the officer-man relation. Even an average soldier, when properly 'handled' by their commanding officer, would be prepared to obey almost any order. The army, then, was concerned almost entirely with vertical connections, with how power was exerted from higher levels of the hierarchy onto lower levels. Horizontal connections – the relationships between soldiers – largely fell outside of their concerns.

Even where the authorities examined these relationships more closely (which usually happened only in the wake of a disciplinary breakdown), their findings are of limited value for our purposes. The army authorities, especially at the higher levels, were heavily influenced by the army's institutional biases and professional culture. They often operated on the assumption that soldiers shared the quasi-feudal warrior ethos of the officer corps, and its inflexible notions of martial honor.<sup>35</sup> This often led them to conclusions that can only appear strange to modern observers.<sup>36</sup> Many officers believed,

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<sup>35</sup> Martin Kitchen, *The German Officer Corps, 1890-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), 49-58.

<sup>36</sup> See Deist's remarks on the disconnect between soldiers and officers, "Military Collapse," 193.

for example, that flagging morale could be sustained by a more liberal distribution of medals and decorations. To deal with malcontents, officers were encouraged to make wider use of “honor punishments”, which included demotion and other symbolic shamings.<sup>37</sup> Accounts authored by authorities, moreover, show little appreciation for the fact that soldiers interact with officers differently than they interact with other men – because the former interaction is embedded in power relations in ways that the latter are not. As the work of modern anthropologists has made clear, “power-laden situations are nearly always inauthentic.”<sup>38</sup> When confronted by more powerful individuals, subalterns will rarely speak and act freely. Usually, they will avoid open conflict by adopting an outwardly accommodating and deferential manner. Military records, even if they could somehow be purged of all bias and personal prejudice, would still never provide more than a partial picture of social relations in the army. They show to us only the small piece of that world which soldiers reveal to their superiors.

As James Scott has said, “if we wish to recover more than just performance, we must move backstage where the mask can be lifted, at least in part.”<sup>39</sup> This study has therefore also relied on the contemporary accounts of soldiers themselves – meaning, letters, diaries, and (to a lesser extent) unpublished memoirs and recollections. These sources are not without problems of their own, of course. They are subject to the biases and distortions of their authors – who may omit references to events which do not fit with

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<sup>37</sup> See for instance, HSA-St, M30/1, “Deutsche Propagandatätigkeit durch Offizier geschrieben,” 2 Sep. 1918.

<sup>38</sup> James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 285.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 287.

their imagination of the war.<sup>40</sup> It is difficult, moreover, to know how representative such sources are. No historian, as critics point out, can survey no more than a fraction of all the letters written.<sup>41</sup> One way to compensate for this is to use them in combination with other sources. Wherever possible, I have tried to corroborate first-person sources with other kinds – newspapers, censorship and mood reports, political records, intelligence documents. Another response to these problems is to increase the volume of sources. In the course of my research, I have surveyed more than 90 different correspondence collections, along with letters included in censorship reports and police files. In all, these contain more than three thousand pieces of mail, from hundreds of different individuals. If we can find robust patterns across this base of evidence, across different units and social groups, this is at least strongly suggestive of a broader trend. In any case, statistical certainty is not paramount here. The aim is simply to identify some of the important features of social life in the finks – features that other sources cannot give us access to. We accept some of the difficulties inherent in first person sources in exchange for the amazing richness and detail they provide

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<sup>40</sup> For the most thorough remarks on this subject, see Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, *14-18*, 58.

<sup>41</sup> Ziemann, *War Experiences*, 12-13.

## Chapter 1: The Campaign of 1918

To those who study the war a century after the fact, the four years of the First World War can seem to be one long, undifferentiated slaughter. Timelines of the war are crowded with events: declarations of war and the signing of treaties, revolutions, elections, and innumerable new offensives. But all of this activity had seemingly little effect on the overall course of events. Victories on the battlefield (if such they could be called) brought the war no closer to a conclusion. From the perspective of the ordinary soldier, however, the years of the war looked very different from each other. The larger events of the war brought unpredictable and often radical changes to their daily lives. Brief highs of optimism and calm gave ways to lows of privation and danger. And the last year of the war was, for Germany, without a doubt the lowest point of the entire affair. By 1918, the events on the battlefield had reached a decisive moment. The high command, realizing the war could not be continued much longer, staked everything on one final, all-out offensive. The stakes were clear to all involved. If the offensives succeeded, then Germany would at last obtain the battlefield decision that it had sought since 1914. If they failed, there was no way that the war could be continued. The whole enterprise was over-ambitious, however. After three years of industrial war, Germany was at the end of its strength. It no longer possessed the resources – human, material, or moral – to sustain such an effort. The result was a human catastrophe, unprecedented even by the gruesome standards of the First World War.

The aim of this first chapter is to sketch out the events of the campaign, and to describe in some detail how those events were experienced by ordinary soldiers. In

particular, it seeks to illustrate how the style of warfare which prevailed over the last year of the war imposed particular hardships on rank and file soldiers. The point here is not to somehow validate the suffering of the soldiers who were involved, nor to insist that they deserve special attention or sympathy. The purpose, rather, is to frame the questions about combat motivation that this study is attempting to address – if German soldiers endured such terrible conditions, why did they go on?

### **The Campaign of 1918: The General's View**

The shape of events in 1918 ultimately derived from strategic decisions made by the high command at the end of 1917. Since the failure of the Schlieffen Plan, the German leadership had failed to agree on a clear set of war aims, or a single strategy for winning the war. Overall strategy had been pulled in different directions as personalities rose and fell within the high command. Such as it was, though, German strategy had favored the divide-and-conquer principle. It aimed to detach one or more of the Allied powers from the coalition, and so to change the overall balance of resources in Germany's favor.<sup>42</sup> At that point, negotiations could be opened from a position of strength. The internal collapse of the Russian Empire, which began in earnest in the spring of 1917, seemed to open up such a possibility. If Russia could be compelled to sign a separate peace, Germany could concentrate its forces in the west, either to finish off France and Britain, or to ward off any further offensives until the Allies were ready to

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<sup>42</sup> For an effective discussion of German grand strategy, see David Stevenson, *Cataclysm: The First World War as Political Tragedy* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 123-143.



come to terms. In reality, this possibility had vanished as soon as it appeared. On April 6, 1917, three weeks after the tsar had been forced from his throne, the United States had declared war on Germany, in response to Germany's resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare. With a population of nearly 100 million, and with the world's largest economy, the entry of the United States more than balanced out the loss of Russia. In the long term, it rendered a decisive German victory almost impossible, as even the most sanguine observers realized. Bolstered by the financial and human reserves of the United States, Germany would never be able to wear down the remaining Allies. It was Germany, rather, who must inevitably be worn down.

The German leadership was left with relatively few options. They could immediately open negotiations, in the hopes of reaching some kind of compromise settlement. They could wage a defensive war, in the hopes of fighting the Allies to a draw, or they could immediately go on the offensive, aiming to win a rapid success over Britain and France before the US had fully mobilized its resources.<sup>43</sup> All of the options carried risks, and the offensive option most of all, because it would require that Germany concentrate all of her remaining resources in one last effort. If the offensive miscarried, then defeat would be certain. Yet this was the course that Germany ultimately chose. This was due, in part, to the particular culture and values of the German officer corps, and particularly of the two men who had emerged as the army's de facto leaders, Paul von Hindenburg, who since August of 1916 had served as head of the General Staff, and Erich Ludendorff, the Quartermaster General. They considered death preferable to defeat,

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<sup>43</sup> See Dieter Storz, "'Aber was hätte anders geschehen sollen?' Die deutschen Offensiven an der Westfront 1918," in *Kriegsende: Ereignis, Wirkung, Nachwirkung*, eds. Jörg Duppler and Gerhard P Gross (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1999).

and considered themselves duty-bound to fight to the last.<sup>44</sup> For the most, part, though, this decision was a naked bid for political survival. Having helped to make the war, and having chosen to escalate it when a quick victory failed to materialize, the monarchy and the army had clearly tied their fortunes to the outcome of the war. In a political sense, the enormous destruction the war had caused could only be redeemed by a decisive military victory and the establishment of German hegemony over the continent.<sup>45</sup> If Germany were to lose the war, or even to settle for a status quo peace, it seemed clear that the old powers would be swept away.

Having decided upon an offensive strategy, the high command was left to decide how and where to strike. Operationally, the overriding goal was to secure a major victory quickly, before American soldiers could arrive in large numbers. Erich Ludendorff – by now the de facto head of the military, if not the empire – therefore decided upon a single powerful blow, aimed at the point where the British and French lines met. He believed a major breakthrough at this point could render the entire Allied position on the western front untenable. This was because the two allied forces had different strategic priorities, and would retreat along different paths. The French, whose primary objective was to cover their own capital, would fall back in a south-westerly direction, towards Paris. The British forces, by contrast, would have to retreat north-west towards the ports along the English Channel, which served as both their logistical base and their escape route back to

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<sup>44</sup> For the cult of honor in the officer corps generally, see Kitchen, *German Officer Corps*, 49-63; Avner Offer, “Going to War in 1914: A Matter of Honor?” *Politics & Society* 23 (1995). The attitude of the army’s leading figures is revealed particularly in their comportment during the final weeks of the Empire. Hindenburg and Ludendorff (among others) seriously advocated resistance “to the end,” in order to preserve the army’s honor. Michael Geyer, “Insurrectionary Warfare: The German Debate about a *Levee en Masse* in October 1918,” *Journal of Modern History* 73, no 3 (2001).

<sup>45</sup> Richard Bessel, “Mobilization and Demobilization in Germany, 1916-1919,” in *State, Society and Mobilization in Europe during the First World War*, John Horne ed, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 215.

Britain. Once the two armies were driven apart, the Germans could defeat them separately, and achieve the kind of decisive victory that had thus far eluded them. Many senior figures in the German high command expressed serious doubts about Ludendorff's plan. They simply did not believe that it was possible to achieve the kind of massive breakthrough that the plan envisioned. Neither side, they pointed out, had been able to produce such a breakthrough in the past. The Allied disposition of forces, moreover, seemed design to deal with such just a strategy. A high proportion of the Allied forces were held in reserve, behind the front. In the event of a German attack, these reserve formations could be quickly dispatched to reinforce any threatened sectors, using the dense network of railways in north-west France.<sup>46</sup>

In the event, their doubts would prove to be justified. The German attack, codenamed "Michael," was scheduled to begin on March 21<sup>st</sup>. Most of the army's remaining combat power had to been committed to the operation – indeed, it was one of the largest single operations of the war. 1.4 million men were involved, grouped into sixty seven divisions, along with 6,600 artillery pieces and 1,000 aircraft.<sup>47</sup> The initial phases of the offensive were highly successful, even more so than the Germans themselves had planned. By the end of the first day of fighting, the German spearheads had advanced to a depth of five kilometers, which was as far as the British had advanced in four months during the Battle of the Somme. By the end of the third day, the Germans had advanced up to 22.5 kilometers, along a front fifty kilometers wide.<sup>48</sup> They had, in addition, captured some 90,000 Allied soldiers. Measured against previous operations on

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<sup>46</sup> For a thorough discussion of German strategic planning and internal debates, see Martin Kitchen, *The German Offensives of 1918* (Stroud: Tempus, 2001), 22-44.

<sup>47</sup> Kitchen, *The German Offensives of 1918*, 62.

<sup>48</sup> Zabecki, *German 1918 Offensives*, 135-36; Kitchen, 74

the western front, it was undoubtedly the most successful offensive of the war. And yet the hoped-for breakthrough did not materialize. The British defenders, whom Ludendorff believed to be psychologically crushed, were able to regroup, and additional reinforcements were rushed in from other fronts, including twenty-three French divisions. At the same time, Ludendorff seemed to lose sight of his own plan for the battle. He committed his precious reserves to secondary operations along the flanks of the German advance, rather than to sustain the momentum of the principal thrust. By the end of March, the Allies had been able to bring the German advance to a halt. German casualties, moreover, had been exceedingly heavy. In a week of fighting they had lost more than 239,000 men, including a high proportion of their specially trained assault troops.<sup>49</sup>

The failure of the “Michael” operation meant the failure of the entire offensive strategy, as a few prescient observers were quick to point out. The Allied lines had not been broken; and with such a high proportion of its combat power consumed in the initial thrust, the German army now lacked the strength to launch another major attack. Ludendorff was slow to admit defeat however. “The Michael” offensive, he argued, had forced the Allies to commit their reserves. And now that their reserves were exhausted, even a limited German effort might conceivably produce a breakthrough.<sup>50</sup> Over the next several months, then, the German army launched a series of smaller blows, hoping to find some weak point in the Allied line. The next offensive, codenamed “Georgette”, was launched against British positions in Flanders. The immediate objective was to seize vital

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<sup>49</sup> David Stevenson, *With Our Backs to the Wall: Victory and Defeat in 1918* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2011), 68.

<sup>50</sup> Kitchen, *The German Offensives of 1918*, 97-98.

rail connections behind the Allied front and threaten the Channel ports, but they found these to be heavily defended. The main effort ground to a halt in less than a week, with the German armies having failed to secure any of their main objectives, and having again suffered heavy casualties. Ludendorff then shifted his main effort south, against French positions along the Aisne river. The third offensive, in late May, scored some initial successes reminiscent of Michael. In the first three days, German forces advance some thirty miles and threatened Paris. The advance was again halted, however, thanks in part to the contribution of American units which were now coming into action. The effort was renewed twice over the next six weeks, but to little effect. The Allies had begun to devise effective defenses against the new German tactics, such as the construction of broad defensive “zones” rather than rigid trench lines. The last of the German offensives, launched on July 15, was a complete failure. The main effort collapsed on the first day. On July 18<sup>th</sup>, the French struck back at the now over-extended German forces, in an operation often called the “Mangin Offensive”, after its principal architect. The attack recaptured much of the territory the Germans had won since May, and compelled the Germans to commit almost all of their remaining reserves. Ludendorff was still not yet ready to abandon his designs. Over the next several weeks, he contemplated fresh blows against the Allies, and even instructed his staff to draw up detailed operational plans.<sup>51</sup> All such operations were non-starters, however. Ludendorff simply had no more units with which to mount an attack.

In retrospect, it is clear that the Mangin Offensive formed the crux of the campaign of 1918. It marked the end of the German offensives, and the beginning of the

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<sup>51</sup> Kitchen, *The German Offensives of 1918*, 200, 220-21.

second main phase of the campaign, the great Allied counter-offensive. Over the last half of 1918, Allied strategy rested primarily in the hands of French general Ferdinand Foch, who had been promoted to the newly created position of “Supreme Commander of the Allied Armies” in the wake of the Michael offensive. Throughout the summer, Foch had sought an opportunity for a counterattack, believing that the Germans would eventually over-extend themselves. The Mangin Offensive was the first of these. A much larger and more deliberate counterstroke was launched in early August, against the massive bulge created by the first German offensive. The area was weakly defended, as the most of the remaining strength had been shifted further south, for the offensives in Champagne. The Allied attack, supported by over 400 tanks, rapidly pierced the German lines. 50,000 Germans were captured in the ensuing chaos. The Battle of Amiens, as it was called, was one of the greatest Allied successes of the entire war. In the wake of this victory, the Allied leaders began to contemplate a more ambitious strategy – what Foch called ‘the general offensive.’ Rather than limit themselves to local counter-attacks, the Allies would launch a series of offensives, in close succession, all along the front. The primary goal was not to force a deep breakthrough, which experience had shown was virtually impossible. The purpose, rather, was to wear down and disperse the German army, while preventing it from consolidating a defensive position. Despite the relative complexity of the scheme, and despite the logistical difficulties inherent in such a vast undertaking, this plan was successfully put into action. Between early August and the end of the war on November 11, the Allies were continuously on the offensives, launching scores of separate attacks. The principal effort was carried out by British and Commonwealth forces against the center of the German line, which formed a great curve between Verdun

and the English Channel. Subsidiary efforts were mounted by American and French forces against the south face of the bulge, and by Anglo-Belgian forces against its northern extremity.<sup>52</sup>

After the Battle of Amiens (which Ludendorff would refer to as “the black day of the German army” in his memoirs), the high command at length admitted that the war could no longer be won. But many high-ranking generals and politicians continued to believe that the war was not yet decisively lost. Ludendorff’s priority aim at this point was to manage a limited retreat, and to consolidate a new line of defense. If Germany could wage a protracted defensive struggle, there was still a chance that Britain and France, who were themselves close to exhaustion, would be prepared to accept a negotiated settlement. It was even conceivable that Germany might keep some of its gains in Eastern Europe, in exchange for the restoration of French and Belgian territory in the west.<sup>53</sup> The army was unable to make a stand, however. The best chance to do so came in late September, as the army fell back to a network of defensive positions known collectively as “The Hindenburg Line.” This position, whose construction had begun in the fall of 1916, was truly formidable. It consisted of overlapping networks of strong-points and machinegun nests, which in some places were ten miles wide. Ludendorff believed that the position could be held at least through the winter, but in the event it was breached within days. The Allies attacked the line at several points simultaneously – a

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<sup>52</sup> For the most comprehensive and up to date surveys of the Allied offensives and Allied strategy, see J.P. Harris, *Amiens to Armistice: The B.E.F. in the Hundred Days Campaign* (London: Brassey’s, 1998); David Stevenson, *With Our Backs to the Wall: Victory and Defeat in 1918* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2011); Robert Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory: French Strategy and Operations in the Great War* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2005).

<sup>53</sup> See the deliberations of the meeting at Spa, August 13 1918. Described in Harry Rudin, *Armistice 1918* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), 24-25; see also Vice Chancellor von Payer’s comments in mid-September, 37-38; or the remarks of Count Roedern and Ludendorff on October 17, 152.

move which the OHL lacked the reserves to counter.<sup>54</sup> Once the Hindenburg Line had been abandoned, the army had no choice but to fight a desperate fighting withdrawal, attempting to delay the Allied pursuit with rearguards in the hope that the main body might slip away and regroup. This also failed. Fighting now in the open, outside the protection of trenches and fortifications, the German rearguards were simply swept aside and the army was unable to shake the Allied pursuit. The army mounted ferocious defense in many places, especially on the flanks. Throughout the fall, the Germans continued to hold American attacks in the Argonne, and British attacks along the Belgian coast. But in other places, the Germans were in headlong retreat.

### **The Campaign of 1918: The Soldiers' View**

German military authorities believed that the campaign of 1918 was something of a relief for the ordinary soldier.<sup>55</sup> A return to the offensive, they argued, freed soldiers from the horror and filth of trench warfare. It gave them an “opportunity for action” – to take the fight to the enemy, rather than to passively endure Allied bombardment.<sup>56</sup> Most of all, it held out the hope that the deadlock could be broken. Soldiers realized that the war could not be ended through defensive action alone, no matter how successful. Only an offensive could force the enemy to come to terms. There is some truth to these arguments. Some soldiers did indeed express relief to be out of the trenches, and “in the

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<sup>54</sup> For a description of the breaching of the Hindenburg defenses, see J.P. Harris and Niall Barr, *Amiens to Armistice: The B.E.F. in the Hundred Days Campaign, 8 August to 11 November 1918* (London: Brassey's, 1998), 218-225.

<sup>55</sup> Erich Ludendorff, *Ludendorff's Own Story*, 163.

<sup>56</sup> Friedrich Altrichter, *Die seelischen Kräfte des Deutschen Heeres im Frieden und im Weltkriege* (Berlin, E.S. Mittler, 1933), 123-25.



open air.”<sup>57</sup> Many soldiers likewise held on to the belief that a successful offensive could bring a swift end to the war – even if they also knew that any offensive, successful or not, must surely involve heavy casualties.<sup>58</sup> But it is highly misleading to assert that the campaign of 1918 was somehow ‘easier’ than previous efforts. By almost any conventional way of measuring, this campaign was far more costly, and involved greater physical demands, than any which came before.

This fact becomes clear from the casualty figures alone. Between March 21, 1918 – the beginning of the German offensives – and the conclusion of the armistice, the German army would suffer 1.8 million casualties. This amounted to about 225,000 casualties per month, or between 5 and 10% of the total strength of the *Westheer*.<sup>59</sup> In both absolute and proportional terms, this was by far the highest rate of loss suffered during the entire war. It was in fact one of the highest rates of loss sustained by any army in modern military history. It is nearly twice as high as German monthly losses on the Eastern Front in 1943, at the height of the fighting on the Eastern Front in World War II. And it is two and a half times greater than British monthly losses during the Somme offensive.

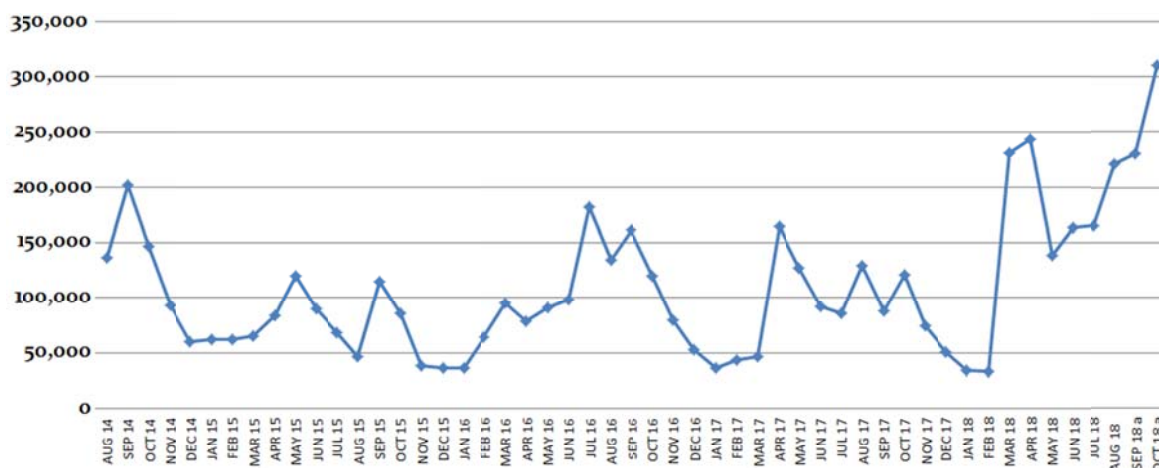
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<sup>57</sup> Hoover, Schetter, 14.

<sup>58</sup> BA-MA, RH/61 1035, Stimmungbericht 24 Feb. 1918.

<sup>59</sup> Through most 1918, the total number of German soldiers on the Western Front hovered around 3.5 million. After July 1918, it began to decline quickly, eventually plunging to about 2.5 million. See James McRandle and James Quirk, “The Blood Test Revisited: A New Look at German Casualty Counts in World War I,” *Journal of Military History* 70, no. 3 (Jul 2006), Table A1, 695-696.

**Graph 1 -- Total Casualties in the German Army on the Western Front, by Month, 1914-1918**



Source: Figures for August 1914 to July of 1918 are from *Sanitätsbericht über das Deutsche Heer im Weltkriege 1914/1918*, vol. 3 (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1934), Tafel 147-50. The figures for August 1918 are on page 60, übersicht 53. German casualties for September through November 1918 are not listed in the *Sanitätsbericht*, or in any other source of which I am aware. My figures here are based on the estimates made by James McRandle and James Quirk in "The Blood Test Revisited: A New Look at German Casualty Counts in World War I," *The Journal of Military History* 70, no. 3 (Jul. 2006). McRandle and Quirk base their estimates off of a comparison of different data sets.

In the most general sense, the high casualties suffered during the campaign of 1918 derived from the overall balance of forces between the two coalitions. From a purely economic perspective, the Allied powers enjoyed an enormous advantage over Germany and its confederates. At the beginning of the war, the combined GDP of the Allied nations was nearly triple that of the Central Powers. Over the course of the war, that gap would grow only wider, as additional countries joined the ranks of Germany's enemies. By 1918, total Allied GDP exceeded that of the Central Powers by nearly five times. The Allied powers, including their overseas colonies and possession, could draw on a population of some 1.27 billion inhabitants (70% of the earth's total population) to the Central Powers' 156 million.<sup>60</sup> Germany tried to compensate for these disadvantages

<sup>60</sup> Stephen Broadberry and Mark Harrison, "The Economics of World War I: an Overview," in *The Economics of World War I*, eds. Stephen Broadberry and Mark Harrison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 7-10.

by continually tapping new sources of strength. When reserves of manpower ran low, the state responded by expanding the age of service liability, instituting civilian conscription, and combing men out of hospitals, prisons, and non-critical industries. When materials ran low, they developed substitutes, and organized collection drives and conservation campaigns. By 1917, however, such reserves were drying up. The economy was facing total exhaustion. German production of armaments and war materials, which had more or less kept pace with Allied production, thereafter diverged. German production stagnated or declined, while that of the Allies continued to rise.<sup>61</sup> The size of the German army likewise peaked in the summer 1917, and declined steadily from then on.<sup>62</sup>

In practical terms, this meant that the German army was simply outnumbered. For a while, the Germans were able to mask their inferiority. After the collapse of Russia, the high command was able to transfer the bulk of its forces in Eastern and Southern Europe to the battlefields in France.<sup>63</sup> By concentrating its forces in this way, the German army had managed to achieve near-parity on the Western Front. On the eve of the Michael offensives, German armies in the West numbered about 3.4 million, while the Allied contingents counted 3.7 million.<sup>64</sup> This statistical parity was largely an illusion, however. For the Germans, there was no possibility of further reinforcement. They had committed virtually every combat-capable unit to the Western Front. And there were no additional recruits or reserves upon which they could draw. All German men of military age had

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<sup>61</sup> Kevin Stubbs, *Race to the Front: The Material Foundations of Coalition Strategy in the Great War* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2002), 123-134.

<sup>62</sup> *Sanitätsbericht über das Deutsche Heer im Weltkrieg 1914/1918*, v. III, (Berlin: Reichkriegsministerium, 1934) Tafel 147-150.

<sup>63</sup> See Giordan Fong, "The Movement of German Divisions to the Western Front, Winter 1917-1918," *War in History* 7, no. 2 (2000): 225-235.

<sup>64</sup> Zabecki, *The German 1918 Offensives*, 89, 91.

been called up by the middle of 1915.<sup>65</sup> Thereafter, the army could generate additional manpower only by calling up teenagers as they reached the minimum age of military service. But Germany had exhausted even this source of manpower, by prematurely calling up several draft classes in close succession. The next available class of recruits, the cohort of 1920, was composed of men who had not yet turned eighteen, and could not feasibly be called up until the fall of 1918.<sup>66</sup> The Allies, by contrast, still had significant reserves. They had hundreds of thousands of men deployed to secondary theaters in Southern Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, who could be recalled to Europe if necessary, and a further million and a half men in garrison and training units.<sup>67</sup> Most of all, they could count on a steady influx of fresh American recruits. At the prodding of its European allies, the United States began to accelerate its mobilization in early 1918, with spectacular results. In March of that year, there were a quarter of a million American soldiers in France. This would double by May and quadruple by July. At the armistice, the American Expeditionary Force had grown to more than 2 million, making it nearly as large as the entire German army by that point. By 1919, the Americans were prepared to have up to 5 million men in action.<sup>68</sup> After May of 1918, the margin of Allied superiority would grow rapidly. In April, German ‘rifle strength’ – that is, the number of combat

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<sup>65</sup> For the mobilization of German manpower resources, see Ernst von Wrisberg, *Erinnerungen an die Kriegsjahre im königlich preussischen Kriegsministerium: Heer und heimat, 1914-1918* (Leipzig: K.F. Kohler, 1921), 83-88.

<sup>66</sup> Ian Drury, “German Stormtrooper,” in *War on the Western Front: In the Trenches of World War I*, ed. Gary Sheffield (Oxford: Osprey, 2007), 30.

<sup>67</sup> War Office, *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire, 1914-1920* (London: H.M. Stationary Office, 1922), 65-75, 35.

<sup>68</sup> Ralph Haswell Lutz, *The Causes of the German Collapse in 1918* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1969), 63.

troops – actually exceeded that of the Allies for a brief period. By November, Allied rifle strength was nearly double that of Germany.<sup>69</sup>

Germany was even more heavily outnumbered in arms and equipment. In this respect, the Germans never even came close to parity. In March of 1918, the Allies outnumbered Germany in all of the principle weapons of war. Allied armies disposed of 25% more combat aircraft than their German counterparts, and 33% more artillery pieces. The greatest disparities were in the more high-tech weapons categories, which German industries lacked the resources to fully develop. German armies were at a three-to-one disadvantage in machine guns, a five to one disadvantage in motor vehicles, and a fifty-to-one disadvantage in tanks.<sup>70</sup> If logistics are factored in, the imbalance appears even starker. Germany not only had fewer artillery pieces than the Allies, it also produced far fewer shells.<sup>71</sup> This forced field commanders to sharply restrict shell consumption, and even with such measures in place, batteries often exhausted their reserves in the midst of battle.<sup>72</sup> Frustrated artillerymen observed that “the enemy has more than enough, while on our side... the answer is always ‘Conserve! Conserve!’”<sup>73</sup> The shells that were on hand were of increasingly inferior quality, because of rushed production, and shortages of the materials used to build fuses and detonators.<sup>74</sup> Many either failed to go off, or exploded while still in the tube, destroying the gun and often killing the crew. The guns

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<sup>69</sup> Leonard Porter Ayres, *The War with Germany: A Statistical Summary* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1919), 104.

<sup>70</sup> Roger Chickering, *Imperial Germany and the Great War, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 179.

<sup>71</sup> Stubbs, *Race to the Front*, 124; US Army, A.E.F General Staff, *Summary of Information*, no. 197 (Oct 15, 1918).

<sup>72</sup> BFZ, Pechthold, 180.

<sup>73</sup> DTA, 1751/II, 6.

<sup>74</sup> Second Division Historical Section, Army War College, *War Diaries of German Units Opposed to the Second Division* (Washington DC: Army War College, 1930), Vol. 1, 20<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, Doc. 87-88.

themselves were worn out from overuse, which diminished their range and accuracy. Thinned barrels were also more likely to burst. Overuse accounted for an estimated 17% of all artillery losses.<sup>75</sup> Lack of horse teams and motor transport meant that guns could not be relocated, and had to be abandoned. More than 4,000 pieces, amounting to a third of all German guns in the field, were captured intact by the Allies in 1918 alone.<sup>76</sup> Heavy losses forced the army to recommission retired models, and to press captured Russian pieces into service, which were of inferior quality.<sup>77</sup> This also complicated the supply of munitions, as more than fifty different calibers were in service by the end of the war.<sup>78</sup>

Every branch of service was facing similar shortages. Transportation was among the hardest hit. The army depended largely on horses for its transportation needs. But the animals suffered heavy losses from overwork and enemy fire, against which they had no defense. Of the 1.4 million horses mobilized by the army, 900,000 would ultimately die or be killed.<sup>79</sup> Most of those that remained were sick or broken down. Fodder was scarce – hayfields in Germany having been mostly converted to other purposes – meaning that horses had to be fed on leaves, reeds, stubble, even branches and twigs.<sup>80</sup> In many units, less than half of the horses were fit for work of any kind.<sup>81</sup> Large numbers were too weak to be moved, and had to be euthanized.<sup>82</sup> Horses were replaced by donkeys, mules, Russian cart ponies, and in some cases even cattle.<sup>83</sup> In other cases, men had to hitch

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<sup>75</sup> *Summary of Information*, no. 197, (15 Oct. 1918)

<sup>76</sup> *Summary of Information* no. 197, (15 Oct. 1918)

<sup>77</sup> HSA-St, M 30/1, “Erfahrungen der 14 R.D...,” 12 Jun. 1918.

<sup>78</sup> Holger Herwig, *The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914-1918* (London: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 256.

<sup>79</sup> Herwig, *The First World War*, 256.

<sup>80</sup> MKB, Stein, 21 Jan. 1918.

<sup>81</sup> DTA 260, 3 Sep. 1918; DTA 200, 2 Oct. 1918.

<sup>82</sup> DTA 200, 2 Oct. 1918.

<sup>83</sup> *Summary of Information*, no. 235, (22 Nov. 1918); see also Papers of Frank William Gent.

themselves to wagons after the draught animals collapsed.<sup>84</sup> Motor transport did not provide much relief. Germany had access to very limited supplies of crude oil, and these supplies had to be divided among the needs of the air force, the navy, and the motor vehicle fleet. The resulting shortages forced lorries to carry reduced loads,<sup>85</sup> and to reserve fuel “wholly for urgent tactical needs.”<sup>86</sup> Fuel rations sank to as low as 200 liters (~ 53 gallons) per month, even for heavy trucks, which was only enough for a few days of active operations.<sup>87</sup> Aircraft were placed under similar usage restrictions. A lack of fuel also meant less training time for pilots.<sup>88</sup>

Even service branches that made fewer logistical demands, like the humble infantry, suffered from crippling shortages. German arms industries could not produce enough machine guns to meet the rising needs of the army, and the weapons themselves were mechanically complex and prone to breakdown. This left most formations chronically short of the heavy weapons on which they relied for most of their firepower. In October of 1918, one divisional commander reckoned that his unit was short 165 machine guns – which was essentially its entire regular complement – as well as large quantities of mortars, rifles, and anti-tank weapons.<sup>89</sup> At that point, there was little point in replacing them, because there was not enough ammunition to operate the weapons at hand. The standard allotment of infantry ammunition was being handed out only to units where “most needed.” To reduce ammo expenditure, soldiers were ordered not to fire

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<sup>84</sup> DTA 1229, p. 80.

<sup>85</sup> Herwig, *The First World War*, 256.

<sup>86</sup> *Summary of Information*, no. 120, (30 Jul. 1918)

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> John Howard Morrow, *German Air Power in World War I* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 96-97.

<sup>89</sup> BA-MA, PH5 I/40, memo from AOK3, 27 Oct. 1918.

until the enemy had closed to short range. Soldiers were also reminded not to waste rounds by firing at airplanes, or at pigeons, rats, and other pests.<sup>90</sup> Nor were shortages limited to bullets. Virtually everything was in short supply. Field glasses and ranging equipment were gone.<sup>91</sup> Field headquarters were warned against composing orders that were “pointless or too long ... in light of the paper shortage.”<sup>92</sup> The paper thus saved was diverted to other purposes, like making bandages and field dressings.<sup>93</sup> Salvage parties were established to find and recover everything of value, including shell casings, ammunition crates, and uniforms.<sup>94</sup>

Economic shortages placed one kind of burden on soldiers. Tactical changes placed others on them. In planning for the offensives, the German authorities had to somehow overcome the tactical problems that had derailed every prior offensive on the Western Front, both German and Allied. Contrary to popular belief, breaking through the enemy’s forward defenses was not the primary problem. Experience had shown that, with a sufficient concentration of heavy artillery, the enemy’s front line could be breached. The problem lay in how to follow up that breakthrough. Realizing the vulnerability of single trench lines, both sides had responded by constructing multiple defense lines, and by holding units in reserve to respond to breakthroughs. A network of this kind could not be breached by a single conventional assault. It required a series of successive efforts, with pauses in between to bring forward the heavy artillery and fresh assault troops. In

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<sup>90</sup> *Summary of Information*, no. 213 (31 Oct. 1918) and no. 199 (17 Oct. 1918); Hoover, Box 19, Orders from 22 R.D., 17 Jun. 1918.

<sup>91</sup> BA-MA, PH5 I/40, memo from AOK3, 27 Oct. 1918.

<sup>92</sup> HSA-St, M 30/1 261, Wöchentliche Mitteilung Nr. 59, 4 Oct. 1918.

<sup>93</sup> Leo Van Bergen, *Before My Helpless Sight: Suffering, Dying, and Military Medicine on the Western Front* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 328.

<sup>94</sup> *Summary of Information*, no. 199 (17 Oct. 1918).



the meantime, the defenders could construct more trench lines, requiring still more attacks. Battles became interminable affairs, often lasting months, and consisting of hundreds of separate attacks and counterattacks. In response, Germany developed a new tactical system, often called “infiltration tactics.” Under this system, attacking forces that managed to pass through the defenders’ first line would not pause to wait for the artillery to catch up. Rather, they would press forward as fast as possible, for as long as they could go. They would largely forego the support of heavy weapons, in favor of man-portable weapons like the light machine gun. Nor would they wait for re-supply columns advancing from the rear. Food and other necessities would be provided from captured stores, or “appropriated” from the civilian population. If they encountered pockets of stiff resistance, they were to move around them and continue forward, rather than try and overcome them. The larger aim was to breach the enemy line before a response could be mounted, to compel the enemy to abandon their fixed defenses, and then to force a decisive engagement.<sup>95</sup>

From a military perspective, “infiltration tactics” were a creative response to the problems raised by trench warfare. But they also placed tremendous burdens on the men who had to put them into practice. Under this system, soldiers would be forced to march and fight for days, without relief, and without any significant pause for rest. They would also be forced to fight out in the open, without the protection of trenches and without artillery support. The army had fought on similar terms in the opening months of the war,

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<sup>95</sup> The most thorough description of “infiltration tactics,” and the evolution of this system over time, see Martin Samuels, *Doctrine and Dogma: German and British Infantry Tactics in the First World War* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992); see also Timothy Lupfer, *The Dynamics of Doctrine: The Changes in German Tactical Doctrine during the First World War* (Fort Leavenworth: Combat Studies Institute, US Army Command and General Staff College, 1981); Bruce Gundmudsson, *Stormtroop Tactics: Innovation in the German Army, 1914-1918* (New York: Praeger, 1989).

and suffered appalling losses as a result. Casualties in 1918 would be even worse, given the greater size of the armies involved, and given the multiplication of firepower between 1914 and 1918. At the outbreak, a British infantry division disposed of 24 machine guns. By 1918, it possessed 400.<sup>96</sup> The High Command was clearly aware that the costs of these tactics would be enormous, even if the operations were successful. It was a fact which they regarded with detachment, however. In his memoirs, Ludendorff defended himself against charges that he had been incautious with the lives of his men by callously remarking “war consumes men; that is its nature... That the large masses that were led into battle would suffer heavy casualties, in spite of all tactical counter-measures, was unfortunately a matter of course.”<sup>97</sup>

Even where the new tactics achieved some measure of operational success, they opened up unforeseen problems. As noted above, the offensives won comparatively large tracts of land. In so doing, however, they created several massive bulges in the German line, and so extended the front which the army was obliged to defend. At the same time, they produced enormous losses of men, causing the army to shrink. By July of 1918, the size of the *Westheer* had declined from more than 4 million to about 3.5 million.<sup>98</sup> With fewer men to defend more land, the only option was to keep units in the front line for longer and longer stretches. And as each new offensive was launched, the same units had to be used again and again. Of the 36 divisions which took part in the second offensive,

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<sup>96</sup> Philip J. Haythorpe, *The World War One Sourcebook* (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1992), 217.

<sup>97</sup> Erich von Ludendorff, *Ludendorff's Own Story, August 1914-November 1918: The Great War from the Siege of Liege to the Signing of the Armistice, as viewed from the Grand Headquarters of the German Army*, vol. II (New York: Harper and Brothers Press, 1919), 214.

<sup>98</sup> *Sanitätsbericht III*, table 147-150.

27 had already taken part in the first.<sup>99</sup> Of the 36 divisions that took part in the third offensive, only 8 were fresh.<sup>100</sup> Once the army had gone over to the defensive, and the total length of the front began to shorten again, the High Command hoped for some improvement. In fact the situation only grew worse, because the army continued to shrink. By October, the strength of the German armies on the Western Front had declined a further million, to just over 2.5 million.<sup>101</sup> By that time, 22 German divisions had been broken up to provide replacements for other units, while the men per division was reduced up to 25%.<sup>102</sup> Under ordinary circumstances, the army had deployed divisions on a rotational system. After serving a stint in the front line, units would be shifted to a rear area for rest and reconstitution. A unit already in reserve was then shifted back to the front line to take over for the departed unit. During the campaign of 1918, this system became increasingly difficult to maintain. Units in reserve had to be used to replace losses, or to plug holes unexpectedly caused by Allied attacks. There were accordingly fewer units to relieve units in the front line, which were left in combat indefinitely. In mid-July, the army still managed to retain some 45 fresh divisions in reserve. The number would fall to 30 by the end of the month, and under 20 by September. By October, the number of fresh divisions in reserve was effectively zero.<sup>103</sup> When, in early November,

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<sup>99</sup> Robert Foley, "From Victory to Defeat: The German Army in 1918," in *1918: Year of Victory: The End of the Great War and the Shaping of History*, ed. Ashley Elkins (Wollombi: Exisle Publishing, 2010), 77.

<sup>100</sup> Kitchen, *The German Offensives of 1918*, 134.

<sup>101</sup> Lutz, *Causes of the German Collapse*, 54-55.

<sup>102</sup> Lutz, *Causes of the German Collapse*, 82.

<sup>103</sup> *Why Germany Capitulated on November 11, 1918: A Brief Study Based on Documents in the Possession of the French General Staff* (Paris: Lang, 1918), 27.

the high command attempted to assemble several fresh divisions for use against revolutionaries at home, they found that none were available.<sup>104</sup>

The experiences of individual divisions varied widely, depending on many factors. In virtually all cases, however, their time in the front line increased dramatically. A survey of fifty German divisions revealed that, in the ninety days between mid-March and mid-June, they had spent thirty-nine days in the line on average. Over the next ninety days (mid-June to mid-Oct), the average had risen to fifty days. Ten of the fifty had spent more than sixty-five days in line, and some as many as eighty.<sup>105</sup> Men were not simply spending more days in the line. They were spending more days *continuously* in the front line, without break. In earlier periods of the war, commanders generally kept their units in the front line for 2-4 days where possible, and about seven at maximum.<sup>106</sup> In 1918, 12-20 days seems to have been typical, and much longer stints were hardly unheard of. Some units were continuously engaged for two or three months.<sup>107</sup> Even when units were relieved, they often received little appreciable rest. Units were moved to the rear, only to be immediately sent back into the line when some new attack materialized.<sup>108</sup> In other cases, units in rest areas found themselves overtaken by battle when Allied forces unexpectedly broke through the front lines.<sup>109</sup> This was relatively common, given that units in reserve were kept closer and closer to the line, so that they could be deployed

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<sup>104</sup> Scott Stephenson, *The Final Battle: Soldiers of the Western Front and German Soldiers of 1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 82.

<sup>105</sup> *Summary of Information*, no. 199 (17 Oct. 1918), "Number of Days in the Line of the Fifty Best German Divisions"

<sup>106</sup> Accord to John Ellis, standard policy was four days in the front line and two in reserve, before four of rest. John Ellis, *Eye-Deep in Hell: Trench Warfare in World War I* (London: Croom-Helm 1976), 28. Soldiers' accounts support this, though there were some local variations in this policy. See for instance MKB, Stein, 21 Jan. 1918.

<sup>107</sup> BA-MA, PH I/40, memo from AOK 18, 1 Nov. 1918.

<sup>108</sup> BfZ, Pechthold, 195-96; *Summary of Information*, no. 198 (16 Oct. 1918).

<sup>109</sup> Hoover, Schetter, 36.

quickly in case of emergency. Some ‘rest’ areas were only a kilometer or two behind the front, well within range of enemy artillery, and far too close to the action to allow soldiers much to decompress.<sup>110</sup> Even where soldiers were not actually called on to fight, their rest periods were constantly disrupted by alarms and tactical alerts. One man’s unit, near to the front in the Ardennes sector, was put on alert four times in a single day – each time assembling and marching forward, before ultimately being recalled.<sup>111</sup> Some were held in readiness for days or even weeks at a stretch. There were many false alarms and practice alarms, “in all weather and all hours,” to the great annoyance of the troops.<sup>112</sup> Over time, constant alerts could be almost as taxing as combat itself. One soldier, after several weeks of alarms, recorded that “the officers and men were quite exhausted, on account of the heat, [and] the continuous battle-readiness in weak positions.”<sup>113</sup>

Soldiers who were nominally at rest were very often also diverted to other tasks, because there was no one else on hand to do the job. This included the construction of roads, railways lines, defensive positions, and other labor-intensive tasks.<sup>114</sup> The high command did what it could to prevent the total exhaustion of combat units. It repeatedly reminded commanders that rest periods should be a minimum of three or four weeks, and that resting units should be kept at some distance from the front.<sup>115</sup> But at the same time, the high command often conceded that such goals were hardly feasible, in light of the grave strategic situation and general lack of reserves. Army-level orders from summer

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<sup>110</sup> BfZ, Lips, 3 Oct 1918.

<sup>111</sup> BfZ, Blecher, 5 Nov. 1918.

<sup>112</sup> DTA, 402.3, 14 Mar. 1918.

<sup>113</sup> BfZ, Pechthold, 184-85.

<sup>114</sup> *Summary of Information*, no. 205 (23 Oct. 1918); *War Diaries of German Units Opposed to the Second Division*, vol. 1, 20<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, Doc. # 74; HSA-St, M 33/2, telegram 25 Oct. 1918.

<sup>115</sup> BA-MA, PH5 I/40, memo 17 Mar. 18; *Summary of Information*, no. 205, (23 Oct. 1918).

and fall of 1918 warn commanders that “it cannot be expected that the divisions now at the front can be relieved in the foreseeable future.”<sup>116</sup> Instructions to divisional commanders make it clear that, when units were granted a respite, the primary task is to “make the troops available for use again as soon as possible.”<sup>117</sup>

Being in the front lines for such extended periods put soldiers under tremendous strain. A soldier in the front line was not literally constantly fighting, of course. Lulls developed between larger set-piece attacks, and tacit truces occasionally developed.<sup>118</sup> But any soldier in the front lines, or even near them, was in constant danger, from enemy raids and surprise attacks, as well as from snipers, artillery, aircraft, and other long-range weapons. Even the quietest sectors of the front were not free from danger. Allied commanders made it a point to regularly harass the enemy with air and artillery attacks, if for no other purpose than to remind them that “there’s a war on.”<sup>119</sup> The constant risk of attack kept soldiers in a state of nervous tension and general stress. The general stress of combat was compounded by the particular nature of combat during this stage of the fighting. Danger was not only constant, it was unpredictable. Most of the casualties were inflicted by long-range weaponry, by an opponent who could not be seen.<sup>120</sup> Such weapons could strike a man at any time, with little or no warning. From the soldier’s point of view, such strikes could not be rationalized.<sup>121</sup> They appeared to be entirely random, as a bolt from a blue. Nerves were further frayed by the over-use of stimulants,

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<sup>116</sup> BA-MA, PH5 I/40, memo to AOK 9, 5 Aug. 1918.

<sup>117</sup> BA-MA, PH5 I/40, memo to Oberkommando HG Kronprinz, 7 Sep. 1918.

<sup>118</sup> Tony Ashworth, *Trench Warfare, 1914-1918: The Live and Let Live System* (Houndsmills: Macmillan, 1980).

<sup>119</sup> Ashworth, *Trench Warfare*, 94-96.

<sup>120</sup> *Sanitätsbericht III*, 71.

<sup>121</sup> Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, 28-29.

particularly coffee and tobacco. Such items were liberally consumed in every army, but particularly so in the German army, where they were utterly ubiquitous.<sup>122</sup> Stimulants helped to suppress the appetite, which was important for men in the front line, where the delivery of meals was irregular at best. They also helped to keep men awake and alert through the long hours of exertion. Men in the front lines rarely had opportunity to sleep. Most of a unit's available strength had to be held in readiness against attack, or to serve as guards and sentries. Usually a man could expect to snatch no more than a few hours of sleep, at odd times, and frequently interrupted by artillery fire and perimeter alarms.<sup>123</sup> Even this was impossible in particularly active areas. Men routinely went two or three days without sleep, and in some cases even longer.<sup>124</sup>

Such strains could not be borne indefinitely. During the Second World War, military psychiatrists in several nations studied the effect of prolonged combat. These studies (and many others conducted since) generally agreed that, past a certain point, constant combat rapidly leads to physical and psychological collapse. Perhaps the most well-known of these studies, that conducted by American psychiatrists Swank and Marchand, found that after sixty days of combat 98% of surviving soldiers had become psychiatric casualties, while the remaining 2% had shown signs of psychopathy before entering combat. Other studies arrived at slightly different timelines, but those details do not matter a great deal. The point is that humans have limits of physical and mental endurance, and that German soldiers were being pushed up against those limits in 1918.

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<sup>122</sup> Soldiers received a daily ration of cigarettes and cigars. See BA-MA, RH/61 1035, "Stimmungsbericht – Verplegung," 23 Jun. 1918.

<sup>123</sup> See for instance, Hoover, Schetter, 10.

<sup>124</sup> See BfZ, Ehlers, 24 Jul. 1918.

In the short-term, the stresses of combat were likely to manifest themselves in nervous exhaustion, what later generations of psychiatrists would call “combat fatigue.” The symptoms were instantly recognizable to any experienced soldier. The facial features became shrunken and distorted – “disturbed,” as many soldiers described it.<sup>125</sup> They became slow-witted and unresponsive, indifferent to their surroundings, and often unable to speak.<sup>126</sup> A period of genuine rest, away from the front, worked some recovery, but rarely a total one. Over time, more serious and long-lasting problems began to develop. Some men simply snapped and became totally unable to function – classical cases of “shell shock” or (as German doctors often referred to it), “war neurosis.” German military doctors treated more than 600,000 such cases during the war, which amounted to about 9% of all German casualties suffered in the war.<sup>127</sup> We cannot determine exactly what proportion of cases was reported during the last year of the war, but anecdotal evidence suggests that the incidence was high. Soldiers’ letters are filled with accounts of men who “lost their composure.” Men formerly regarded as “outstanding soldiers” and having “nerves of steel” were discovered by comrades rolling around on the ground like dogs, babbling unintelligibly, or kneeling and praying out in the open, fully exposed to enemy fire.<sup>128</sup> There were moreover, a great number of cases that went unreported because men feared to seek treatment, or who were turned away by military doctors, many of whom considered them malingerers.<sup>129</sup> Other men, rendered unable to function, became casualties before the men in their unit could get help. This was the case with one

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<sup>125</sup> BfZ, Pechthold, 32.

<sup>126</sup> DTA 1040/II, 23 Mar. 1918.

<sup>127</sup> *Sanitätsbericht* III, 145.

<sup>128</sup> BfZ, Pechthold, 38-40; DTA, 1229, 9.

<sup>129</sup> Paul Lerner, *Hysterical Men: War, Psychiatry, and the Politics of Trauma in Germany, 1890-1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 157-58.



unfortunate *Unteroffizier*, who began showing strange symptoms after a particularly difficult stretch of fighting. His men tried to help, but had no idea what to do with the man, and ended up writing on his behalf to a nervous ward. They were informed that only a few men were admitted each month, and their officer was gassed before he could be admitted.<sup>130</sup>

Many men developed symptoms which never became totally debilitating, and which were never formally diagnosed, but were nonetheless serious. Most often, these men suffered from emotional or mood related problems, though the range of symptoms was vast. One particularly common symptom was “flashbacks,” the recurrent and uncontrollable intrusion of past memories, usually of combat or some other stressful event, into present consciousness. For many men, these were every-day occurrences.<sup>131</sup> Others experienced just the opposite – memory loss, and a general decline in mental function. Some soldiers experienced this as a primarily internal phenomenon. They became less reflective, more dominated by need and habit.<sup>132</sup> In more severe cases, even physical function was impaired. One soldier described this as “a worrying, indifferent feeling, in which one forgets even food, drink and sleep.”<sup>133</sup> Others developed a baffling indifference to danger. Such men “went about their business, completely calm and serene, while shells exploded nearby.”<sup>134</sup> Over extended periods, far-reaching personality changes could occur. Bouts of depression or violent outbursts were common.<sup>135</sup> Other changes were not so easy to characterize. Men were simply different than they were

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<sup>130</sup> BfZ, Lips, 20 Apr. 1917.

<sup>131</sup> BfZ, Ehlers, 15 Jul. 1917.

<sup>132</sup> DTA 1221, 31 May 1918.

<sup>133</sup> BfZ, Lips, 1 Apr. 1917.

<sup>134</sup> Diary of Franz Halpap, 30 Apr. 1916.

<sup>135</sup> BfZ, Pechthold, 127.

before. Such changes were particularly noticeable to family and old friends, who were reunited with soldiers after a long time apart. “Wenzel came home yesterday on 14 days leave,” one woman wrote, “but how thin he has become, and how much his character has changed.” How, exactly, he had changed, she does not say. Among those soldiers who had served for any significant period of time, relatively few were altogether unchanged. In a letter home, one soldier downplays his recent bouts of nervousness, reasoning that “everyone who has been under fire for a long time ... has suffered from it.”<sup>136</sup>

The general hardships of combat were made worse by the difficulties involved in a “war of movement.” Since the end of 1914, the war in the west had been almost entirely static. Neither side had succeeded in moving the front more than a few kilometers one way or the other, even through the most massive attacks. The German offensives succeeded in restoring mobility to the battlefield, at least by the standards of the First World War. Between March of 1918 and the end of the war, the front line shifted several hundred kilometers – first as the Germans pushed west, and then as the Allies drove them back, towards the German border. As the Germans ought to have remembered from 1914 and the failure of the Schlieffen Plan, mobile warfare imposed a new set of hardships on soldiers, which were in many ways worse than those involved in trench fighting. Mobile warfare required soldiers to march and carry equipment for long distances, and to live and fight out in the open. The German army, which had been sedentary for so long, was poorly suited to these tasks. Many soldiers no longer had the physical stamina to undertake long forced marches.<sup>137</sup> They lacked adequate clothes and equipment for field

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<sup>136</sup> MKB, Schütz, 14 Jun. 1918.

<sup>137</sup> German Army, *Die Rückführung des Westheeres* (Berlin, 1919), 4.

operations. To conserve on cloth, German uniforms had been cut progressively shorter, and made from *Ersatz* materials like denim and corduroy, which offered less protection against cold and rain.<sup>138</sup> Many field tents had been destroyed, or scrapped to provide material for airships and aircraft. Those that remained lacked waterproof linings, because of an acute shortage of rubber.<sup>139</sup> The same was true of raincoats and ground rolls. Allied prisoners found, to their surprise, that their captors were most interested in obtaining their tents and clothing, even trading precious bread rations for them.<sup>140</sup> Footwear was especially lacking. Because of leather shortages, there were not enough pairs of infantry boots to replace those that had been worn out in the summer campaigns. Those that were available were often cobbled together from scraps, and had soles made from wood or cloth.<sup>141</sup> Those who passed by fresh battlefields were often struck by the fact the English corpses were invariably unshod, “as if they had never had shoes.”<sup>142</sup>

Mobile operations also raised complex logistical problems. One advantage to static warfare was that it made supplying the troops in the field relatively easy. Since the front did not move, an elaborate network of light railways and supply bases could be built up just behind the front. Once the fighting became mobile, however, soldiers moved away from their bases, and the link between front and rear became tenuous. To reach the troops, supplies had to be transported long distances in carts and wagons over roadless battlefields. Many shipments failed to arrive, or simply never caught up to the troops they

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<sup>138</sup> Herbert Bayard Swope, *Inside the German Empire* (London: Constable and Co., 1917), 336.

<sup>139</sup> HSA-St, M 30/1, “Erfahrung der 14 R.D. aus den Angriffskämpfen...”

<sup>140</sup> Memoirs of Charles D. Dermody, Chapter 5.

<sup>141</sup> BfZ, Blecher, Nov 3 1918

<sup>142</sup> DTA 1083, 91-92.

were intended for.<sup>143</sup> Soldiers could sometime obtain food and fodder by foraging, but the food could rarely be prepared. Field stoves and cookware were in short supply, and in any event were mostly useless because there was no fuel to operate them. Water was a particular problem. In the heavily fertilized fields of northern France, the ground water was usually undrinkable. Fresh water could only be obtained through a laborious process of purification.<sup>144</sup> This was possible under the condition of trench warfare, as large semi-permanent purification stations could be established close to the front. When the fighting became mobile, however, soldiers had to drink whatever they could find. Many resorted to drinking fouled rainwater that had collected in shell craters. Others walked miles to use village pumps, which were a favorite target for Allied planes and artillery, and toiled the water back to their positions. Desperate men carried the water in steel helmets or discarded fuel canisters.<sup>145</sup>

Besides the bare necessities, soldiers also missed the many minor comforts which positional warfare had made possible. When the front was largely immobile, soldiers were able to expand and improve their positions, often displaying an astonishing energy and ingenuity. Behind the trenches, soldiers planted vegetable gardens and leveled football fields. And in the trenches themselves, dugouts were transformed into functioning homes. They often boasted separate quarters for living, sleeping, and writing, and were fitted with electric lights, doors, windows, and furniture taken from nearby

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<sup>143</sup> These problems would be particularly acute during the Michael operation. See Kitchen, *The German Offensives of 1918*, 94.

<sup>144</sup> Great Britain War Office, *The German Army Handbook of 1918* (London: Frontline, 2008), 137-38.

<sup>145</sup> DTA 1229, 81-82.

villages.<sup>146</sup> When Allied soldiers began occupying these positions, they were often astonished at their luxury: “some of the quarters they had underground were wonderful. Huge dugouts furnished with Queen Anne chairs, pianos, paintings, and oriental rugs and everything they could pillage. They surely must have been living in style while we battered at their trenches.”<sup>147</sup> At the same time, the army was able to establish a series of regular rest camps near the front lines. Villages near to the front adapted their economies to meet the needs of the soldier population, and became *de facto* military towns.<sup>148</sup> Soldiers could easily visit rear areas to purchase supplies, watch films, and visit the regimental library, not to mention drink, gamble, patronize the brothel, and pursue other more traditional soldierly recreations.<sup>149</sup> The extent of such comforts should not be exaggerated – even at its best, trench life was dirty and unpleasant. But such comforts were psychologically important, however minor they may appear to us. They provided soldiers with some sense of control over their environment.<sup>150</sup> In the campaign of 1918, they were a distant memory for most. Soldiers could rarely count on a night with a roof over their heads. Few units were equipped with tents, and most of the structures were destroyed in the fighting (Allied gunners made a point of destroying the rest, solely to deprive the Germans of shelter). Most soldiers slept on the ground, or in shell craters covered with grass, boards, or pieces of corrugated iron.<sup>151</sup> They considered themselves

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<sup>146</sup> DTA 1229, 79; Theodor Herzig, *Die Tagebücher des Theodor Herzig: Aufzeichnung aus dem Ersten Weltkrieg*, ed. Christian Leffeldt (Gelnhausen: Wagner, 2006), 28.

<sup>147</sup> Letters of Walter Lockard [private collection], 18 Aug. 1918; Diary of A.W. Miller [private collection] 3 Oct. 1918.

<sup>148</sup> See for instance the description offered by Ernst Jünger, *Storm of Steel* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 23-33.

<sup>149</sup> For an overview of some of the comforts offered in the rear, see Hoover WWI Collection, Box 8.

<sup>150</sup> Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 350-55.

<sup>151</sup> See Hoover, Shetter 24-30.

lucky if they were able to find the ruins of some peasant cottage or animal stall in which to shelter; old campaigners knew that sleeping with animals staved off frostbite.<sup>152</sup>

Deteriorating living conditions contributed to the spread of disease. While the levels of sickness had been high throughout the war, for most of the war military doctors had at least prevented the outbreak of catastrophic epidemics. Typhus, cholera, diphtheria and the other great killers of pre-modern wars had been largely held under control. Mortality also had been held down. Over the course of the war, around 7% of soldiers reported sick each month – significant but not debilitating, and lower than the comparable rates among the civilian population. And only about 1% of sick cases died.<sup>153</sup> This situation would change rapidly in the summer and fall of 1918, with the onset of the “Spanish flu,” an extraordinarily lethal variant of ordinary influenza, and the worst pandemic since the Black Death. The disease struck in two distinct waves, the first in the summer of 1918 and the second in the fall. Based on the evidence available, it seems reasonable to suggest that there were some 1 million cases in the *Westheer*, of whom perhaps 10 – 20,000 died.<sup>154</sup> The death rate seems to have been somewhat higher in Germany than elsewhere. Some experts suggested that was the result of exhaustion and malnutrition among the German troops, though this remains disputed. Declining nutrition and health certainly played a role in the simultaneous resurgence of other diseases though. Typhus, which had been brought under control early in the war, emerged as a

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<sup>152</sup> DTA 1084, 2 Sep. 1918.

<sup>153</sup> About 166,000 German soldiers died of disease during the war. Van Bergen, *Before my Helpless Sight*, 140-41. The total number of sick cases in the German army was 14.6 million. *Sanitätsbericht* III, 19.

<sup>154</sup> This is a conservative estimate. In June and July of 1918 alone, there were more than 500,000 cases reported in the *Westheer*. *Sanitätsbericht* III, 122. A second a more powerful wave of influenza struck in about mid-September. No figures exist for this period, but the smaller American army gives at least some point of reference. Between Sep 15 and 8 Nov 1918, there were 316,000 cases of the flu, and nearly 10,000 deaths. Ayres, *Statistical Summary*, 126.

serious problem again in 1918.<sup>155</sup> Rancid rations led to widespread digestive problems. Some whole units were infested with worms and parasites.<sup>156</sup>

It is worth remembering, too, that the men who were fighting in 1918 had already lived through three years of war, and that those years had taken on a toll on their bodies. This was perhaps most clearly apparent with the youngest recruits, the eighteen and nineteen year old soldiers who had only recently been called to the colors. These young men had come to maturity during the lean war years. During their primary years of growth, their average caloric intake had declined to half of its pre-war level, and their diets lacked protein and other nutrients.<sup>157</sup> Many had been employed in heavy labor from the age of fourteen or fifteen, thanks to relaxed regulations on child-labor laws. These soldiers were up to 25% lighter than pre-war draftees, and according to some studies, shorter as well.<sup>158</sup> By pre-war standards, many of these men would have been deemed physically unfit for service.<sup>159</sup> Training instructors despaired of turning these boys into competent soldiers, pointing out that many of them could “barely lift a rifle.”<sup>160</sup> American and British soldiers could only regard such boys with surprise and pity.

The older veterans had greater physical endurance, but the war had often left their bodies badly damaged. More than five million men were wounded during the war.

Leaving aside those who died of their wounds, the large majority of these were returned

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<sup>155</sup> Zabecki, *German 1918 Offensives*, 276.

<sup>156</sup> Peter Hart, *1918: A Very British Victory* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2008), 304.

<sup>157</sup> Chickering, *Imperial Germany and the Great War*, 143.

<sup>158</sup> Chickering, *Imperial Germany and the Great War*, 123.

<sup>159</sup> In the pre-war era, each cohort contained more than twice as many men as the army actually needed to maintain the size of the army. With such a surplus of recruits, recruitment boards often enforced fairly strict physical requirements, especially relating to size and strength. See the description in Hoover, Abel, no. 237.

<sup>160</sup> Wrisberg, *Heer und Heimat*, 19.

to military service – no less than 75%.<sup>161</sup> Many men would be wounded multiple times, a fact which the army acknowledged by introducing a new medal which honored such men. To qualify for the medal's second class, one had to be wounded three times, and six times for the third class. Such men were not too difficult to find. A single company contained thirty such men.<sup>162</sup> Ernst Jünger was famously wounded 14 times. The luckless Ernst Ruh was discharged after being wounded repeatedly; but within months he was redrafted, re-examined and found fit for service, and posted to his former company.<sup>163</sup> Many wounds were minor, of course, but most left some lasting effect. Lung damage, suffered as a result of chest wounds or gas inhalation, rarely healed completely. This limited cardiovascular endurance, and often led to heart trouble, because of the increased strain on the circulatory system and the thickening of the blood.<sup>164</sup> Wounds to the extremities, which were the most common category of wound, often limited mobility or motor function. Other wounds left lasting pain. This was often the case with wounds caused by shrapnel and shell fragments. These caused jagged wounds to flesh and organs that rarely healed properly.<sup>165</sup> Injuries were often made worse because they were not properly treated. As the military situation became critical, men were turned out of hospitals and dressing stations before they had recovered. One man was sent back to front after only ten days, despite having been concussed and partly buried by the nearby detonation of a nearby artillery shell.<sup>166</sup> *Musketier* Zuckmeyer was sent back to the front almost immediately after being blown off a coaling tower and falling three stories, and

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<sup>161</sup> *Sanitätsbericht* III, 62.

<sup>162</sup> HSA-St, M468 Bd 1-2, Stammrolle 1/180.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, #604.

<sup>164</sup> Van Bergen, *Before My Helpless Sight*, 176.

<sup>165</sup> Van Bergen, *Before My Helpless Sight*, 171-72.

<sup>166</sup> MKB, Schütz, 14 May 1917.



despite his protests that he could hardly walk.<sup>167</sup> Another was sent back to the front despite severe wounds to his lung and foot; he was not allowed to speak at the examination.<sup>168</sup> Such examples could be multiplied endlessly. The point is that these men were falling apart. Years of fighting had left them battered and broken, and ill-equipped to deal with the kind of strains that they were placed under.

In earlier periods of the war, soldiers would discuss which battles had been the worst. And no two soldiers, it seemed, were of the same opinion on the subject. For every soldier who insisted that Third Ypres had been the low point of the war, there were a dozen others who would argue that the fighting there had been “nothing” compared to Arras, or Bapaume, or Douaumont. Countless hours were spent in these debates, in minute comparisons of the difficulty of the terrain or the weight of the Allied bombardment.<sup>169</sup> By the summer of 1918, however, these discussions were over. By then, virtually everybody believed that the last phase of the war was by far the worst. Even the most experienced veterans – men who had been in the line since 1914 – admitted that the recent fighting “puts everything I have seen up till now in the shadows.”<sup>170</sup> Their explanations rarely pointed to a single feature of the fighting. They tended, rather, to cite the combination of hardships the fighting involved – the heavy casualties, the physical strain, the supply problems, the ever-increasing periods in the front line, the dwindling hope of victory. Alone, any of these might have been tolerable. In combination, and over such a long period of time, they were “simply unbearable.”<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Van Bergen, *Before My Helpless Sight*, 355.

<sup>168</sup> BA-MA, RH/61 1035, “Stimmungsbericht,” 31 Aug. 1918.

<sup>169</sup> See for instance BfZ, Pechthold, 66.

<sup>170</sup> BfZ, Lips, 21 Aug. 1918.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 18. Aug 1918

Remarks like these confront us with difficult questions about motivation. If soldiers were clearly knew how bad the situation was, how did they find the strength to continue? With German defeat increasingly inevitable, how did they justify their personal sacrifices? And given the likelihood of their own death or maiming, how did they make sense of their participation in the war? In other words, why did they continue to fight? These are questions that I will begin to take up in the next chapter.

## Chapter 2: The End of the German Army

The last chapter described, in some detail, the terrible hardships the German army endured over the last year of the war. And it left us with questions about motive. If conditions were so bad, why did soldiers keep on fighting? To begin to form answers to these questions, we need to possess a clearer understanding of how soldiers reacted to their circumstances. Did these men fight unwillingly? Were there signs of resistance and refusal among soldiers? If so, what form did they take – shirking, desertion, refusal to obey orders, outright insurrection? And on what scale did such behaviors occur? Did the army approach the point of internal collapse? Or was none of this the case? Did the army go on fighting to the end? How we answer these questions will obviously set the terms for our discussions about morale and motive.

Historians have not formed any clear idea about the state of the German army during the last months of the war, however. The problem is not so much that they actively disagree with one another about the shape of events. The problem, rather, is that the end of the war simply fell out of our historical consciousness – leaving many of the key details in this process unresolved. It seems rather surprising that the end of the war should have been forgotten in this way, both because of its importance to larger narratives to the war, and because of its connection to other important questions about inter-war Germany and the rise of National Socialism. How and why this forgetting happened is rooted in the complex political debates about how the defeat had happened, and who was responsible for it. Historians' efforts to reconstruct the events leading up to defeat were, at first, an extension of these debates. Historians would construct radically different narratives,

depending on their political affiliations. And because of the way that subsequent events unfolded, these disagreements were never sorted out. The defeat of 1918 became politically sensitive territory, where historians were unwilling or unable to venture.

This chapter will attempt to sort out these debates, as a necessary preliminary to understanding individual motives. The aim is to untangle the threads of politics and memory surrounding the defeat of 1918, and to establish a more empirically grounded narrative of events. In general terms, I argue that while the army was showing certain signs of strain, acts of resistance were quite rare – rarer than most accounts would have it. Up until the last days of the war, the army was still more or less intact, and still capable of offering significant resistance.

### **The Politics and History of Defeat**

A casual student of the First World War would probably suspect that there would be a considerable literature on 1918. The historiography of the war in general is enormous, and seemingly every subject and period is covered in exhaustive detail. There are hundreds of books and articles devoted to the causes of the war, for instance, and a similar number devoted to the great trench battles of 1916.<sup>172</sup> A determined search will turn up only a handful of books on the last year of the war, however. And among these,

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<sup>172</sup> According to one of the most recent bibliographies, since 1970 more than 250 books have appeared which focus on the war's origins. Robin Higham and Dennis Showalter, eds., *Researching World War I: A Handbook* (Wesport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2003), 10-21.

only a single one is devoted to the German experience specifically.<sup>173</sup> If we consult the many general histories of the war, we find the same kind of pattern. Even the most exhaustive histories pass over the end of the war in a few pages. John Keegan's *The First World War*, now perhaps the standard text on the war, spends 175 pages on the first five months of the fighting, and only 22 on the last year.<sup>174</sup> These histories, moreover, are highly selective in the details they include. They mention the climatic battles in the mid-summer, and then seem to jump forward to the conclusion of the armistice and the drafting of the peace treaty. The actual defeat of the army seems to vanish. It is almost as if, as Michael Geyer has put it, "a month or two in the calendar of 1918 are missing."<sup>175</sup>

To the extent that historians have examined the events of the last months, they have reached very different conclusions. Some argue that while the army had been worn down in the last battles, its discipline and its fighting spirit remained unbroken.

According to K.D. Erdmann, for instance, "the German army in its entirety [remained]

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<sup>173</sup> Until very recently, only a handful of volumes covered the last year of the war specifically, and these were primarily narrative rather than analytical works. These included John Toland, *No Man's Land: 1918, The Last Year of the Great War* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1980); Joseph Gies, *Crisis 1918: The Leading Actors, Strategies, and Events in the German Gamble for Total Victory on the Western Front* (New York, Norton: 1974); and John Terraine, *To Win a War: 1918, the Year of Victory* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1978). Only within the last few years has the end of the war been the object of scholarly analysis. Three volumes have appeared on the subject, including Ashley Elkins, ed., *1918: Year of Victory* (Exisle Publishing, 2011); David Stevenson, *With Our Backs to the Wall: Victory and Defeat in 1918* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2011); and Jörg Duppler and Gerhard Paul Gross, eds., *Kriegsende 1918: Ereignis, Wirkung, Nachwirkung* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1999). Of these, none focuses on the German experience specifically, and none place particular emphasis on the very last months of the war. Beyond these books, one can only consult histories of specific battles, histories of the armistice, or the memoirs of some of the principle participants.

<sup>174</sup> John Keegan, *The First World War* (New York: Knopf, 1998).

<sup>175</sup> Michael Geyer, "Insurrectionary Warfare: The German Debate about a *Levée en Masse* in October 1918," *The Journal of Modern History* Vol. 73, no. 3 (Sep. 2001): 461.

cohesive until its demobilization.”<sup>176</sup> Others insist that by the time the armistice was concluded, the army was in the process of “disintegrating,” or “quite literally falling apart.”<sup>177</sup> Proponents of this latter view offer different explanations for how and why the army collapsed. One position holds that the army was essentially destroyed from without, reduced to a “spider’s web of fighters” by the crushing material superiority of the Allies.<sup>178</sup> Another holds that the army collapsed from within, with hundreds of thousands of men deserting or otherwise absenting themselves from the lines in the final months.<sup>179</sup> These scholars divide amongst themselves over the political valence of the desertions. What some see as a symptom of class-based conflict, others views as the result of general war weariness.<sup>180</sup> More recently, some have suggested that the army engaged in mass surrenders, under the direction of its junior officers.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Karl Dietrich Erdmann, *Der Erste Weltkrieg*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Munich: Deutsche Taschenbuch Verlag, 1973), 236.

<sup>177</sup> Herwig, *The First World War*, 442. Richard Bessel, *Germany after the First World War* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993), 47.

<sup>178</sup> K.J. Müller, General Ludwig Beck, *Studien und Dokumente zur politisch-militärischen Vorstellungswelt und Tätigkeit des Generalstabschefs der deutschen Heeres 1933-1938* (Boppard: Bolt, 1980), 326. See also Herwig, *The First World War*, 433; Alan Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction: Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 276; Robin Prior, “Stabbed in the Front: The German Defeat in 1918,” in *1918: The Year of Victory*, ed. Ashley Elkins.

<sup>179</sup> Niall Ferguson emphasizes the rising number of surrenders to the Allies. *Pity of War*, 386. N.P Howard links these surrenders to the Allied blockade, and widespread hunger. N.P. Howard, “The Social and Political Consequences of the Allied Food Blockade of Germany, 1918-19,” *German History* 11, no. 2 (1993). Wilhelm Deist argued that most soldiers absented themselves through means other than desertion, including feigning illness or tampering with their own weapons. He termed this a “covert military strike,” (see discussion below, esp. footnote ...). Wilhelm Deist, “The Military Collapse of the German Empire: The Reality Behind the Stab-in-the-Back Myth,” *War in History* 3 (1996).

<sup>180</sup> Leftist historians tended to emphasize the connections between indiscipline and class hatred. See Wolfgang Kruse, “Krieg und Klassenheer: Zur Revolutionierung der Deutschen Armee im Ersten Weltkrieg,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 22, no. 4 (1996); Dieter Dreetz, “Rückführung des Westheeres und November Revolution,” *Zeitschrift für Militärgeschichte* 7 (1968). More conventional military accounts tend to emphasize general weariness. See Deist, “Military Collapse.” See also Benjamin Ziemann, “Enttäuschte Erwartung und kollektive Erschöpfung. Die deutschen Soldaten an der Westfront 1918 auf dem Weg zur Revolution,” in *Kriegsende 1918: Ereignis, Wirkung, Nachwirkung*, eds. Jörg Duppler and Gerhard Paul Gross (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1999).

<sup>181</sup> Alexander Watson, *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale, and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

These conflicting interpretations can be explained in part by the sheer complexity of events at the end of the war. A great many things happened in a very short space of time. In the last forty days of the war, Germany had three different chancellors and two different supreme commanders. The Kaiser abdicated, the monarchy was abolished, and a republic declared. A ceasefire was negotiated through an extended exchange of diplomatic notes, and debates raged within the government on how to respond to the Allied demands and whether the war should be continued. Mutinies broke out in the High Seas Fleet, which quickly spread to cities throughout the country, and merged with indigenous protest movements in Bavaria and elsewhere. All the while, the Western Army was fighting a difficult campaign, embracing dozens of separate engagements. With so much happening at once, it has proven difficult to disentangle lines of cause and effect, especially since many of the pertinent documents have been lost or destroyed.<sup>182</sup> Historians, for instance, still struggle to understand the exact relationship between the naval mutinies, the revolution, and the defeat of the army.<sup>183</sup>

Disagreements over the defeat of Germany, however, are not primarily the result of disagreements over historical facts. Ultimately, their origins can be traced back to the immediate post-war years, and the highly politicized debated over who was to blame for military failure. The war had been an unprecedented catastrophe for the German nation. Two million men were dead, and the nation's resources were exhausted. These losses

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<sup>182</sup> The archives of the Prussian War Ministry, in which many of the relevant materials were housed, were destroyed by fire in 1945. Michael Geyer comments on this garbling of cause and effect, "Insurrectionary Warfare," 462-63.

<sup>183</sup> Many conservative historians, such as Ralph Lutz (*The Causes of the German Collapse*, 134), argues that the mutinies and revolutionary activities in Germany spread to the field army, and contributed to its collapse. Scott Stephenson, in a recent monograph, denies such a connection: *The Final Battle: Soldiers of the Western Front and the German Revolution of 1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Left wing historians, like Deist, have suggested that the revolution and the collapse of the army were not structurally connected, but sprang from a common impulse.

might have seemed acceptable, if Germany had achieved a decisive victory. Rather than continental hegemony, however, Germany was facing economic ruin and territorial reduction. The enormous sacrifices that the nation had been called upon to make were manifestly vain. In the months and years after the conclusion of the peace, German politics were therefore dominated by debates over responsibility – how had this happened? And who was to blame?

Unlike 1945, when the country's entire political structure was demolished, these debates could not be neatly resolved. The Kaiser was gone, but most of the pre-war power structure remained. And with a handful of exceptions, every party and public organization had openly supported the war, and played some role in wartime politics. The result was a complex and many-sided political melee. Different groups and parties fashioned their own narrative of war and defeat, which minimized their own role in events, and shifted the responsibility elsewhere.<sup>184</sup> There was nothing particularly unusual about this; blame shifting of this sort is a standard feature of republican politics. But these debates were extraordinarily intense, given the stakes involved, and uncommonly persistent. The direct economic and social consequences of the war remained central features of the political landscape for decades.<sup>185</sup> Whenever these problems were taken up, the discussion was invariably drawn back to questions of war

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<sup>184</sup> For the most thorough overviews, see Boris Barth, *Dolchstoßlegende und politische Desintegration: Das Trauma der deutschen Niederlage im Ersten Weltkrieg 1914-1933* (Düsseldorf, Droste, 2003); Boris Barth, "Dolchstoßlegende und Novemberrevolution," in *Die Vergessene Revolution*, ed. Alexander Gallus (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2010); Vanessa Ther, *Unlike Phoenix from the Ashes: Republican Constructs of the First World War in the Weimar Republic* (University of Dublin: unpublished dissertation, 2009).

<sup>185</sup> Bernd Ulrich, "Die unkämpfte Erinnerung: Überlegungen zur Wahrnehmung des Ersten Weltkrieges in der Weimarer Republik," in *Kriegsende 1918: Ereignis, Wirkung, Nachwirkung*, eds. Jörg Duppler and Gerhard Paul Gross (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1999).



and responsibility. These debates were also highly fluid. The events themselves were difficult to understand, and responsibility was difficult to assign. The government of the Reich possessed multiple sources of power and convoluted sources of authority, making it unclear who had decided what.<sup>186</sup> Under these conditions, almost any theory could be made to seem plausible, and theories could be easily altered to suit changes in the political climate.

The idea that the army survived the war intact emerged very early on, and from various points along the political spectrum. It can be seen already in the public comments of Friedrich Ebert in December of 1918, in which he characterized the army as “undefeated in the field.” His carefully-worded remarks were clearly designed to build support for the nascent government over which his party had inherited control.<sup>187</sup> Given that government’s tenuous hold on power, it would be profoundly unwise to jeopardize its popular support by publicly minimizing the accomplishments of 11 million veterans. Relatively quickly, however, this point of view became more strongly associated with the political right, and above all with high-ranking members of the military establishment. In his war memoirs, first published in 1919 (and dedicated to the war’s veterans), Ludendorff maintained that despite the effects of enemy propaganda and Bolshevik agitators, the soldiers who were “well-conducted and brave ... were always in the vast majority,” and that “the army crossed the frontier [back into Germany] in good order.”<sup>188</sup>

The memoirs and public comments of other high ranking commanders, while often

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<sup>186</sup> For comments on this point, see Hew Strachan, “Germany in the First World War: The Problem of Strategy,” *German History* 12, no. 2 (1994): 240-41. Martin Kitchen, *The Silent Dictatorship: The Politics of the German High Command under Hindenburg and Ludendorff, 1916-1918* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1976).

<sup>187</sup> Barth, *Dolchstoßlegende*, 214-25.

<sup>188</sup> Ludendorff, *Ludendorff’s Own Story*, 246, 429.

harshly critical of Ludendorff (and of each other) describe the condition of the army in more or less identical terms. Crown Prince Wilhelm, the Kaiser's son and commander of one of the principle army groups on the Western Front, wrote that "the soldiers behaved heroically in the unequal combat, and faithfully fulfilled their duty to the death. He lies who asserts that the fighting spirit of the front was broken."<sup>189</sup> Max Bauer, a staff officer in general headquarters throughout the war, likewise asserted that the army had crossed the line under "firm discipline."<sup>190</sup> This version of events, of course, helped to absolve the military of any responsibility for national defeat. If the army was still intact and still fighting at the end of the war, then the country had not been compelled to surrender in a military sense. The responsibility for defeat lay instead with the country's political leadership, who had accepted the Allies' draconian terms while resistance was still possible.<sup>191</sup> This line of reasoning would easily slide into the "stab-in-the-back legend" (as the term is usually understood today) as it became married to pernicious conspiracy theories – that Bolshevik (or Jew, or pacifist) agitators had intentionally accepted an unjust and disgraceful peace, in order to discredit the old order and pursue their selfish interests. The stab-in-the-back legend would reach its zenith under the National Socialist regime, but it was widespread in many circles long before 1933.

The opposite position – that the army had collapsed at the end of the war – has more complex origins. In the immediate post-war years, this was an idea associated with the left, and especially the far left. Conservatives vehemently maintained that the German

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<sup>189</sup> William, Crown Prince of Germany, *Memoirs of the Crown Prince of Germany* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1922), 253-264.

<sup>190</sup> Max Bauer, *Der Grosse Krieg in Feld und Heimat: Erinnerungen und Betrachtungen* (Tübingen: Osiandersche Buchhandlung, 1921), 273.

<sup>191</sup> For a more extensive discussion of this development, see Barth, "Dolchstoßlegende und Novemberrevolution," 117-120.

revolution was launched by a handful of radicals (in many versions, with the help of Allied or Soviet agents), and did not represent the views of most Germans.<sup>192</sup> Those on the left countered that the revolution was a broad-based movement, which stemmed from the general population's profound war weariness and desire for political reform. The left looked to support this position by emphasizing acts of protest at home, and acts of indiscipline within the army. In their view, the army had not fought to the last in defense of the imperial regime; rather, they abandoned a war fought for conservative political interests and territorial aggrandizement. Dissent in the army, moreover, was not separate from revolutionary upheavals at home. They were part of a single popular movement. This view was initially advanced in the pages of *Vorwärts*, and in tracts and pamphlets published by the party presses of the KPD.<sup>193</sup> It was quickly elaborated by left-wing intellectuals, in a flood of historical monographs.<sup>194</sup>

Relatively soon, however, elements of the “disintegration” thesis were appropriated by the right, and integrated into the stab in the back legend. The army's claim that the army had returned home “undefeated” proved to be untenable. It had come under sharp attack from the left. And it had also come under closer scrutiny from the new government, which had in August of 1919 established a Parliamentary commission to

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<sup>192</sup> This was the view embraced by almost all of the military's ranking figures. Ludendorff, for instance, speaks of the “long, systematic underground work” of Bolshevik agitators (*Ludendorff's Own Story*, 429). The Kaiser emphasizes the role of Bolshevik agents, operating out of the Soviet embassy in Berlin. Wilhelm II, Emperor of Germany, *The Kaiser's Memoirs* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1922), 284. This claim was also advanced by right-wing intellectuals and historians. See E.O. Volkmann, *Der Marxismus und das deutsche Heer im Weltkrieg* (Hobbing, 1924).

<sup>193</sup> Ther, *Unlike Phoenix from the Ashes*, 42-47. See also Ernst Drahn and Susanne Leonhard, eds., *Unterirdische Literatur im revolutionären Deutschland während des Weltkrieges* (Berlin-Fichtenau : Verlag Gesellschaft und Erziehung, 1920).

<sup>194</sup> Some of the key works here include Ludwig Lewinsohn, *Die Revolution an der Westfront* (Charlottenburg : Mundus-Verlagsanstalt, 1919); Hermann Kantorowicz, *Der Offizierhass im deutschen Heer* (Freiburg, 1919).

investigate the causes of defeat.<sup>195</sup> The commission questioned much of the former military leadership; and while these men staunchly refused to accept responsibility for defeat, they could scarcely conceal the magnitude of the military disaster that had befallen the army in 1918, nor could they conceal the terrible risks the high command had run in pursuit of an annexationist peace.<sup>196</sup> The military thus found itself in need of a new defense. And the claims of the left seemed to fit perfectly with their needs. For such arguments could be turned on their head with hardly any difficulty. Defeat had not been the result of faulty strategic direction, they could claim. Rather, disloyal or weak-willed forces soldiers had abandoned the fight and the critical juncture.

The evolution of right-wing narratives of the war, as it incorporated these ideas appropriated from the left, is not difficult to see. As mentioned above, military figures initially sought to stress the cohesion and discipline of the army. They acknowledged that some men deserted from their units, especially in the last days. But initially, desertion played a minor role in their narratives of defeat. These men were not representative of the army as a whole, but weak-willed individuals who had succumbed to enemy propaganda and civilian *Miesmacherei*. In most accounts, they receive nothing more than a passing reference, and are sometimes handled in an almost sympathetic manner. Crown Prince Wilhelm, describing an encounter with a group of shirkers at a railway station, described them thus: “Nor were they all rascals; there was many a face that showed that the nerves had given way, that the energy was gone, that the primitive and unchecked impulse of

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<sup>195</sup> Lutz, *Causes of the German Collapse*, vi.

<sup>196</sup> The commission was increasingly dominated by conservative interests, and eventually reached a divided opinion. But its liberal members were at least able to put hard questions to key military figures. See especially the testimony of General von Kuhl, *Die Ursachen des Deutschen Zusammenbruchs im Jahre 1918*, vol 3, , (Berlin, Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft für Politik und Geschichte, 1925),

self-preservation had got the mastery...<sup>197</sup> Over the course of the 1920s and 1930s, however, “deserters and shirkers” came to play a much more prominent role these narratives, and in many cases were made into one of the primary causes for defeat. This change can be often be traced within the work of individual authors. The best example is offered by Erich Volkmann, a conservative historian who had served as an officer during the war (and would also write a series of adventure novels set during the war). In 1922, Volkmann published *Der Grosse Krieg*, which was among the first scholarly histories of the war to appear in Germany. The book has very little to say about desertion or indiscipline in the army, and overall Volkmann strongly defends the record of the troops: “The combat troops, almost without exception, maintained their good bearing [*Haltung*].”<sup>198</sup> But several years later, in Volkmann’s contributions to the parliamentary commission, his focus was very different. Now, he had much more to say about desertion, and was prepared to offer an estimate as to its scale: 750,000 to 1 million men in the last weeks of the war alone.<sup>199</sup> This was an extraordinarily high figure, amounting to nearly half of all German troops then on the Western Front. Around the same time, he published *Der Marxismus und das deutsche Heer im Weltkriege*, in which he clearly suggests that these desertions critically undermined the army’s powers of resistance.<sup>200</sup> The same basic argument appeared in the official histories of the war, whose fourteen volumes were published between 1925 and 1930. These cited a remark by Groener in a

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<sup>197</sup> Crown Prince Wilhelm, *Memoirs of the Crown Prince*, 247.

<sup>198</sup> Erich Otto Volkmann, *Der Grosse Krieg, 1914-1918* (Berlin: Reimar, 1922), 159.

<sup>199</sup> Albrecht Philipp, ed., *Die Ursachen des Deutschen Zusammenbruchs im Jahre 1918*, vol 11, II, (Berlin, Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft für Politik und Geschichte, 1925), 66.

<sup>200</sup> Erich Otto Volkmann, *Der Marxismus und das deutsche Heer im Weltkriege: unter Benutzung amtlicher Quellen dargestellt* (Berlin: Hobbing, 1925) 192-195, 202-203.

situation briefing in early November 1918, in which he suggested that between 200,000 and 1.5 million soldiers were “missing.”<sup>201</sup>

After the National Socialists came to power in 1933, debate on the defeat of 1918 effectively ceased. The Nazis imposed their own particular variant of the “stab in the back” legend in which defeat was laid on the doorstep of international Jewry, who conspired to bring about the revolution, and who had been gradually undermining national spirit over the course of decades.<sup>202</sup> Soldiers and military matters were virtually absent from this version of events. After 1945, there was little impulse to resume the discussion. In the wake of a second and even more catastrophic defeat, the collapse of 1918 had lost much of its political relevance.<sup>203</sup> Any discussion of defeat, moreover, threatened to lead into ideologically dangerous territory. Hitler’s expansionist foreign policy, as well as his persecution of Jews and communists, was based in large measure on his determination to avenge the ‘betrayal’ of 1918. After 1945, most Germans dismissed this betrayal as a fabrication, and left the matter at that. To reopen the discussion risked perhaps validating (or appearing to validate) some element of the “stab-in-the-back” legend, and resurrecting uncomfortable discussions about whether the Nazi programme was in any sense “justified.” This attitude persisted for a very long time. In a volume published in 2010, Jay Winter – one of the leading historians of the war – recalled the warning he had received after embarking upon a new project: “One distinguished German

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<sup>201</sup> Reichsarchiv, *Der Weltkrieg 1914 bis 1918, volume 14, Die Kriegsführung an der Westfront im Jahre 1918* (Berlin: E.S. Mittler & Sohn, 1944), 760.

<sup>202</sup> Boris Barth, *Dolchstoßlegenden und politische Desintegration: Das Trauma der deutschen Niederlage im Ersten Weltkrieg 1914-1933* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 2003)

<sup>203</sup> For relevant remarks, see Alexander Gallus, “Die vergessene Revolution von 1918/19: Erinnerung und Deutung im Wandel,” in *Die Vergessene Revolution von 1918/19*, ed. Alexander Gallus (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2010).

scholar asked me why I wanted to go back to the Great War? All I was likely to do, he said, was to rake up the coals of the ‘stab-in-the-back’ legend.”<sup>204</sup> The structure of the post-war historical profession proved to be an obstacle as well. Military history virtually disappeared from the German academy, not to be revived until the 1980s, and then in a limited fashion.<sup>205</sup> Up until the 1970s, moreover, many leading historians were men who had themselves served in the First World War, and for whom the subject of war and defeat may still have been a painful subject.<sup>206</sup> Men like Gerhard Ritter, who captained an infantry company in 1918, regarded the war as an impressive national achievement, and apparently had little wish to see it tainted by association with Hitler’s wars.<sup>207</sup>

Western European historians added little to the discussion. 1918 never loomed as large in Anglo-French memories of the war, despite being the decisive and in many ways the most dramatic year. While Germany was defeated, the Allies had not exactly covered themselves with glory in the process. There had been no decisive battle. Germany had been battered into submission, through a long and costly strategy of frontal assault. The end of the war was obviously welcome at the time, but there was a widespread sense that the victory had taken too long to achieve, and that the war effort had been mishandled.<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Jay Winter, “1918: The Road to Victory,” in *1918: Year of Victory*, ed. Ashley Elkins (Exisle Pub, 2010), 37.

<sup>205</sup> Jörg Echternkamp, “Another Turn of the Tide? World War II and the Writing of Military History in West Germany 1945-2005,” (Potsdam: Research Institute for Military History, 2006)

<sup>206</sup> Geyer, “Insurrectionary Warfare,” 462.

<sup>207</sup> See Gerhard Ritter, *The Sword and the Scepter: The Problem of Militarism in Germany*, vol. 4 (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1969). Throughout, Ritter offers praise for the ordinary Germans who were part of the war effort, and most especially “the valor of... German soldiers, who remained ready to stake their lives for their country down to the very last,” 341.

<sup>208</sup> For Britain, see Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London: Bodley Head, 1990); In France, judgments were somewhat softer, as 1918 had brought the liberation of the occupied zones and the return of Alsace Lorraine. But this was set against the fact that, by the last year, France had been reduced to a secondary role in the war. See Stephane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14-18: Understanding the Great War* (New York, 2000).

After the Second World War, this sense grew stronger. If the war had been waged to contain Germany and curb militarism, then 1918 had clearly been no victory at all. As time passed, and as the overall perception of the war became more negative, popular memory of the war became more and more dominated by the horrors of the trenches, and by the archetypal trench battles of 1916-17.<sup>209</sup> The focus therefore rested on the middle of the war rather than the end. To the extent that anyone showed any interest in the specifics of defeat, this interest was connected to the bitter recriminations over strategy and generalship. During the war, some influential politicians argued that the Allies should abandon the strategy of attrition, and pursue victory through other channels – through economic warfare, or through offensives in other theaters. After the war was over, they would argue that strategy of attrition had proven to be a failure; Germany had collapsed because of internal unrest, and not because of anything the allied had accomplished on the battlefield.<sup>210</sup> The Allied generals, in turn, scrambled to show that it was their armies which had defeated Germany, and not Bolshevik agents.<sup>211</sup> As in Germany, these controversies were more about domestic political agendas than historical truth, and in any event, they gradually faded from the scene along with the generals in question.

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<sup>209</sup> See Gary Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory: The First World War: Myths and Realities* (London: Headline, 2001).

<sup>210</sup> See Winston Churchill, *The World Crisis, 1911-1918* (London: T. Butterworth, 1931); Major General Frederick Maurice, *The Last Four Months: The End of the War in the West* (London: Cassel and Co., 1919). This critical tradition was later taken up by B.H. Liddell Hart, *The Real War* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1930).

<sup>211</sup> See for instance, *Sir Douglas Haig's Despatches, December 1915 – April 1919* (London: J.M Dent, 1919), or *The War Memoirs of David Lloyd George* (London: Nicholson and Watson, 1933). These debates have been partly revived in recent decades, with fresh attacks against Allies Strategy (John Keegan, *The First World War*), and new defenses of both Allies strategy and tactics. For instance, J.P. Harris, *Douglas Haig and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front: The British Army's Art of Attack, 1916-18* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1994).



With debate on the subject effectively halted, the disagreements about the nature of the defeat were not definitely resolved. There was no clear consensus on whether or not the army had collapsed, and why, and there were comparatively little scholarly work on which new generations could draw. The only notable effort to revisit the defeat came during the 1980s from a historian named Wilhem Deist, at the time one of the few German scholars involved with military history. Deist's view of the defeat was rooted in the ideas of the post-1918 left. Like them, he argues that the army, despairing and war-weary, was indeed "in the process of disintegration" at the end of the war.<sup>212</sup> He does not argue that the collapse of the army was directly connected to the revolution at home, but he suggests that they emerged from similar impulses. He characterizes the collapse of morale as "a mass movement," which, like protest movements in Germany, "began with the far-reaching loss of authority by the established powers as a result of glaring abuses." His description of the collapse as a "covert military strike of soldiers" emphasizes the similarity to proletarian resistance.<sup>213</sup> While Deist himself was something of an outsider within his profession, his view eventually became widely accepted. It seemed to finally lay the *Dolchstosslegende* to rest, and in this, it accorded well with the general political climate – of seeking a more comprehensive repudiation of Nazism, through a more candid engagement with it. Yet his work sparked little further investigation on the subject. Deist's findings, which even he regarded as preliminary,<sup>214</sup> have not been substantially elaborated or modified. The defeat of Germany remains poorly understood.

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<sup>212</sup> Deist, "Military Collapse," 202.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid, 204.

<sup>214</sup> Deist repeatedly suggests that many aspects of the defeat remained poorly understood, and that a complete understanding of the defeat would have to await further research. "Military Collapse," 191, 201.

## Between Cohesion and Collapse

Wilhelm Deist was clearly correct about the views of the ordinary soldier. After four years of slaughter, of shortages, of innumerable (broken) promises of imminent victory, the rank and file no longer trusted their leaders, and they were no longer prepared to support the continuation of the war. And these attitudes were increasingly manifested in overt behaviors. Incidences of crime, of insubordination, and of outright desertion increased steadily over the war, and particularly in its final phase. There were more serious incidents too: fragging, riots at military camps, entire regiments refusing to obey orders. Clearly, discipline in the field army was not “flawless,” as Ludendorff and his generals had argued, or even anything close to that. But it is too much to say that the army collapsed or disintegrated, as the Russian army did. All the evidence we have suggests that, at the end of the war the army was largely intact and still capable of offering significant resistance. The point here (if it needs to be said) is not in any way to resurrect or legitimate the *Dolchstosslegende*. The point here is simply to be clear about events which have hitherto fallen into a historical “no-go zone,” because of the serious questions which these events raise.

The source which seems to bear most directly on the condition of the army would seem to be the army’s own judicial records. These sources are problematic in many ways, of course. As a general matter, crime statistics do not necessarily reflect the actual number of crimes committed. Changes in the rate of crime may reflect changes in the way that crimes are investigated or prosecuted, rather than a real change in the number of

incidents.<sup>215</sup> In this specific case, moreover, the records are incomplete; the majority of the army's criminal statistics were destroyed with the Prussian War Ministry in 1945. Nevertheless, it seems that these sources may provide us with at least a useful starting point for the discussion. So what do these statistics reveal? Not surprisingly, they indicate a general increase in crime over the course of the war. The records of the Württemberg contingent – which represents one of the most complete set of records still extant – show that total crime about doubled over the course of the war.<sup>216</sup> They also suggest that there was an increase in the most serious types of crimes. Malingering, refusal to obey orders, and other “severe crimes against military discipline,” virtually unknown in the first years of the war, began to appear about the middle of 1916.<sup>217</sup> Crimes that fell under the category of “desertion” (including outright desertion [*Fahnenflucht*], and the lesser charge of ‘absence without leave’) remained stable over the first half of the war, and then increased relatively steeply thereafter (See Figure). By 1918, the rate of desertion had more than tripled. Similar trends are observable in other units and national contingents.<sup>218</sup>

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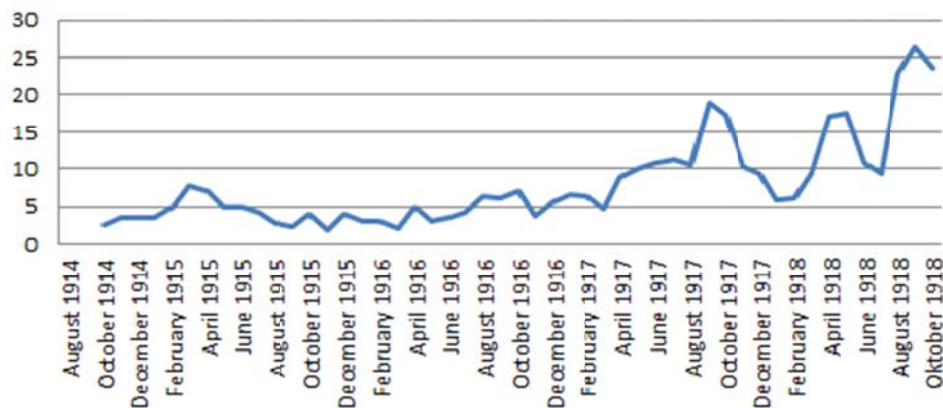
<sup>215</sup> See the remarks in Christoph Jahr, *Gewöhnliche Soldaten: Desertion und Deserteure in Deutschen und Britischen Heer 1914-1918* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1998), 30-32.

<sup>216</sup> HSA-St, M1/7 274, 275.

<sup>217</sup> M I/7 274 Kriminalstatistik des Württembergischen Heeres

<sup>218</sup> Jahr, *Gewöhnliche Soldaten*, 148-51.

**Graph 2 – Charges for Desertion/AWOL in the Württemberg Contingent, per Month, per Division**



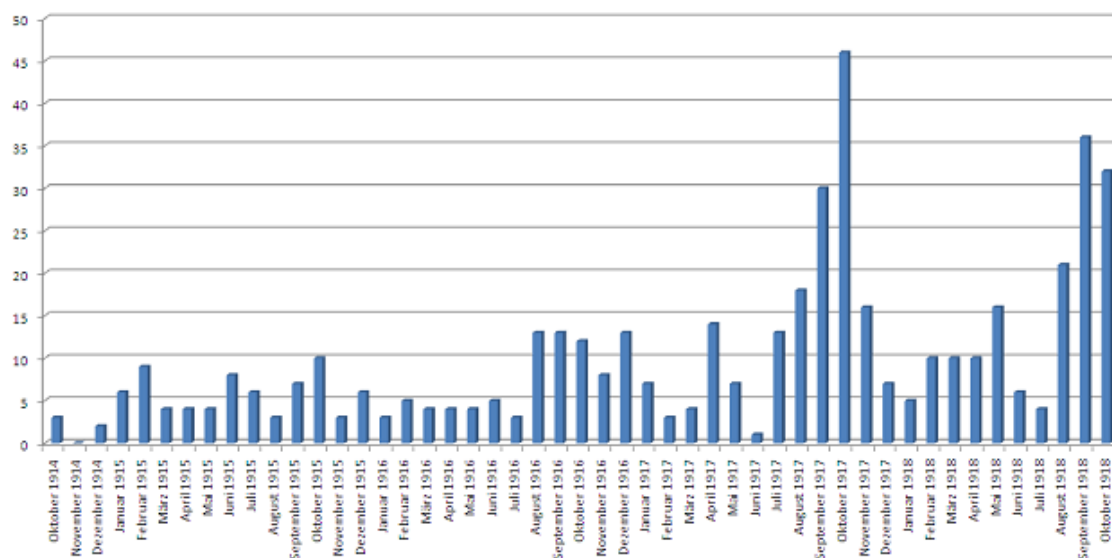
Source: These figures were compiled by me, on the basis of the records of divisional courts. HSA-St M1/7 303, 304, 305, 306, 307, 308, 311, and 313.

What is important to note here, however, is that while the rate of desertion did rise over the war, the numbers involved remained quite small. Even at its very highest point, in the fall of 1918, the monthly desertion rate was only about 6 in 10,000. Over the course of the war, the monthly average was only about 2 in 10,000. These figures were comparable to those in other armies, and they were completely insignificant in strategic terms, especially when compared to the number of men killed or wounded on the battlefield. The total number of combat casualties was more than a hundred times higher than the number of men charged with desertion.<sup>219</sup> Another fact which becomes clear, especially if we look at the records of individual divisions, is that desertion rates do not

<sup>219</sup> The total casualties of the Württemberg contingent is listed at 264,662. Constantin von Altröck, *Vom Sterben des Deutschen Offizierkorps* (Berlin: Mittler und Sohn, 1922), 75. The total number of desertion charges in the field forces was 2,090.

follow any consistent or linear pattern. The number of desertions rises or falls according to a unit's tactical circumstances, and they do not always reach their peak in 1918. Take as an example the 26<sup>th</sup> Reserve Division – probably the best division in the Württemberg contingent. While it is clear that desertions are higher in the second half of the war than in the first, desertion is a bigger problem in 1917 than 1918.

### Graph 3 – Charges for Desertion/AWOL in the 27<sup>th</sup> Reserve Division, 1914-1918



Source: HSA-St M1/7 310

Such figures can be disputed of course. One can easily argue that these figures are underestimates, as some soldiers were no doubt able to disguise their dereliction as a legitimate absence. Others no doubt slipped away in battle, and were declared missing or dead. Yet it's unlikely that the figures were mistaken by orders of magnitude. As the greatest threat to military discipline, military courts prosecuted desertion far more scrupulously than other crimes (much as domestic courts treat murder more seriously

than other crimes).<sup>220</sup> Unlike in some other armies, German soldiers could be charged with a crime *in absentia*.<sup>221</sup> So if a man disappeared under mysterious circumstances, his commanders usually did not hesitate to charge him with absence without leave, and leave the courts to sort out the details when he was apprehended. Given this, it seems unlikely that thousands of cases simply “slipped through the cracks.”

There are also potential disagreements over how exactly one defines “deserter.” Volkmann counted as a deserter not only those who were charged by military courts, but also the many thousands of men located in the army’s rear areas.<sup>222</sup> To him, it seemed obvious that the men in the rear were intentionally “hiding out” there, taking advantage of the general crowding and confusion to avoid detection. This view strikes me as a simply wrong, however. The area behind the front line (the *Etappengebiet*, in German military jargon) encompassed the military garrison of the occupied portions of France and Belgium, as well as the army’s entire support apparatus: supply dumps, recruit depots, hospitals, headquarters, airfields, workshops, prisons. It was also the point of transit between Germany and the battlefield; more than a million men passed through it each month – new recruits, men on leave, the wounded, criminals, civilian deportees, German businesspeople.<sup>223</sup> There is simply no way to know how many men were in the rear at

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<sup>220</sup> This is evident from the judicial statistics. Charges for desertion are always the most numerous of any category. They are far more numerous than even petty crimes (eg. theft), that would be the most numerous in any civilian system. HSA-St, M1/7 274, 275.

<sup>221</sup> Jahr, *Gewöhnliche Soldaten*, 183. In *Absentia* charges are common in the case files, HSA-St, M1/7 303-313.

<sup>222</sup> Deist also accepts this view, although for different reasons.

<sup>223</sup> By 1916, more than 200,000 replacements travelled to the front each month, along with a similar number of sick and wounded being transported back to rear area hospitals. At the same time, as many as 900,000 men were travelling through the rear areas each month, bound for or returning from leave. Adolph Sarter, *Deutschen Eisenbahnen im Kriege* (Stuttgart: Dt. Verl.-Anst., 1930) 94, 98.

any given time, nor is there any way to tell who was supposed to be there and who was there without permission.

Nor should we assume that any man who was wandering the rear area was actually a deserter or a shirker. Most of these men were stranded because of the breakdown of the transportation service, and through no design of their own. The rail network in the occupied territories poorly suited Germany's strategic needs. There was only a single direct route between Germany and the main battlefields on the Western Front, and it could bear only a fraction of the required traffic. The remaining traffic could reach the front only via long detours. All of the various east-west routes passed through a handful of chokepoints, especially Liege, which produced massive delays and confusion.<sup>224</sup> Discipline was difficult to maintain in these chokepoints, as rear-area administrations had few officers and police at their disposal, and limited resources for providing food and shelter. As early as 1916, discipline in the rear had become a source for concern, with authorities privately admitting that the maintenance of "perfect discipline" here was perhaps an "unsound demand."<sup>225</sup> The situation became worse later in the war. Railways lines and rolling stock broke down because of heavy traffic, and reduced resources for maintenance.<sup>226</sup> Allied aircraft, which boasted increasing range, began to target trains, stations, bridges, and switching yards deep in the rear, causing chaos. Transit through rear areas – trips which were only a matter of hours in peacetime – became a nightmarish series of delays and transfers.<sup>227</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> Sarter, *Deutschen Eisenbahnen*, 93. French Army, *Why Germany Capitulated*, 39-42.

<sup>225</sup> BA-MA, PH5 I/131, memo 24 Apr. 1916.

<sup>226</sup> Stevenson, *With Our Backs to the Wall*, 428-29.

<sup>227</sup> *Die Rückführung des Westheeres* (Berlin: 1919), 4-7; Maurice, *The Last Four Months*, 219-220.

Typical was the case of Emil Buthmann, who returned from leave in the middle of October, and described the trip at some length in his journal. Bound for La Cateau, near the front lines, Emil's train was delayed for many hours just outside the town of Maubeuge; when the angry passengers pressed the conductor for information, he finally informed them that allied aircraft had destroyed a munitions train on the tracks further up the line, snarling traffic in the whole region. When the train still showed no signs of moving, he leapt out the window and boarded another, which was moving slowly along a parallel track. In this train, he eventually reached Mons, which he found jammed with French refugees sleeping in open rail cars. After a half a day, he was able to find a train bound for La Cateau via Valenciennes and Aulnoy. Just outside Aulnoy, however, the train was attacked by Allied aircraft, and its passengers forced to flee and shelter in ditches. Once the danger has passed, he walked to Aulnoy, and then set out to La Cateau on foot. He was able to reach the town by the following day, but was unable to obtain food or shelter, as the town was overrun with military personnel and refugees. Eventually he was granted leave to sleep in a local barracks, which was bombed during the night. The next morning, he set out in search of his unit, which by this point was nowhere to be found. Some days later, after having received contradictory information from the people he meets along the way, Emil ran into his company entirely by chance in the town of Premont. From Maubeuge to Premont, barely 30 miles in a straight line, had taken him the better part of a week to traverse, and even that had been possible only with a good bit of luck.<sup>228</sup> Hundreds of thousands of other men faced the same situation. When their train failed to appear, or took them to the wrong place, or if their unit was nowhere to be

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<sup>228</sup> DTA, 1083, 109-112.



found, they were thrown on their own devices. Some, no doubt, took the opportunity to desert, or to “disappear” for a few days. But most were simply lost and confused – and after years under the grip of their officers, not used to showing as much initiative as *Musketier* Buthmann. Even the army authorities were inclined to admit as much. One officer, passing through Namur in late October, finds that the town is one enormous traffic jam, and the railway station overflowing: “soldiers stretched out side by side in the semi-darkness, sleeping even on the ground.” In the crowd, he spots several men who look to him like deserters (men who would not “look you in the eye”), “but for the most part they belong to organizations that are on the move – army headquarters, S.O.S units.”<sup>229</sup>

The evidence presented so far, it must be admitted, is not conclusive on its own. The army’s administrative and judicial records, while suggestive, are too incomplete to be able to support firm conclusions. The acid test of the army’s cohesion would seem to be its performance in battle. If the army remained cohesive, then we would expect to see it offer significant resistance to its enemies; if it were in the midst of disintegration, that would clearly be impossible. On this count, the evidence is clearer. The German offered what can only be described as tenacious resistance, right up to the signing of the armistice. As before, the casualty figures tell much of the story. From August 1, 1918 until the end of the war, the Allied armies suffered nearly 900,000 casualties. In October alone, they lost some 320,000 men. In fact, October 1918 was almost certainly the costliest month of the war for the Allied powers.<sup>230</sup> More than 50% of all combat deaths

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<sup>229</sup> *Summary of Information*, no. 239 (26 Nov 1918), “The Last Days of the German Army,” 16 Oct. entry.

<sup>230</sup> It is difficult to say with certainty, since all the Allied powers calculated their casualties in a slightly different matter, and grouped their data into different time periods. But it was certainly the most costly

suffered by the American army for the entire war came in October.<sup>231</sup> The fighting did not show much sign of abating as the armistice approached. From November 1<sup>st</sup> to November 11<sup>th</sup>, the Allied armies suffered another 67,000 casualties. As had been the case throughout the war, moreover, combined Allied casualties were higher than those of Germany. The margin narrowed somewhat in the last months of the war, as the Allied superiority in men and machines grew overwhelming, but it never closed completely. By no stretch of the imagination had the Germans laid down their arms.

**Table 1 -- Allied and German Casualties on the Western Front, 1918**

Month	British <sup>1</sup>	French <sup>2</sup>	American <sup>2</sup>	Allied Total	German <sup>3</sup>
January	13,042	5,244	30	<b>18,316</b>	33,885
February	9,809	6,705	251	<b>16,765</b>	33,233
March	173,721	50,599	1,585	<b>225,905</b>	232,007
April	143,168	58,850	2,113	<b>204,131</b>	244,332
May	69,049	129,304	4,539	<b>202,892</b>	138,574
June	32,436	78,749	9,817	<b>121,002</b>	163,348
July	32,562	134,726	38,331	<b>205,619</b>	165,099
August	122,272	112,097	23,625	<b>257,994</b>	221,158
September	114,831	72,853	51,487	<b>239,171</b>	230,172
October	121,046	107,207	94,016	<b>322,269</b>	310,144
November	20,925	12,945	33,179	<b>67,049</b>	64,526

Sources:

1. Great Britain, War Office, *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire during the Great War* (London: H.M Stationery Office, 1922), 253-71.

2. Kevin Stubbs, *Race to the Front*, 84. Originally from X.H. Price, "Study Relative to the Importance of the Part Played by the Various Allied Armies on the Western Front after July 18, 1918" G-3 Secret Files (Washington, D.C.: NARA, RG120/E268/B3157/F9), Table 2.

3. See Appendix I

Notes: Figures exclude casualties of Belgian, Portuguese, and Italian formations. Figures for the French are probably low. Other sources put the number of French casualties considerably higher. See Anthony Clayton, *Paths of Glory: The French Army, 1914-1918* (London: Cassell, 2003) 161-62.

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month of 1918 (Stubbs, *Race to the Front*, 84), and the final phase of the war was the most costly for the Allies in general. See McRandle and Quirk, *Blood Test*, 677-78.

<sup>231</sup> Ayers, *Statistical Summary*, 120.

Examining the tactical situation leads us to the same conclusion. Despite Germany's desperate shortages of reserves, the Allied were never able to decisively break through their defenses. Even at the moment of the armistice, the army maintained some level of resistance along the length of the front, and no Allied commander claimed otherwise.<sup>232</sup> And while German forces were mostly engaged in a fighting retreat, they could still inflict the occasional check on the Allied advance when they turned to fight. In the middle of October, they broke up a British attack on the Selle River, inflicting severe casualties on the attackers.<sup>233</sup> At the southern end of the front, in the Argonne forest, German units held out for six weeks, despite being outnumbered by as much as eight to one. They were finally dislodged after a month of bitter close-quarter fighting amidst the region's innumerable thickets and ravines.<sup>234</sup> None of this was sufficient to change Germany's overall strategic outlook, which grew increasingly dire throughout the fall. But it is at least sufficient to show that the serious fighting had not ended.

In the face of such incidents, and others like them, the Allied military chiefs dismissed any suggestion that the Germans were in the midst of a collapse, or anywhere near one. Into the first days of November, in fact, most of them continued to believe that the war would continue into the foreseeable future. For most of the war, the Allied commanders had been known for their virtually unshakable optimism – sometimes bordering upon a foolish perseverance in the face of catastrophe. This was above all true of the men who had risen to command the Allied armies in 1918, men like Douglas Haig.

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<sup>232</sup> See for instance Barclay, *Armistice: 1918*, 2; J.H. Boraston, ed., *Sir Douglas Haig's Despatches* (December 1915 – April 1919) (London: JM Dent and Sons, 1919), 293; Ferdinand Foch, *The Memoirs of Marshal Foch* (Garden City, NY.: Doubleday, 1931), 447-48.

<sup>233</sup> Harris, *Amiens to Armistice*, 248-65.

<sup>234</sup> Edward Lengel, *To Conquer Hell: The Meuse-Argonne 1918* (New York: Holt, 2008).

It was these men who had pressed forward with ceaseless frontal assaults on the Somme and Passchendaele, continually dispatching confident cables back to their leaders at home. In 1918, significantly, there was to be no such optimism. In early September, eight weeks before the armistice, British leaders were still debating whether or not to plan for victory in 1919 or 1920.<sup>235</sup> Lloyd George, the British Prime Minister, was at the same time pushing to scale back operations on the Western Front, so that resources could be conserved for the decisive battles the following year. Optimism grew in the following days, following a series of major successes, but only marginally. There were still no expectations of a quick victory, and no talk of weakening resistance. In a meeting with Lloyd George on October 18<sup>th</sup>, Haig informed him that the Germans were still fighting with determination, and that the war would certainly continue into 1919.<sup>236</sup> At a major conference of the Allied military chiefs six days later, the same view prevailed. Foch candidly admitted that while the situation was favorable, the German armies were still intact.<sup>237</sup> At the same time, the Allies were approving production schedules which called for the output of munitions to peak in 1919.<sup>238</sup> They were also massing forces for further campaigns in Lorraine, Bavaria, and Hungary.<sup>239</sup> Expectations of extended fighting were confirmed by the reports of front line units and intelligence organizations. Throughout the autumn, they reported that German morale was low, but they found little evidence that its powers of resistance had decreased. On October 15, the intelligence unit of the American 42<sup>nd</sup> Division admitted “the enemy has continued his resistance with

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<sup>235</sup> Churchill, *The World Crisis*, 519.

<sup>236</sup> Bullitt Lowry, *Armistice 1918* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1996), 47-48.

<sup>237</sup> Lowry, *Armistice 1918*, 69-70.

<sup>238</sup> Churchill, *The World Crisis*, 519-520.

<sup>239</sup> Lowry, *Armistice 1918*, 150-57.

undiminished fury and has at no time showed a tendency to withdraw or surrender.”<sup>240</sup>

Several days later, reports from the 82<sup>nd</sup> Division stated that “the enemy’s resistance continued to be of the strongest nature.”<sup>241</sup> British intelligence dispatched similar reports into November.<sup>242</sup>

Expectations for a long war shaped the Allied views on concluding an armistice. Haig and most of Britain’s other senior military leaders opposed drafting harsh terms, believing that the Germans were not yet sufficiently beaten to accept them.<sup>243</sup> Foch favored harsh terms, but only as a diplomatic maneuver. Foch, like Haig, did not believe that the Germans would accept harsh terms, and he was apparently “astonished” that the German delegation eventually signed the document.<sup>244</sup> The Allies eventually did offer the Germans exceedingly harsh terms. In exchange for an armistice, Germany was to evacuate Belgium and France, and Germany territory west the Rhine was to come under Allied occupation. Germany was also to surrender most of her fleet and heavy weapons. These terms, however, did not reflect confidence in their position, but lack of it. They were designed to ensure that that, if peace talks broke down, Germany could not continue the war under any circumstances. Allied leaders were deeply afraid that, if granted a respite, the German army could withdraw and establish a defense on its own borders. There were serious doubts about whether, in that case, the Allies could win.<sup>245</sup> In other words, the Allies continued to believe the Germans were capable of further resistance.

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<sup>240</sup> *Summary of Information*, no. 201, (27 Oct. 1918).

<sup>241</sup> *Summary of Information*, no. 203 (21 Oct. 1918).

<sup>242</sup> Lowry, *Armistice 1918*, 148.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, 47-49.

<sup>244</sup> Lowry, *Armistice 1918*, 158.

<sup>245</sup> Churchill, *World Crisis*, 509-511.

Their entire diplomatic strategy was designed to avoid any potential resurgence of its power.

On the other side of the lines, the German high command was proceeding along similar premises. As the summer wore on, even the most optimistic observers realized that the war could no longer be won. And the Allied triumph at Amiens seemed to remove all doubt. On September 29<sup>th</sup>, in the aftermath of the battle, Ludendorff informed the government that an Allied breakthrough was highly likely, and that an armistice must be concluded at once. But while everyone realized the war was lost, no one was arguing that the army was actually in the midst of internal collapse. At a Cabinet meeting on October 17<sup>th</sup>, Ludendorff argued that the army's morale was still solid, and that the fight could be continued into 1919.<sup>246</sup> He and Hindenburg reiterated this position on the 25<sup>th</sup>, in a meeting with the Kaiser.<sup>247</sup> Several members of the Cabinet doubted whether Ludendorff's assessment could be trusted, and there were suggestions that other members of the military should be consulted. In fact, though, almost all the key figures in the military were in agreement on this point. On November 1<sup>st</sup>, General Groener (who by then had succeeded Ludendorff as head of the supreme command), stated that "the army stands splendidly," and that the real danger to the situation was posed by disloyal elements at home.<sup>248</sup> A few days later, the Kaiser consulted 40 front-line commanders, in an effort to better grasp the realities of the situation. Groener's remarks here point to another critical fact that must be borne in mind here. The military leadership was terrified that military collapse would plunge the army into revolution. They further imagined that

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<sup>246</sup> Harry Rudin, *Armistice 1918* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944) 143,146.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, 209-10.

<sup>248</sup> Kitchen, *Silent Dictatorship*, 266.

these radicalized soldiers, now streaming pell-mell back into Germany, would spread revolution throughout the country. The army had contemplated such a scenario for decades, ever since the expansion of the army had compelled the army to admit urban workers and other suspect elements.<sup>249</sup> But their fears had been particularly awakened by a succession of events over the last eighteen months – most especially the revolution in Russia, but also the Italian collapse at Caporetto, the January strikes, and reports of increasing socialist agitation among the rank and file. From the late summer onwards, the high command became increasingly obsessed with this possibility.<sup>250</sup> Their overriding priority, then, was to keep the army intact – a fact which Ludendorff and his associates repeatedly made explicit.<sup>251</sup> They had no reason to invite the destruction of the army by holding a false or overly-optimistic view of its condition. If the army were indeed showing signs of dissolution, such reports would surely have been at the center of the high command's discussions.

The accounts of soldiers only support this view. While such reports cannot be expected to provide anything like a complete picture of operations along the entire front, they can nevertheless give some sense of the fighting's general character. All sources agree that the fighting was uncommonly fierce. Clarence Richmond, serving with the American 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division and a veteran of several battles, recorded in his diary that the fighting along the Meuse River in early November was "the heaviest that I have been through so far in this war."<sup>252</sup> His unit, attempting to force its way across the river was pinned down by German fire for more than a day, and his platoon was virtually wiped

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<sup>249</sup> Martin Kitchen, *The German Officer Corps: 1890-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), 163-66.

<sup>250</sup> Geyer, "Insurrectionary Warfare," 467-68.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid. 458. See especially Heye's comment.

<sup>252</sup> War Diary of Clarence Richmond, 10-7 Nov. 1918.

out. “The bank of the river was strewn with our dead. I counted twenty five within a distance of a hundred yards.” That was a day before the armistice was signed. Ivor Williams, a four year veteran of the front lines, voiced the same opinion when his unit was engaged in the Somme sector. “The enemy is resisting terribly,” he recorded in his diary. “They are the best fighters we have struck. Casualties are fearful.”<sup>253</sup> As they advanced, Allied soldiers were struck by the sheer number of Germans which had died at their posts. Private Charles Dermody, captured by the Germans while fighting in the Argonne wood, marveled at the carnage that greeted him as he was led back through the enemy lines. “It was then that I saw the damage we had been doing,” he wrote. “There were dead Germans lying thick for a mile.”<sup>254</sup> Very often, dead Germans were discovered still manning their weapons. Fighting in the Argonne in the early days of November, Clarence Richmond described the scene after his unit had cleared the enemy out of a thicket: “About two hundred yards from the edge [of the wood] were two German machine guns, with two operators still at their post.”<sup>255</sup> A similar scene greeted Walter Lockard a few days later. “That gang were on the job at all times and I’ll hand it to them for stickers. We would find machine gun nests where there were two or three dead Boches and a gun with empty belts of ammunition lying around.”<sup>256</sup> For his part, he saw little sign that the war would be over any time soon. He had written to his mother, “I honestly thing that this time next year will find us this side of the pond unless the German people wise up.” This was a common enough sentiment among Allied troops. Earl Bolton, serving with the Canadian Corps, wrote to his sister in late September, and

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<sup>253</sup> Diary of Ivor Alexander Williams [private holding], 1 Sep. 1918.

<sup>254</sup> Memoirs of Charles Dermody, Chapter 1.

<sup>255</sup> War Diary of Clarence Richmond, 30 Oct. – 5 Nov. 1918.

<sup>256</sup> Letters of Walter Lockard [private holding], 9 Nov. 1918.



warned her against any undue optimism. “They may talk about the war being over this winter but don’t let anybody kid you about that for it may last 3 or 4 months yet.”<sup>257</sup>

In these last weeks of the war, the tactical situation was highly fluid. It could vary a great deal from one day to the next, and from one point to another. In some sectors, the exhausted Germans put up little resistance. Exhausted soldiers sometimes flung away their rifles and fled from the allied advance, or simply waited for Allied capture.<sup>258</sup> There were cases in which entire companies or battalions surrendered after only token resistance.<sup>259</sup> On the whole, though, we can clearly conclude that most German soldiers continued to fight, and that the army as a whole continued to offer significant resistance to the Allied advance, right up until the last days of the war. On the morning of November 11<sup>th</sup>, when the armistice officially came into effect, most of the *Westheer’s* 2.9 million men were still with their units, still taking orders, still going into the front lines and still putting themselves in danger.

These findings make it very difficult to answer the questions with which we began the chapter – that is, why these soldiers fought. We generally accept that there is some correlation between the conditions of a soldier’s life and his willingness to fight; the more privation he suffers, the more danger he is exposed to, the more likely he is to give up. In this case, though, it seems as though the opposite is true. German soldiers suffered heavier losses and greater hardships than his counterparts in other armies. And at the same time, they displayed greater discipline and resiliency. So how can we explain this extraordinary endurance? Was the German state simply better at commanding the

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<sup>257</sup> Canadian Letters and Images Project, Earl Bolton, 22. Sep 1918.

<sup>258</sup> Peter Hart, *1918: A Very British Victory* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2008), 400.

<sup>259</sup> Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, 224.

loyalty of its men? Was there some feature of the German military, or of German society more broadly, that made them more willing to fight? Or were there other variables at work here?

## Chapter 3: Sticks and Carrots

The first two chapters have sketched out the basic problem with which this study is concerned. In Chapter One, we saw how German soldiers endured some of the hardest fighting of the entire war. Yet in Chapter Two, we concluded that the majority of soldiers continued to fight to the very end. Conventional understandings of morale lead us to believe that the opposite should happen –the harder things get, the less motivated that soldiers are to continue. So what is happening here? How can we explain the willingness of these men to go on fighting?

The existing body of research on this subject provides little help in answering this question. The problem is not so much a lack of interest; there are now dozens of studies which, in one way or another, broach the question of soldiers' motivation in the First World War. The problem, rather, is that scholars have not shown much imagination in approaching the topic. In all of their work on this subject, they have produced only two general types of explanations. One emphasizes the forces of coercion; soldiers fought because they were compelled to do so, by the disciplinary machinery of the army and state. The other explanation emphasizes consent and persuasion. In this view, soldiers fought because they wished to do so, because they believed that fighting served some important purpose. While these explanations work better for some cases than for others, neither gets us very far in explaining the extraordinary resilience of the German soldier. Coercion and persuasion, while certainly present in the German army, were weak in comparison to most other armies. And the longer the war continued, the weaker they became. The demands of the war gradually destroyed the social and organizational bases

on which they rested. The aim of this chapter is to develop this point in more detail. It will examine how consent and coercion theories apply to the German case, and it will describe how they ultimately fail to explain the behavior of the German soldier.

### **Coercion Theories**

For many historians, especially military historians of more traditional inclinations, the soldier's resilience derived primarily from military discipline. Armies, they argue, were very good at making people fight. The most direct instrument of military discipline was the officer corps, and the coercive powers with which its members were invested.<sup>260</sup> At all times, soldiers were under the observation of a team of officers. And these officers were empowered to deal severely with any soldiers who displayed an unwillingness to fight, or who were otherwise reluctant to obey the army's instructions. Soldiers who attempted to flee, or who refused to obey orders "in the presence of the enemy," could be shot on the spot. Lesser offenses were often handled by military courts, which were also empowered to hand out heavy punishments. Insulting an officer, for instance, or general insubordination, could be punished with years in a military penitentiary.<sup>261</sup> The authority of the officer corps did not rest entirely on force and threats. It was given legitimacy, a sense of "naturalness", by the social distance between officer and man. While the rank and file were drawn mainly from the lower classes, their officers were recruited from the

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<sup>260</sup> Some proponents of coercion theories include Deist, "Military Collapse;" Ziemann, *War Experiences*, and Herwig, *The First World War*.

<sup>261</sup> See Karl Hecker, ed., *Das Militär-Strafgesetzbuch für das Deutsche Reich* (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1877). For serious crimes, sentencing guidelines in other armies were comparable.

upper classes – men who soldiers were already accustomed to respect and obey.<sup>262</sup> This was particularly true in Germany, where the persistence of an aristocratic-patriarchal ethos was more pronounced than elsewhere.<sup>263</sup> In Germany, too, military service was held in particularly high regard.<sup>264</sup> The officer corps could therefore attract the services of the best and brightest – the university-educated, the scions of respectable houses, men who had been groomed for leadership positions their entire lives.<sup>265</sup>

The authority of the officer corps was supplemented by a broader process of training and conditioning. Before a man was even posted to an active unit, he had undergone an extended period of military training. Instruction in basic skills, such as the operation of weapons, was only the secondary purpose of such training. Its primary purpose was to transform the man into a pliant instrument of military policy.<sup>266</sup> It achieved these aim partly through drill. The endless repetition of basic tasks was designed to reduce the need for conscious deliberation, and to render such behaviors virtually automatic. In battle, the soldier would not stop to consider his circumstances, or

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<sup>262</sup> Watson, *Junior Officership*; Sheffield, *Leadership in the Trenches*.

<sup>263</sup> There is much debate over whether the bourgeoisie or the aristocracy exerted a greater influence on pre-war cultural norms. But in either case, it is clear that military-aristocratic norms continued to play an very important role in German cultural life. See Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1973), esp. 137.

<sup>264</sup> For the militarization of culture, see Heinz Lemmermann, *Kriegserziehung im Kaiserreich: Studien zur politischen Funktion von Schule und Schulmusik, 1890-1918* (Liliental bei Bremen, 1984); Wilfried von Bredow, *Moderner Militarismus : Analyse und Kritik* (Stuttgart W. Kohlhammer, 1983); Benjamin Ziemann, “Sozialmilitarismus und militärische Sozialisation im deutschen Kaiserreich 1870-1914. Desiderate und Perspektiven in der Revision eines Geschichtsbildes” *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 53 (2002).

<sup>265</sup> See esp. Karl Demeter, *The German Officer-Corps in Society and State, 1650-1945* (New York: Prager, 1965).

<sup>266</sup> Hew Strachan, “Training, Morale and Modern War,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 41, no. 2 (2006); Michael Geyer, “How the Germans Learned to Wage War,” in *Between Mass Death and Individual Loss: The Place of the Dead in Twentieth Century Germany*, eds. Alon Confino, Paul Betts, and Dirk Schumann (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008). For a similar contemporary view point, see J.F.C Fuller, *Training Soldiers for War* (London: H. Rees, 1914); Friedrich Altrichter, *Die seelischen Kräfte des deutschen Heeres im Frieden und im Weltkriege* (Berlin: E.S. Mittler, 1933).

whether he should continue to fight; he would simply act as he had been trained to do. Training was also designed to help the soldier control the emotions that might conflict with the performance of his duties – above all fear. A well trained soldier knew what to expect in battle. He also knew how to respond, and he had faith in the efficacy of his response, and in the ability of his comrades and superiors to support him. The experience of combat would therefore seem less disorienting to him. He would feel some measure of control over his circumstances. In all nations, training served these same basic ends. But the German training programme was widely regarded to be among the best in the world, in large part because the process was accorded an especially high priority by the military authorities. Relative to other countries, Germany spent far more on instruction and training exercises.<sup>267</sup>

Explanations of this kind – emphasizing the role of discipline and coercion – work much better for the beginning of the war than the end. We often refer to “the German army,” as though it were a single, stable entity. In fact, though, it changed over time, and under the conditions of war it changed very quickly indeed. The army of 1918 resembled the army of 1914 very little, as even its leaders were forced to recognize.<sup>268</sup> By the last half of the war, all of the mechanisms through which coercive pressures were exerted – the officer corps, the military judiciary, standards of training and recruitment – had become drastically less effective. By the last months of the war, it is difficult to see what is holding the army together.

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<sup>267</sup> Strachan, “Training, Morale, and Modern War,” 218-219. Also, Wesbrook

<sup>268</sup> In his memoirs, Ludendorff characterizes the army of 1918 as a militia. *Ludendorff's Own Story*, 164.

The deterioration of the army was ultimately rooted in Germany's limited human resources, relative to the demands imposed by the war. The tactical effectiveness of the German soldier was achieved through an extended period of training. Men drafted into the infantry served a training period of two years; those with the cavalry and some of the technical branches served three. In a training period of this length, men not only mastered the details of tactics and weaponry; they were able to build up relationships with their leaders, and with the other men in their training class. This was considered to be one of the great strengths of the system.<sup>269</sup> The system was also designed to create a reserve of trained manpower, which could be mobilized in the event of a major war. Once men had completed their training period, they were returned to civilian life, but they remained liable for military service (in various capacities) up until the age of 45. The younger classes of reservists would be incorporated directly into the field army, to bring it up to its wartime strength. The others could be used to replace casualties, and to perform auxiliary tasks.<sup>270</sup> When war broke out in 1914, the German army had at its disposal some 5 million trained men. About 3.5 million of these were immediately incorporated into the active army, leaving about 1.5 million for other functions.<sup>271</sup> Given the short-term war the high command envisioned, this manpower reserve seemed more than sufficient. In the event, however, it was exhausted within twelve months. Losses proved much higher than expected – the army suffered almost 800,000 casualties by the end of 1914.<sup>272</sup> At the same time, the army drew upon the pool of replacements to form new units for the field. By the beginning of 1915, all of the men with pre-war training had

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<sup>269</sup> "Forming New Units," *Tactical Notebook 2* (October 1992).

<sup>270</sup> For a concise discussion of the German recruitment structure, see Drury, "German Stormtrooper," 30.

<sup>271</sup> Altrichter, *Die seelischen Kräfte*, 190-91.

<sup>272</sup> See Appendix I: "German Casualties."

been called into service.<sup>273</sup> From that point forward, the army was forced to draw upon men who had no prior military training. Many of these were men who had initially been deemed unsuitable for military service.<sup>274</sup> Another large portion were teenagers, who were called into service upon reaching the age of liability. Through the middle years of the war, the army continued to suffer heavy casualties, and the number of men with pre-war training steadily declined. By 1918, they constituted less than a quarter of the army's total strength, and many of these were middle aged men, who were no longer deemed fit for combat operations.<sup>275</sup> The army's core of well-trained soldiers had effectively ceased to exist.

The men who took their place were called up and trained during the war itself, an arrangement which rapidly proved to be inadequate. Before the war, new recruits received their training within the regiments of the standing army, alongside older recruits, and under the supervision of the regiment's regular officers and NCOs.<sup>276</sup> During the war this was obviously impossible, because the regiments had been dispatched to the front. The army had made no alternate arrangements, apparently on the assumption that there would be no need to train further recruits in wartime, that its existing reserves would be sufficient. When untrained men began to be called up, which began to occur already in 1914, a training system had to be improvised. Initially, individual regiments established training companies at their home base in Germany, in which untrained draftees were

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<sup>273</sup> Wrisberg, *Heer und Heimat*, 87.

<sup>274</sup> *Notes on the German Army*, 23.

<sup>275</sup> Drury, "German Stormtrooper," 33.

<sup>276</sup> For a good description, see Eli Helmick, "Military Observations in Germany," *Infantry Journal* 3 (1906).



given a basic training course before being sent to the field.<sup>277</sup> But these training companies, which had to be built from the ground up, suffered from serious deficiencies. The army faced shortages of equipment virtually from the outset, and most of what was on hand was assigned to combat units in the field. This left very little for the training formations. Recruits often lacked basic training materials, such as rifles and kits, and were issued “filthy” boots and uniforms recycled from previous classes.<sup>278</sup> Food was not plentiful, especially given the physical intensity of basic training, and sometimes had to be purchased from company stores out of the recruit’s meager stipend.<sup>279</sup> This eventually prompted commanders in the field to make complaints, charging that new recruits were arriving at their units sick and underfed. Above all, the training companies lacked qualified instructors. With most of the army’s active officers in the field, training staff had to be drawn from other sources – especially old officers unfit for field duty, and men recalled from retirement. Very few of these men had ever seen combat.<sup>280</sup> These courses had no standardized curricula. The army allowed individual regiments to set the format and requirements of their own training courses. With little guidance, most courses focused on the traditional subjects with which their aged instructors were most familiar, such as drill, formation marching, and tests of physical endurance.<sup>281</sup> Tactical training was outmoded.<sup>282</sup> And many necessary skills, such as shooting and entrenching, were

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<sup>277</sup> “Forming New Units”

<sup>278</sup> Wrisberg, *Heer und Heimat*, 77-78; Theodor Herzig, *Die Tagebücher des Theodor Herzig: Aufzeichnungen aus dem Ersten Weltkrieg* (Gelnhausen: Wagner, 2006), 23.

<sup>279</sup> Herzig, *Tagebücher*, 25; BfZ, Pechthold, 444.

<sup>280</sup> Wrisberg, *Heer und Heimat*, 76-77; Ziemann, *War Experiences*, 39.

<sup>281</sup> Wrisberg 252, Pechthold 127

<sup>282</sup> BfZ, Pechthold, 443.

inexplicably neglected.<sup>283</sup> Senior military officials constantly demanded that basic training focus on more practical subjects, but apparently to little effect.<sup>284</sup>

An equally serious problem was the short duration of training. Even after it became clear that the war would not be over in six months, as originally hoped, the military leadership continued to think in terms of a short war. At any given moment, they believed that the war could be ended within the next 12-18 months.<sup>285</sup> There was therefore no time for extended training. To be of any use, men had to be put into the field as quickly as possible. Training times were established by unit, and therefore varied, but they generally lasted between 8 and 12 weeks, and generally became shorter as the war continued.<sup>286</sup> Realizing the inadequacy of the existing system, the high command attempted to provide some additional training. In December of 1914, a second step was added to the training processes; after basic training, recruits were sent to “field recruit depots” near the front lines.<sup>287</sup> There they received several weeks of additional instruction, usually by men with combat experience. The system was sound in theory, but produced only limited improvements in practice. Now near to the front lines, recruits were constantly being pulled out of their depots to perform auxiliary tasks – to serve guard duty, to build roads and fortifications, even (on occasion) to fight in the front lines.<sup>288</sup> This was especially the case in the later years of the war, as combat units had more tasks to perform, and fewer sets of hands. By 1918, men in the recruit depots spent only a fraction of their time actually receiving instruction. They rarely received more than

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<sup>283</sup> HSA-St, M 30/1, “Zweijährige Dienstzeit,” report by Major Caracciola-Delbrück.

<sup>284</sup> HSA-St, M 30/1, “Erfahrungen der 14 R.D...”.

<sup>285</sup> See Wrisberg, *Heer und Heimat*, 95-96.

<sup>286</sup> Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, 85.

<sup>287</sup> Wrisberg, *Heer und Heimat*, 77-78.

<sup>288</sup> HSA-St, M 33/2, memo Sep. 25 1918; BA-MA, PH 5/27, AOK 18 memo, Oct. 19 1918.

three months of training total, and in many cases less. This was obviously far below the peacetime standard of two years, and also well below that which Allied soldiers received. American soldiers, for instance, typically received seven months of basic training, followed by several more months in forward-area training.<sup>289</sup>

The declining quality of training clearly damaged tactical efficiency. Officers complained that the new recruits were lacking in every critical skill – “in defensive drills, in the use of terrain, in fire discipline, in march endurance, in independence, in initiative.”<sup>290</sup> Many could not perform even the most basic tasks, like care for their weapons. Some went so far as to describe the new replacements as “completely worthless.” One divisional commander complained to his superiors that “the company and battalion commanders would rather fight with 10 men of the old *Stammschaften* than 50 new replacements.”<sup>291</sup> Veteran troops also avoided the new replacements, whose “bad habits” could easily get them killed, and who could not be trusted with basic jobs. One old hand recalls his experiences with these hastily trained recruits: “the young soldiers could not work with us. Many had never learned how. They quarreled among themselves, none wanted to lend a hand, none knew properly how to begin to take care of this or that.”<sup>292</sup> Even the recruits themselves complained, because their training had left them completely unprepared for what they would find in the field.<sup>293</sup> Their lack of practical

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<sup>289</sup> Ayers, *The War With Germany*, 32-34.

<sup>290</sup> HSA-St, M 30/1, “Zweijährige Dienstzeit,” report by Major Caracciola-Delbrück.

<sup>291</sup> BA-MA, PH5 I/40, memo from Gruppe Dieffenbach, Oct. 12 [1918].

<sup>292</sup> BfZ, Pechthold, 61.

<sup>293</sup> HSA-St, M 30/1, “Erfahrungen der 14 R.D...”

training often cost them their lives. Casualty rates among new replacements were invariably higher than among veterans.<sup>294</sup>

The quality of leadership was likewise in decline. Before the war, the German officer corps was much lauded for its professionalism and skill. But it was also relatively small, owing to the army's socially restrictive standards. Candidates had to have completed their university degrees (or a certain number of credits). They had to have sufficient means to support and equip themselves during their period of apprenticeship. And to officially receive their commission, they had to win the endorsement of their fellow officers and of their regimental commander, who were anxious to weed out any candidates of "unsuitable" background.<sup>295</sup> This combination of requirements effectively closed off the officer corps to the working classes, and much of the middle class.<sup>296</sup> The number of active, long-service officers numbered about 33,000. These were supplemented by some 34,000 reserve officers – mostly middle class men who with limited service time, who had "purchased" a commission as a badge of social status.<sup>297</sup> This was a relatively small number for an army whose mobilized strength was in excess of 3.5 million; the ratio of officers to men was less than half than in the British army.<sup>298</sup> Even before the outbreak of war, in fact, there were not enough officers to fill all of the required slots. The Prussian contingent alone was short some 2,000 officers.<sup>299</sup> And the situation became immeasurably worse once the fighting began. Officers had to be found

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<sup>294</sup> Ziemann, *War Experiences*, 34.

<sup>295</sup> Watson, "Junior Officership" 432. Anon., *The German Army from Within* (London: Hodder and Sloughton, 1914), 13-14.

<sup>296</sup> Kitchen, *The German Officer Corps*, 23-31.

<sup>297</sup> Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, 432-33.

<sup>298</sup> Ferguson, *The Pity of the War*, 347.

<sup>299</sup> Kitchen, *The German Officer Corps*, 34.

to found for the new formations created during the war – the infantry alone formed 1,700 additional battalions by 1917 – and to man the ranks the swelling military bureaucracy. The staff of the War Ministry, for instance, increased from 700 to 6,632.<sup>300</sup> Officers also had to be found to replace heavy losses. This was an even bigger problem than finding replacements for the rank and file, because officers were wounded and killed at a higher rate. According to one calculation, 25% of all active officers were killed during the war, compared to 14% of ordinary soldiers.<sup>301</sup> In all, 51,860 officers were killed and 95,000 wounded.<sup>302</sup> Total casualties were more than twice the size of the pre-war officer corps.

The army had no choice but to continue to commission officers during the war. The application process was partially amended, to accommodate the needs of men already in the ranks.<sup>303</sup> But despite the ever more dire shortages of officers, the army refused to substantially alter the stringent educational and economic pre-requisites. As a result, the quality of candidates deteriorated. As the war progressed, officer schools were forced to admit men who had little or no prior military training.<sup>304</sup> The total number of candidates, moreover, declined. The officer corps remained closed off to all but the upper strata of society, and these simply could not supply the number of men that the army required. The ratio of officers to men, comparatively low to begin with, declined further during the war.<sup>305</sup> The decline was greatest in combat units. In rear-area and administrative units, the shortage of officers could be partially offset by using less fit

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<sup>300</sup> Wrisberg, *Heer und Heimat*, 15.

<sup>301</sup> Altrock, *Vom Sterben*, 68, 71.

<sup>302</sup> Watson, "Junior Officership," 447.

<sup>303</sup> Jaraus, 521, Watson, "Junior Officership," 437.

<sup>304</sup> Summary of Information, no. 226 (11 Nov. 1918); Ludendorff, *Ludendorff's Own Story*, 286; Watson, "Junior Officership," 442.

<sup>305</sup> *Notes on the German Army*, 32-33.

men: retirees, convalescents, men transferred from other branches. But this was less of an option for front-line units. Because of the physical demands of combat, only young and physically fit men could be posted to these formations. After the heavy losses suffered in the spring offensives, the shortage of officers became critical. By the summer of 1918, many infantry divisions had no more than a third of the required number of officers.<sup>306</sup> Entire companies were often without officers; there were even reports of entire divisions without officers.<sup>307</sup>

For officers, as for the rank and file, wartime training courses were hugely accelerated. In peacetime, the path to the officer corps was a long and difficult one. If a man who attained a commission by the standard route, the process typically required the better part of a decade: five years at a cadet school, an initial apprenticeship in the chosen regiment, followed by training in a war academy, and then an extended probationary period while the candidate was evaluated.<sup>308</sup> During the war, the process could be concluded in a matter of weeks. Men who met the basic requirements could apply for officer candidacy after a brief period in the ranks. If their commanding officer approved, they would be transferred to an officer training course, which lasted between eight and twelve weeks; if there was urgent need for additional officers, the courses could be concluded in as few as six weeks.<sup>309</sup> Men who passed the concluding examinations received their commissions. These courses, by all accounts, were quite rigorous. But it was simply impossible for an eight-week course, no matter how demanding, to give candidates adequate instruction in the myriad tactical and administrative tasks which they

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<sup>306</sup> BA-MA, PH I/40, "Zustand der Divisionen," 25 Oct. 1918.

<sup>307</sup> BfZ, Pechthold, 93-94. Hoover, Hansen, 8. Oct 1918, quoted remarks from Haase.

<sup>308</sup> Anon., *German Army from Within*, 13-14; *Notes on the German Army*, 31.

<sup>309</sup> DTA 260; Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, 126.

would be expected to perform. This was especially so, since so many of the candidates were very young. In the officer corps, as in the army at large, the pool of eligible men was quickly exhausted. This meant that the only source of new officers were the draft classes who were just coming of age. Complete demographic data on the wartime officer corps is lacking, but there is much evidence to suggest that the average age of combat officers declined dramatically. Soldiers' accounts often refer to the youth of these officers, some as young as seventeen or eighteen.<sup>310</sup> Official reports likewise refer to the growing predominance in "youthful officers."<sup>311</sup> While most of these men were no doubt dedicated and hard-working, they simply lacked any practical or professional experiences on which to draw. They also had trouble dealing with the older men who came under their command. Middle-aged reservists were skeptical when their young officers tried to lecture them in subjects about which they had no knowledge – such as politics and war aims, as these men were barely old enough to vote.<sup>312</sup> They likewise became angry when their officers did not acknowledge their age and experience. After a dispute with his lieutenant, one grizzled veteran exclaimed "he is 23 years old. I have 22 years in the service!"<sup>313</sup>

The high command was aware of these problems to some extent, but they had limited resources with which to address them. Officer training schools suffered from many of the same problems and limitations as basic training courses. They lacked qualified instructors, since the ablest and most experienced officers were desperately

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<sup>310</sup> see Hoover, Shetter; Hoover, Abel, #229; BfZ, Geidel, 17 Jan. 1918; BfZ, Hilpert 9 Aug. 1917; BfZ, Pechthold, 124.

<sup>311</sup> HSA-St, M 30/1, "Deutsche Propagandatätigkeit" Sep. 2 1918; See also Ludendorff, *Ludendorff's Own Story*, 248; Ziemann, *War Experiences*, 79.

<sup>312</sup> Kitchen, *The German Officer Corps*, 175.

<sup>313</sup> DTA, 1040, 13 Oct. 1918.

needed in combat units. Even in the elite *Sturmabteilungen* schools, instructors were often elderly and behind the times – some of them quoting tactical doctrines current in the 1890s.<sup>314</sup> The practical requirements of these training courses, stringent in theory, were considerably loosed to provide more men. Contrary to pre-war practice, men who failed their examinations were sometimes allowed retake them, in some cases multiple times.<sup>315</sup>

Many of the men who received their commissions during the war, the so-called *Kriegsoffiziere*, were scarcely more competent than the raw recruits that they commanded. Front-line units received an increasing number of officers who had never seen combat before.<sup>316</sup> These men often could not perform simple tasks, like oversee the construction of a defensive position, or correctly read a map.<sup>317</sup> Their inexperience led them to expose their men to unnecessary risks, or to saddle them with pointless labors. One novice officer, for instance, ordered extensive preparations for a raid, which he later called off, then rescheduled, then called off again. A week's worth of labors was lost, and the men were apoplectic.<sup>318</sup> More importantly, these officers had little idea how to command or direct the men under their command. Some privately confessed to a fear of public speaking, and struggled to assume an air of authority.<sup>319</sup> Veteran officers observed that the new replacements let themselves “be commanded by the men,” rather than commanding them.<sup>320</sup> Officers themselves felt that their training was inadequate, and

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<sup>314</sup> BfZ, Pechthold, 158.

<sup>315</sup> DTA, #260, 179-180.

<sup>316</sup> BfZ, Pechthold, 129.

<sup>317</sup> Hoover, Schetter, 6. Watson, “Junior Officership,” 443.

<sup>318</sup> DTA, #402.3, 22-23 Feb.

<sup>319</sup> BfZ, Pechthold, 150, 168.

<sup>320</sup> BfZ, Pechthold, 227-8.



complained that they had been thrust into combat postings before they were ready.<sup>321</sup>

Some worked to overcome their lack of experience, but others did not; many simply disliked their jobs, and did as little as possible. Throughout the officer corps, there were many sons of privileged families who had no wish to serve as officers, but did so to preserve the family name, or to avoid being drafted into the rank and file.<sup>322</sup>

The army's senior leadership noted, with some understanding, that inexperienced officers tended to rely more heavily on threats and punishments to maintain discipline. Yet this tool was increasingly unavailable. Even in 1914, German military justice had been among the least strict of any major army, notwithstanding stereotypes of Prussian militarism. A new legal code had been drafted shortly after unification. It was far more liberal than the older Prussian code which it replaced, partly as a concession to pressure from the other German states, and partly because of the sense of legalism which pervaded the new Empire's political culture. Under the 1872 code, summary proceedings had been dispensed with. Trials were conducted under an adversarial system modeled on domestic criminal proceedings, with the burden of proof lying on the plaintiff, and judgments subject to review by higher authorities. Permanent courts replaced ad hoc drumheads. Judges and advocates were trained jurists. Offenses were more precisely defined than previously, with sentencing guidelines established by the legislature rather than the

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<sup>321</sup> Hoover, Abel #221,

<sup>322</sup> See for instance the letters of Willy Schutz; MKB, AK 219.

army.<sup>323</sup> In comparison to other armies, minimum sentences were comparatively light. Capital punishment was retained, but only for the severest offenses.<sup>324</sup>

Over the course of the war, the code was further loosened. The social democrats, who before 1914 had campaigned extensively against the cruelty of military justice, continued their campaign after the outbreak. The War Department was not inclined to oppose them very vigorously. Its senior members realized that the old standards were no longer suited to the increasingly war-weary and civilianized army. The first revision took place even before the shooting started, in July of 1914. Expecting that some men would fail to report for duty, the penalty for absence without leave was reduced.<sup>325</sup> The Reichstag pushed through a more thorough reform of military law in April of 1917. These reforms drastically reduced the punishments for desertion and other serious offenses. The minimum sentence for desertion in the field was lowered from five years to one year. In cases of repeated desertion, in which the death penalty had previously been mandatory, judges could now opt for life imprisonment. In the fall of 1918, punishments for insubordination were similarly reduced. These changes were applied to all pending cases, and could also be applied to sentences that were currently being served.<sup>326</sup> Corporal punishments – including the infamous practice of ‘tying,’ in which the victim was tied to a post or wagon wheel for extended periods – had already been abolished

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<sup>323</sup> Hecker, ed., *Das Militär-Strafgesetzbuch für das Deutsche Reich*; for a summary of the more liberal features of the 1872 law code, see Jahr, *Gewöhnliche Soldaten*, 43-45.

<sup>324</sup> For example, contrast German and British policies on capital punishment: Anthony Babington, *For the Sake of Example: Capital Courts Martial, 1914-1920* (London: Penguin, 2002); Gerard Orem, *Military Executions in World War I* (Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

<sup>325</sup> Jahr, *Gewöhnliche Soldaten*, 81.

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*, 81-82.

under liberal pressure.<sup>327</sup> The practice of “hard arrest,” involving solitary confinement and reduced rations, was abolished in 1918.<sup>328</sup>

Field commanders did their best to roll back these changes, insisting that harsh disciplinary measures were crucial for sustaining morale, but their efforts accomplished little. This was partly due to the particular division of powers within the military. Disciplinary matters fell under the jurisdiction of the War Department, rather than with the army’s operational command, and the working relationship between these two bodies was always conflicted.<sup>329</sup> Substantive revisions to the legal code rested with neither party, but with the Reichstag.<sup>330</sup> Efforts to sharpen discipline also routinely foundered on the rigid legalism of the judiciary. Because of the growing caseload, and because of the logistical difficulties of organizing a trial in wartime (when many witnesses and plaintiffs would be at the front), many cases went untried for months or years.<sup>331</sup> All parties agreed in principle that trials should be expedited. When real change was attempted, however, thorny legal questions invariably arose. For instance, it was often unclear which court had jurisdiction. Normally, a man accused of a crime was tried by the court of his own division. But what if the crime occurred while he was in transit? Or if he was temporarily assigned to another unit, or in the rear? The OHL pressed for a more flexible approach to these problems. There were proposals to establish “special” courts to handle such cases.<sup>332</sup> But the War Ministry preferred to try and sort out the complex jurisdictional

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<sup>327</sup> Ludendorff, *Ludendorff's Own Story*, 246.

<sup>328</sup> Jahr, *Gewöhnliche Soldaten*, 300-01.

<sup>329</sup> For an outline of their wartime relations, see Kitchen, *The Silent Dictatorship*, esp. 71-75.

<sup>330</sup> Jahr, *Gewöhnliche Soldaten*, 300.

<sup>331</sup> HSA-St, M 1/7, Bü 274, “Geschäftsanfall der Gerichte des Besatzungsheer im Jahre 1918.”

<sup>332</sup> HSA-St, M 1/7, Bü 257, memo from Ludendorff, 9 Aug. 1918.

issues, through an avalanche of memoranda and directives.<sup>333</sup> The resulting system was increasingly convoluted and unworkable. A high proportion of cases were transferred to different courts, and it often took months for the paperwork to be forwarded to its new destination.<sup>334</sup>

Unable to change the law itself, the military authorities fell back on the means at its disposal. They issued constant reminders to field commanders that under the provisions of the existing legal code, they had the right to use their weapons to maintain discipline among their men. Officers were urged to “unhesitatingly” employ “all available means” to prevent disorder, and to inform their men that they were authorized to summarily execute those who refused to obey orders in battle.<sup>335</sup> But these efforts also foundered on legal questions. The legal issues surrounding the use of weapons were not so straightforward as these reminders would have it. The relevant section of the legal code (section 124) stated that superiors may resort to their weapons in “the most extreme emergency and urgent danger.”<sup>336</sup> But it was not clear what kind of circumstances this covered, especially given the relatively novel conditions of trench warfare. The military code also protected subordinates against abuse or attack from superiors. Some officers feared that if they used weapons against their men, they could be prosecuted under that law.<sup>337</sup> There followed lengthy debates over what exactly the law meant. These provided

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<sup>333</sup> HSA-St, M 1/7, Bü 257, memo from War Ministry, 2 Sep. 1918.

<sup>334</sup> See the records of divisional courts, eg. HSA-St, M 1/7 305.

<sup>335</sup> HSA-St, M 1/7, Bü 257, memo from Ludendorff, “Aufrechterhaltung der Mannzucht in Der Armee,” 1 Aug. 1918.

<sup>336</sup> Hecker, ed., *Das Militär-Strafgesetzbuch*.

<sup>337</sup> Altrichter, *Die seelischen Kräfte*, 225.

no clear answer, but only a series of likely scenarios.<sup>338</sup> In any event, there is no evidence that the OHL's urgings actually increased the willingness of officers to employ force. In the entire Württemberg contingent, there was not a single recorded case of an officer shooting a subordinate.<sup>339</sup>

Despite the exhortations of the high command, the judiciary exhibited increasingly leniency in the latter years of the war. Military courts, being staffed with trained jurists, never assigned an absolute priority to military interests. While acknowledging that it was the goal of the judiciary to maintain military discipline, many still insisted on also seeking justice for the individual, and on upholding the procedures on which that justice depended.<sup>340</sup> As time passed, judges were inclined to exercise more leniency in judgments and sentencing, in view of the length and strain of the war. The army's field commanders constantly demanded that judges hand out the maximum sentence for offenses.<sup>341</sup> In practice, the opposite was happening. The average length of sentences was markedly declining. In the early years of the war, refusal to obey orders earned soldiers a sentence of at least ten years in a military penitentiary; after 1917, soldiers were rarely sentenced to more than 3 years for that crime.<sup>342</sup> Judges also became more inclined to hand down suspended sentences. There was no formal system of appeals, but men could apply for reductions of their sentence, and an increasing number did so. In 1917 alone, more than 7,000 German soldiers applied for sentence reduction,

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<sup>338</sup> HSA-St, M 1/7, Bü 257, memo from Kriegsministerium, "Zur Aufrechterhaltung der Mannzucht..." 22 Jul. 1918.

<sup>339</sup> In all cases where a soldier died outside of regular combat, the circumstances were noted in the records of the divisional courts. I have not found any references to summary shooting in the records. See HSA-St, M 1/7, Bü 303-316.

<sup>340</sup> Jahr, *Gewöhnliche Soldaten*, 159.

<sup>341</sup> HSA-St, M 1/7, Bü 257, memo from Prussian War Ministry, 5 Nov. 1918.

<sup>342</sup> HSA-St, M 1/7, Bü 274, "Schwere Fälle."

along with the nearly 3,000 who applied to have their sentence adjusted in accordance with the penalty reductions mandated by the April 1917 law. In Württemberg, there were 1,016 appeals for sentence reduction, out of 2,100 convictions. Only a quarter of these were rejected outright. Countrywide, another 1,890 appealed directly to the emperor for clemency, and two-thirds of these were approved.<sup>343</sup> The Emperor also declared regular amnesties, usually on the occasion of his own birthday, absolving sentences of under six months. The high command disapproved of such amnesties, but the Kaiser continued to issue them through the end of the war.<sup>344</sup> A set of general amnesties was issued in the weeks after the armistice, a move which had been repeatedly denied by the high command, but which had been widely expected during the war.

By 1917, even men convicted of serious crimes were unlikely to receive harsh punishments. Consider the case of the 27<sup>th</sup> infantry division. In 1917 and 1918, the divisional courts processed 169 cases of desertion or absence without leave. Only 66 of those cases were resolved in the division's courts by the time the war had ended. 45 defendants were found guilty, with 21 being either acquitted or having the charges against them dropped. Those found guilty were sentenced to, on average, about seven months confinement, and only seven sentences exceeded a year. Eighteen sentences were suspended, meaning that fewer than thirty men received punishment of any kind.<sup>345</sup>

This is by no means to say that there was no effective discipline in the army. Nor is it to underestimate the coercive powers which even comparatively mild punishments may have exerted. The point here is that discipline was not severe enough to explain the

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<sup>343</sup> HSA-St, M 1/7, 274 "Nachweise der Straffälligkeit..."

<sup>344</sup> Ludendorff, *Ludendorff's Own Story*, 246.

<sup>345</sup> HSA-St, M 1/7, Bü 305.

extraordinary endurance of the German army. They were not driven into the combat at the point of a gun, as soldiers sometimes have been. The penalties for disobedience were light, in comparison to the terrible dangers of fighting.

### **Consent Theories**

While military historians have tended to focus upon the role of discipline in motivating soldiers, cultural historians have generally favored more positive explanations. Soldiers were not compelled to fight, they would argue; they accepted the dangers of combat willingly, because they believed that the war served some crucial purpose. For most soldiers, this belief was tied to a sense of “defensive patriotism,” to borrow the phrase of one historian.<sup>346</sup> Soldiers believed that they were fighting to defend their homes and families from enemy occupation. More broadly, they believed that that the war served to protect the nation, and the institutions and cultures that were central to it. French soldiers, for instance, valued their republican form of government. They believed that a German victory put this in jeopardy, and so they were motivated to fight against the German invasion. Defensive patriotism was often coupled with ethnic hatreds, national xenophobia, and fears of revenge. German soldiers, for instance, fought to defend German *Kultur*; they fought to preserve it against crass western capitalism and Russian barbarism – the latter of which, particularly, represented a threat to national existence.<sup>347</sup> Defensive patriotism was very often also tied to other fundamental

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<sup>346</sup> Becker and Audoin-Rouzeau, *14-18*, 107. See also Hew Strachan, *The First World War vol I: To Arms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 110.

<sup>347</sup> Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction*; Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius, *The German Myth of the East*:

structures – citizenship, public culture, masculinity. In France, combat motivation was tied to the state’s democratic political culture, and to the sense of mutual obligation between ruler and ruled.<sup>348</sup> Others have argued that a crucial role was played by the rise of bourgeois ethics, and its strong commitment to duty.<sup>349</sup> All such beliefs, of course, were actively fostered and nurtured by the state. They were developed before the war, by myriad agents of socialization.<sup>350</sup> And they were reinforced during the war through various forms of propaganda.<sup>351</sup>

On the face of it, this sort of argument would seem to work well for Germany, where nationalism was as strong as anywhere in Europe. The political landscape was dominated by overtly nationalist organizations, from the Army and Navy Leagues, to the Colonial Society, to the popular veterans’ organizations.<sup>352</sup> Their members competed for reserve commissions, proudly sported their uniforms in the streets, and attended elaborate patriotic celebrations, like the annual commemoration of the battle of Sedan.<sup>353</sup> The outbreak of war, moreover, was greeted by public rejoicing; excited crowds gathered in public squares for the latest news, and thousands of young men rushed to join the colors. The first months of the war even saw the (temporary) disappearance of the political infighting and labor unrest that had become a permanent feature of Wilhelmine society.

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*1800 to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Stephane-Audoine Rouzea, “The French Soldier in the Trenches” in *Facing Armageddon: The First World War Experienced*, eds. Hugh Cecil and Peter Liddle (London: Cooper, 1996)

<sup>348</sup> Smith, *Between Munity and Obedience*.

<sup>349</sup> Eksteins, *The Rites of Spring*.

<sup>350</sup> Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*.

<sup>351</sup> Anne Lipp, *Meinunglenkung im Krieg: Kriegserfahrungen deutscher Soldaten und ihre Deutung 1914-1918* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003); Robert Nelson, *German Soldier Newspapers of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>352</sup> Coetzee, *The German Army League*; Rohkrämer, *Der militarismus der ‘kleinen Leute;’* Chickering, *We Men Who Feel Most German*.

<sup>353</sup> Kitchen, *German Officer Corps*, 120-22; Jeffrey Smith, “The Monarchy versus the Nation: The ‘Festive Year’ 1913 in Wilhelmine Germany,” *German Studies Review* 23, no. 2 (May 2000).



For all that, though, nationalist explanations do not get us very far in understanding the behavior of German soldiers in 1918. While it is true that nationalism was a prominent element in imperial society, it was by no means a universal phenomenon. Among many segments of the society, nationalism existed alongside other competing identities. This was true, for instance, among many Catholics, and among many from the south German provinces.<sup>354</sup> Among other segments of society, nationalism had penetrated only weakly and intermittently. This was the case for most of the Empire's ethnic minorities – French, Poles, Danes.<sup>355</sup> And it was especially the case for the large swaths of the working class, where socialism ran strong.<sup>356</sup> While bourgeois crowds gathered to celebrate the news of war, working class crowds gathered to protest it. The weeks before mobilization saw large anti-war demonstrations in cities and towns across the country.<sup>357</sup> The idea that the nation unanimously supported the war was as much construction as reality. It was an idea deliberately propagated by the state, and deployed for political ends – primarily, to silence criticism of the war effort.<sup>358</sup>

Even for those whose nationalist commitments were strong, their willingness to fight did not last forever. It is not that their identities were radically reconfigured – they did not suddenly renounce their Germanness. Rather, the emotional intensity surrounding that identity became dulled over time, especially as dangers and hardships mounted.

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<sup>354</sup> See for instance Helmut Walser Smith, *Protestants, Catholics and Jews in Germany, 1800-1914* (Oxford: Berg, 2001).

<sup>355</sup> For Poland, see Richard Blanke, *Prussian Poland in the German Empire, 1871-1900* (Boulder: East European Monographs, 1981). For the French territories, see Kramer, "Wackes at War."

<sup>356</sup> The degree to which the German working classes identified with the nation is a difficult question, and not fully resolved. It seems clear, though, that many considered as set apart from the rest of the nation, and were hostile towards many of its central features. For sensitive treatment of this question see Vernon Lidtke, *The Alternative Culture: Socialist Labor in Imperial Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

<sup>357</sup> Verhey, *Spirit of 1914*, 12-35.

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid.* 136-155.

Their belief in the nation no longer translated into a readiness for combat. When and how this shift happened was very much dependent on individual factors – upon their pre-war background and ideological disposition, upon their particular experience of the war, and on a host of other factors. In most cases, though, it seems that their willingness wore away quite quickly. This was not a phenomenon that was peculiar to the last years of the war. This shift is clear even in 1914, when the rightness and necessity of the war was still largely accepted. By way of example, consider the case of Walther Vogt, a medical doctor who was called up in July of 1914, and who served with a front line medical unit. In his earliest letters, Walther expresses nothing but support for the war, and often comments on the “heroic” efforts of soldiers and fellow officers. In these letters, he says little about fighting or hardship. He often affects an almost cheerful tone, describing the curiosities of military life, and inquires about the minor happenings in his home town. But fairly soon after reaching the front, Walter’s unit is swamped with casualties from the hard fighting in Poland (he describes at the length the anguished pleas of those who are beyond aid), and he receives word that one of his brothers has been killed. By January of 1915, he sounds like a man who has had enough of war. “Everyone has no more enthusiasm,” he writes in a letter home. “I have no more enthusiasm for it ... Weariness, even the longing for home has become a weariness.”<sup>359</sup>

Some men, of course, remained committed to the war longer than Walther. But in no case have I found that these sentiments survived into 1917 or 1918, except among men who had never seen active duty. Many soldiers, when they had occasion to contemplate their experiences during the war, were surprised to find how greatly their outlook had

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<sup>359</sup> BfZ, W. Vogt, Sep. 1914 – Jan. 1915 entries.

changed. Citing a long list of injustices and difficulties, an infantryman wrote to his wife “you would be amazed, my patriotism has gone to hell.”<sup>360</sup> Others found that the experiences of war had shaken their entire moral framework. In the fall of 1918, one wrote in his diary: “The solace of patriotic feeling, the solace of the church, has failed me. I have weighed them and found them wanting. I hold their morality to be a fraud, to captivate and bewitch humanity.”<sup>361</sup> Even the most ardent defenders of the war were eventually moved to reconsider their beliefs. Ernst Jünger, who at one point described war as his “native element”, later found to his surprise that he had worn down. After a difficult fight in June of 1918, he confesses to feeling strangely “tired,” as if “that purposes with which I had gone out to fight had been used up, no longer held.”<sup>362</sup>

The diminishing willingness for combat is also made clear in military and state documents. Signs began to appear very early on. As early as September of 1914, military authorities noted an uptick in the number of letters expressing disillusionment with the war and a general longing for peace.<sup>363</sup> And such sentiments became increasingly common over the middle years of the war. By 1917, morale was clearly approaching the point of crisis. Mail censors pointed out that desire for peace was now often tied to plans for action. Many soldiers advised their families not to subscribe to state war loans, hoping thereby to shorten the war; farmers advised their families to scale back the production of food, with the same goal in mind.<sup>364</sup> Domestic authorities complained that soldiers’ missives were depressing civilian morale, and undercutting commitment to the war on the

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<sup>360</sup> BfZ, Lips, 21 Sep. 1917.

<sup>361</sup> DTA Viktor 13.10.1918.

<sup>362</sup> Jünger, *Storm of Steel*, 266.

<sup>363</sup> Ziemann, *War Experiences*, 84.

<sup>364</sup> Welch, *Germany, Propaganda, and Total War*, 168; Ay, *Entstehung einer Revolution*, 26.

home front.<sup>365</sup> Allied intelligence agencies, meanwhile, had concluded that German morale was close to collapse, based on the uniformly depressed testimonies of thousands of captured soldiers.<sup>366</sup>

By 1918, the authorities knew that the will to “see it through” had disappeared almost entirely. Censors reported that “the longing for peace is actively expressed in every letter.”<sup>367</sup> Similar sentiments were recorded by police spies and informants all along the front – including worrying references to revolution and anti-state violence.<sup>368</sup> They also appeared in complaint letters to local authorities, clergy, and Reichstag delegates – with some delegates receiving thousands of such letters per months.<sup>369</sup> Anti-war literature appeared everywhere, and anti-war slogans emblazoned train cars, military buildings, even cash.<sup>370</sup> Crime of all kinds increased, and some began to commit crimes simply in order to avoid a return to the front.<sup>371</sup> Many openly told the police that the preferred prison to combat.<sup>372</sup> These developments prompted senior officials to launch endless investigations, aimed at ascertaining the ‘true’ state of morale at the front. And each reached darker conclusions than the last. They alternately described the troops as “despondent,” “faint-hearted,” and “pessimistic.”<sup>373</sup> They also found little trace of the

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<sup>365</sup> HSA-St, M30/1, “Deutsche Propagandatätigkeit...”, 2 Sep. 1918.

<sup>366</sup> Jahr, *Gewöhnliche Soldaten*, 29.

<sup>367</sup> BA-MA, RH/61 1035, Stimmungsbericht, 12 Jul. 1917.

<sup>368</sup> HSA-St, M 30/1, Bü 77, “Abschrift der Meldung eines Gewährsmannes aus Lörrach,” 22 Oct. 1918.

<sup>369</sup> Ay, *Entstehung einer Revolution*, 25. For specific examples, see HSA-St, M 77/1, Bü 457.

<sup>370</sup> HSA-St, M 30/1, Bü 261, “Wöchentliche Mitteilungen Nr. 50,” 2 Aug. 1918.

<sup>371</sup> HSA-St, M 1/7, Bü 257, “Mitwirkung der Gerichte bei der Aufrechterhaltung der Mannzucht der Armee,” 20 Aug. 1918.

<sup>372</sup> Ay, *Entstehung einer Revolution*, 108.

<sup>373</sup> HSA-St, M 30/1, “Stimmung der Truppe,” 1 Aug. 1918; HSA-St, M 30/1, “Kriegsführung und Kreisstimmung 1918.”

idealism that had been so evident in 1914. According to one study, “good words and appeals to ideals” no longer had any effect on the soldier.<sup>374</sup>

Soldiers’ declining commitment to the war was also clearly connected to growing doubts about its defensive character. From the beginning of the war, Germany’s political and military leadership had emphasized the war’s essentially defensive character. They emphasized Germany’s legal and moral duties to her close ally, Austria-Hungary, which seemed clearly to have been the victim of a shocking and unprovoked attack at the hands of Serbia. They likewise emphasized the threat of Russian aggression. The physical threat of Russian invasion was often linked to deep fears of cultural annihilation, with German *Kultur* being supplanted by Asiatic barbarism.<sup>375</sup> The defensive character of the war was reinforced by an explicit disavowal of territorial conquests. In August 1914, both Kaiser and the Chancellor had affirmed that Germany was not waging a war of conquest.<sup>376</sup> The Reichstag itself, particularly the parties on the left, seemed to confirm this position. The Social Democrats, prefacing their decision to vote for war credits, condemned “every war of conquest”, and committed themselves to seeking “a peace which shall render possible friendship with our neighbors.”<sup>377</sup> The notion of a defensive war seemed plausible initially, despite that fact that Germany’s first act was to invade neutral Belgium. The cultural and emotional ties with Austria were long-standing. So was the fear and antipathy towards Russia, affirmed by decades of negative portrayals of Slavdom in high

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<sup>374</sup> HSA-St, M 30/1, “Stimmung der Truppe,” 1 Aug. 1918

<sup>375</sup> Ebba Dahlin, *French and German Public Opinion on Declared War Aims, 1914-1918* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1933), 14-16.

<sup>376</sup> Lutz, *Causes of the German Collapse*, 15-16; Dahlin, *Public Opinion*, 14.

<sup>377</sup> Dahlin, *Public Opinion*, 28-29.

and popular culture, and by the common equation of Russia with reaction and tyranny.<sup>378</sup> Those fears were further stoked by a short-lived Russian invasion in the first weeks of the war, during which there were several ugly incidents involving civilians, and which flooded central Germany with hundreds of thousands of panicked refugees.<sup>379</sup>

As the war progressed, however, these justifications became less and less tenable. The Russian threat became less acute, as the Tsar's armies were progressively pushed back, and as the state careened towards total collapse. By the middle of 1917, Russia had effectively ceased to participate in the war militarily, and the reviled monarchy had been replaced by a moderate provisional government. In the winter of 1917, Germany and Russia would open formal negotiations, and by March of 1918, Russia would withdraw from the war. By then, Austria-Hungary had long since achieved its revenge. Serbia had been defeated in 1915, its territory wholly occupied, and its further existence in doubt. The alliance between Germany and Austria had meanwhile become strained to the breaking point. It had partially run aground on political disagreements over the division of territorial spoils in eastern Europe – particularly Poland and Rumania, which both powers coveted.<sup>380</sup> To a greater extent, though, the rift was created by Austria's growing demands for support. Austria's peasant-dominated economy had suffered even worse than Germany's during the war; by 1916, it was in a state of virtual collapse.<sup>381</sup> To keep functioning, the Hapsburg Monarchy relied on support from Berlin, and not only military support, but direct economic support, in the form of cash, food, and raw materials. Given

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<sup>378</sup> Troy Paddock, *Creating the Russian Peril: Education, the Public Sphere, and National Identity in Imperial Germany* (Rochester: Camden House, 2010); Liulevicius, *The German Myth of the East*.

<sup>379</sup> Herwig, *The First World War*, 81-82.

<sup>380</sup> Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1967), 435-36.

<sup>381</sup> Max Stefan Schulze, "Austria-Hungary's Economy in World War I," in *The Economics of World War I*, eds. Stephen Broadberry and Mark Harrison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

the hardships which the German people were then facing, these subsidies aroused great indignation.<sup>382</sup> “It is believed,” according to one police report, “that the German people have no reason to ruin themselves for an ally.”<sup>383</sup> The deterioration of the alliance was punctuated by a series of public clashes, most notably in 1917, when Austrian authorities simply seized grain shipments bound for Germany.<sup>384</sup>

Any suggestion that Germany was fighting a purely defensive war had then become nonsense. By the spring of 1918, German victories on the battlefield had given her *de facto* control over an enormous swath of territory in Central and Eastern Europe. In the west, the whole of Belgium and Luxemburg, as well as a large chunk of north-eastern France, had been under German occupation since 1914. In the Balkans, Germany occupied resource-rich Rumania. The largest gains had been made in the East. Under the Treaty of Brest Litovsk, Germany gained effective control over all of the Russian Empire’s western provinces – Poland, the Baltic States, Finland, the Ukraine, and most of Belorussia. The German sphere of influence extended from the English Channel to the Don Basin, and from Finland to the Balkans – a total area of more than 600,000 square miles.<sup>385</sup> It was the largest politically-unified bloc since the Napoleonic Empire, and one of the largest in European history.

Officially, the occupied territories were not regarded as “conquered”; they were either occupied temporarily, as a wartime necessity, or at the behest of the local

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<sup>382</sup> HSA-St, M 1/4, Bü 1625, “Bericht über die Tätigkeit der Eisenbahnüberwachungsreisenden...,” 6 Oct. 1918.

<sup>383</sup> Ingo Materna and Hans-Joachim Schreckenback, eds., *Dokumente aus Geheimen Archiven, vol 4: Berichte des Berliner Polizeipräsidenten zur Stimmung und Lage der Bevölkerung in Berlin 1914-1918* (Weimar, 1987), 264-65.

<sup>384</sup> Herwig, *The First World War*, 364-65.

<sup>385</sup> Haythornthwaite, *World War One Source Book*, 382-3; Judah Leon Magnes, *Russia and Germany at Brest-Litovsk: A Documentary History of the Peace Negotiations* (New York: Rand School of Social Science, 1919), 184

population. The Chancellor and the Foreign Office carefully avoided discussing outright annexations, and insisted that the specifics of the post-war settlement would have to be worked out at the negotiating table.<sup>386</sup> But this official position was transparently a fiction.<sup>387</sup> For every practical purpose, the occupied territories were treated as imperial conquests. This was a fact which the state, despite its painstaking efforts to obscure the legal status of these territories, made little effort to conceal, and which the military was clearly working to make permanent. Existing authority structures were almost entirely dismantled, and local indigenous movements were quashed; they were replaced either by pro-German puppet governments, or by military-operated “general governments.”<sup>388</sup> All of the occupied territories, moreover, were ruthlessly exploited economically. Belgium, which was probably the hardest hit, given the length of its occupation, was ultimately compelled to render up goods and commodities valued at over 5.7 billion gold marks; hundreds of entire factories were dismantled and shipped back to Germany.<sup>389</sup> That was in addition to the 100,000 Belgian civilians which were deported and subjected to involuntary servitude.<sup>390</sup> The German government not only admitted to the exploitative nature of its occupation. In many cases it broadcast the fact, hoping that the promise of more goods would rally public morale. The treaty with the Ukraine – under which the nominally-independent government agreed to dispatch 100 million tons of grain to the

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<sup>386</sup> Ritter, *Sword and Scepter IV*, 80-82.

<sup>387</sup> *Ibid.*, 82-83.

<sup>388</sup> For a more complete discussion of the political and administrative structures here, see Liulevicius, *War Land*.

<sup>389</sup> Leo Grebler, *The Cost of the World War to Germany and to Austria-Hungary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940); 75-76

<sup>390</sup> Becker and Audoin-Rouzeau, *14-18*, 73; figure also includes some French.



Central Powers – was widely publicized as a “bread and butter peace,” even before it was concluded.<sup>391</sup>

Besides the actual exploitation of these territories, their status as conquests was made clear by the open demands for their annexation put forward by many senior political and military leaders. The public discussion of war aims had been suppressed by the government for much of the war, out of the fear that such discussions would prove politically divisive. Yet the prohibitions were applied unevenly – mostly against liberals and socialists – which left the public discussion effectively in the hands of the annexationists.<sup>392</sup> From the first months of the war, grand schemes for territorial and economic expansion were put forward, and not only by openly expansionist groups, like the Pan-German League and the German Colonial Society. They came from industrial pressure groups, from respected academics, from the Protestant church, and from a wide range of political and military figures.<sup>393</sup> Apart from the Independent Socialists, on the far left, there were very few politicians who were willing to take a clear stand against annexations. In 1915, the progressive Party publicly stated that it was “opposed to a fundamental rejection of territorial conquests.”<sup>394</sup> Among the majority socialists, a few were outright annexationists, and many were prepared to accept a peace with annexations.<sup>395</sup> As the war progressed, and the fate of the occupied territories loomed larger, the government found it difficult to remain non-committal. In August of 1917 the papacy flatly asked Germany to confirm its post-war plans for Belgium, as part of its

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<sup>391</sup> Ritter, *Sword and Scepter IV*, 167

<sup>392</sup> Welch, *Germany, Propaganda, and Total War*, 67-70.

<sup>393</sup> *Ibid.*, 70-75.

<sup>394</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>395</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

efforts to mediate a settlement. After a month of awkward prevarication, the Chancellor issued a vaguely worded statement in which he declined to make any commitment. Only two months earlier, the German foreign minister had openly endorsed the creation of a Mitteleuropa-inspired German sphere of influence in Central Europe.<sup>396</sup> In February 1918, Chancellor Hertling indicated to the Reichstag that territorial “adjustments” would be made at the expense of Poland.<sup>397</sup> There was not-so-secret talk of reconfiguring the Hapsburg Empire, incorporating the Austrian part directly into the Reich, and transforming the rest into German satellites.<sup>398</sup> There remains a good deal of debate about what the war aims of the government were, if indeed it had a coherent program at all. For our purposes here, those details are mostly irrelevant. The point is that the public discussion of war aims left little doubt that the army and the state were pursuing an annexationist agenda.

Among soldiers, belief in a purely defensive war clearly broke down over the last two years of the conflict. It became increasingly difficult for soldiers to deny the exploitative character of Germany’s occupation, given that they lived and worked in the occupied territories, and that they were the ones who actually carried out the government’s exploitative policies, like the deportation of civilians. Even otherwise patriotic soldiers were moved by “the deprivation and misery of the poor in every alleyway.”<sup>399</sup> At the same time, the government’s annexationist course was coming under attack from several angles, despite all their efforts to control the debate. It was roundly

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<sup>396</sup> Fischer, *Germany’s War Aims*, 359-60.

<sup>397</sup> *Ibid.*, 615-16.

<sup>398</sup> Holger Herwig, “Tunes of Glory at the Twilight Stage: The Bad Homburg Crown Council and the Evolution of German Statecraft, 1917/1918” *German Studies Review* 6, no. 3 (Oct 1983).

<sup>399</sup> BfZ, Alber, n.d. [April 1916]

denounced in the liberal press, most notably by the editors of the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, who sent an open letter to Hindenburg before the spring offensive, insisting that German soldiers were only prepared to wage a defensive war.<sup>400</sup> It was also criticized from within the government, especially in the “peace resolution” of July 1917. The resolution, which passed with a two-thirds majority, declared “The Reichstag strives for a peace of understanding... any violations of territory, or any political, economic, and financial persecutions are incompatible with such a peace.” For many soldiers, the decisive point probably Germany’s peace negotiations with Russia, which opened in December of 1917. Given the tremendous concessions which Russia had been forced to make – unprecedented in recent history – very few could convince themselves that the treaty represented any kind of compromise settlement. It was apparent that Germany had simply taken everything that they could. One soldier, upon reviewing the terms of the treaty, sarcastically remarked that Germany had “behaved like a housewife at a going out of business sale, and went home with shopping bag overflowing.”<sup>401</sup> Soldiers did not bother with the elaborate fictions propagated by the foreign ministry, that the conquered territories were somehow autonomous provinces. Still less did they subscribe to the notion that Germany occupied these places occupied these places legally and legitimately. They referred to the treaty for what it obviously was, a “peace of force,” a “diktat.”<sup>402</sup> Those who had followed the negotiations closely noted that the final outcome was significantly delayed by Germany’s insistence upon such Carthaginian terms.<sup>403</sup>

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<sup>400</sup> Ritter, *Sword and Scepter IV*, 128.

<sup>401</sup> DTA, Viktor, 10 Mar. 1918.

<sup>402</sup> *Geheimen Archiven*, 285-86.

<sup>403</sup> BA-MA, RH/61 1035, Stimmungsbericht, 10 Jan. 1918.

Soldiers regarded developments in the west in much the same way. By the beginning of 1918, it was widely believed that the Allies were ready to accept a status quo peace – not only in light of Russia’s collapse, which seemed to put Germany in a strong strategic position, but also given America’s entry into the war, and President Wilson’s open commitment to a “peace without annexations.” Soldiers clamored for the government to make concessions, and to bring about the end of the war: “Hindenburg and Ludendorff should give France and Belgium their land and then we would have peace.”<sup>404</sup> If the government did not pursue a settlement, or at least make some good faith effort to do so, soldiers took this as evidence that they were determined to make additional conquests. This view intensified over the summer and fall, by which time the opportunity for a settlement seemed to have passed. The Allies had clearly gained the upper hand on the battlefield, and would no longer be willing to consider moderate terms. Soldiers bitterly reproached the government for not pursuing peace while the opportunity remained, and vilified the “sprit of conquest” [*Eroberungsgeist*] which seemed to have taken control of national policy. “Why didn’t we dispatch a [peace] note, when our offensives had their greatest success?” one angry soldier asked in the fall of 1918. “No! Now, when we are taking it on the chin, they want to make peace again. Just like in December of 1916.”<sup>405</sup> Similar sentiments were everywhere. Upon reading the armistice terms proposed by Wilson, one man bitterly pointed out, “we could have already secured an honorable peace on these terms.” It was our “conquest-seeking rulers,” he went on, that have “driven us this far.”<sup>406</sup> Public discussion, according to police informants, was

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<sup>404</sup> BA-MA, RH/61 1035, Stimmungsbericht, 24 Feb. 1918.

<sup>405</sup> BA-MA, RH/61 1035, Stimmungsbericht, 28 Sep. 1918.

<sup>406</sup> DTA, 260, 6 Oct. 1918.

dominated by the fact that “Germany had often before passed up opportunities to conclude peace.” These were coupled with assertions that “the Kaiser had started the war out of pure lust for power, to win for each son a land of his own.”<sup>407</sup> Given this, many understood the Allies refusal to deal leniently with Germany. “Our diplomacy in the east is most at fault,” one soldier concluded. “The enemy now wants to destroy us on our own soil.”<sup>408</sup> Others at least understood their determination to overthrow the conservative forces which dominated the government. “The Germans that wanted conquests before are insane. They’re justly gotten rid of.”<sup>409</sup>

For many soldiers, the fact that Germany was waging an aggressive war abroad was seen to coincide with a more general shift in the nation’s moral foundation. The nation had abandoned the values with which it went to war – patriotism, cooperation, self-sacrifice – and that self-interest and profit-seeking had taken their place. National unity had given way to every-man-for-himself. This view eventually became widely held. Sometimes, this view took on relatively complex political or religious overtones, as in the case of *Kriegsfreiwilliger* Max Jackowski. In the wake of his experiences on the western front, he was moved to wonder “where is the humanity? Only avarice, greed, and destructiveness are to be found among the people, and no less among the comrades? I ask ‘where is God’? And where does mankind seek God? Nowhere! Nearly everyone has become his own God; he loves only himself, and the things in the world which he has made.”<sup>410</sup> Most expressed these sentiments in more straightforward terms: “so long as

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<sup>407</sup> HSA-St, M 30/1 77, “Abschrift der Meldung eines Gewährsmannes aus Lörrach,” 22 Oct. 1918.

<sup>408</sup> BA-MA, RH/61 1035, Stimmungsbericht, 28 Sep. 1918

<sup>409</sup> DTA, 260, 6. Oct 1918.

<sup>410</sup> BfZ, Jackowski, 6 Sep. 1916.

men are ruled by hypocrisy, self-seeking, lust for profits, extortion, and other such things, the war will never end,”<sup>411</sup>

Many took this line of reasoning a step further. The problem, as they saw it, was not simply that the rich were using the war as a convenient opportunity to exploit the poor. The problem was that such exploitation had become the sole purpose for the continuation of the war. In this view, powerful groups within German society had seized control of the war effort. They no longer sought to pursue the aims which had been laid down in 1914, but pursued aims which would serve their own interests. Most ordinary Germans, who were left to bear the costs of this war, were largely unaware of the change that had taken place. They were deceived into thinking that they still fought for the defense of the fatherland, while really they fought for the interests of the few. This set of ideas was often referred to simply as *Der Schwindel* (“The Cheat”). One of the major implications of the *Schwindel* idea was that the wealthy were actively blocking a resolution the war, so that they could continue to profit by it. As one soldier put it: “I want to hope for peace, but I nevertheless doubt it will happen ... it goes against the wishes of the rich, the enormous profits are going so well.”<sup>412</sup> This idea had a great number of permutations. Some believed that the wealthy prolonged the war so that additional war loans could be organized – with the proceeds going straight into the hands of bankers and industrialists; Germany’s periodic peace feelers, in this view, were simply tactical maneuvers, designed to persuade the people that the state was pursuing the war in good faith.<sup>413</sup> Others believed that the war itself was only a ruse designed to separate men

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<sup>411</sup> BA-MA RH/61 1035, Stimmungsbericht, 28 Sep. 1918

<sup>412</sup> DTA, Viktor, 19 Aug. 1917.

<sup>413</sup> BA-MA RH/61 1035, Stimmungsbericht, 31 Aug. 1918.

from their families. Once the men were safely out of the war, “they can bleed out women dry.”<sup>414</sup> Yet another version held that the rich had actively intervened to prevent a German victory in the field (for instance, by calling off the submarine campaign), in order to protect their massive investments in Allied countries, including their investment in Allied war loans.<sup>415</sup>

A second conclusion that followed from the logic of the *Schwindel* idea was that military victory ran counter to the interests of the general population. If the war served the interests of a wealthy elite, then a German victory would only help that elite to tighten its stranglehold over the country. It would do so in an economic sense, as the ordinary people would be “bled white” and rendered politically impotent.<sup>416</sup> It would do so also in a political and cultural sense. As in 1871, victory in war would legitimate the conservative and military values of the political elite. “What fatherland are we fighting for?” asked one perceptive young soldier. “What sense does this fight have, if we fight for the militarist Germany?”<sup>417</sup> The corollary of this position was that an Allied victory would not be any worse than a German victory. Defeatism never became a majority position. But by 1917, at the latest, various forms of “benign” defeatism had become a common feature of soldiers’ correspondence. “The main thing,” according to one soldier “is that the *Schwindel* and the killing stop. It doesn’t matter to us, if we end up German or French.”<sup>418</sup> An alternate conclusion was that the only true victory would be of the poor

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<sup>414</sup> BfZ, Wenzel, 17 Oct 1918.

<sup>415</sup> HSA-St, M 77/1, Bü 457, memo to Oberamt Laupheim, 23 Jun. 1917.

<sup>416</sup> BfZ, Bader, 15 Jun. 1916.

<sup>417</sup> Metzger, *Phänomenologie*, 10 Jul. 1915.

<sup>418</sup> BA-MA, RH/61 1035, Stimmungsbericht, 17 Oct. 1918.

over the rich, or more bluntly, that “the fat lords must all be killed. They alone keep the war going.”<sup>419</sup>

The *Schwindel* topos was by no means confined to soldiers of left-wing political inclinations. It certainly drew upon elements of socialist ideology, and it was often used by left-wing propagandists; as early as 1916, Independent Socialists published leaflets proclaiming “*Der Krieg ist ein Schwindel.*”<sup>420</sup> But the *Schwindel* topos had been popular in many different social groups long before the war. Farmers used the term to describe the practices of dishonest landlords and middlemen. Members of the middle class used it in reference to ruthless capitalism – especially to the banking frauds and business scandals that were a common feature of the Wilhelmine period.<sup>421</sup> In conservative circles, it was frequently applied to Jews.<sup>422</sup> It was also linked to fears of urbanization and cultural decay. Popular guides like *Berliner Schwindel* (1905) warned travelers against the multitude of frauds and cheats they were likely to encounter on the streets of the capital.<sup>423</sup> During the war, then, soldiers of all different backgrounds would find it easy to draw upon this concept. It was used by middle-class soldiers – men like Emil Heinz, a rural artisan, who regarded the end of the world with equanimity, because “since at least the *Schwindel* would be over.”<sup>424</sup> It was used increasingly by officers, especially in the junior ranks, to the dismay of the authorities.<sup>425</sup> It appeared also in the writings of civilians, and even children. In March of 1918, one girl confided to her diary that “we can

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<sup>419</sup> BA-MA, RH/61 1035, Stimmungsbericht, 24 Feb. 1918.

<sup>420</sup> Ay, *Entstehung einer Revolution*, 25.

<sup>421</sup> See for instance the comments in *Was ist Schwindel?: Eine kulturgeschichtliche Skizze mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der "Dachauer-Bank" in München* (Munich, 1872).

<sup>422</sup> Matthew Lange, *Antisemitic Elements in the Critique of Capitalism in German Culture, 1850-1933* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), esp. 144, 236.

<sup>423</sup> Johannes Werthauer, *Berliner Schwindel* (Berlin: Seemann, 1905).

<sup>424</sup> BfZ, Heinz, 20 May 1917.

<sup>425</sup> See Hoover, Hansen, “Fra Krigstiden,” 3 Nov. 1918.



no longer be taken in by the *Schwindel* that the old folks have bewitched us with.”<sup>426</sup> It is no stretch to say that it was one of the most common themes in soldiers’ letters. It appears in virtually all of the correspondences that I have read, often habitually.

German authorities tended to measure morale in terms of what goals soldiers were willing to fight for. Would they fight until total victory had been achieved? Would they fight for Alsace? Would they fight for the defense of the country? Or would they no longer fight for any goal – did they demand (as the military authorities usually put it) “peace at any price”? This way of measurement, however, did not provide a very accurate picture of soldiers’ attitudes, because soldiers no longer thought in these terms. Soldiers no longer believed that the war served their interests. They did not, therefore, have a compelling interest in seeing that any of its aims were achieved. No soldier, of course, wished to see Germany invaded and devastated; none, likewise, wanted to see Germany territorially dismembered. But most, as we have seen, had ceased to believe that the fighting in the field actually served the purposes of national defense. To prolong the “terrible bloodbath” in the field, moreover, would rapidly destroy the country’s remaining strength, as surely as if Germany herself were invaded. The longer the war continued, the worse off that everyone would be, no matter what the actual outcome of the war was.

From this way of viewing the situation, the only option that made sense was immediate peace. There was no talk of terms or conditions of any sort; no one spoke of holding out until this or that goal was achieved. Even terms like “an honorable peace” –

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<sup>426</sup> Jo Mihaly, *--da gibt's ein Wiedersehen! : Kriegstagebuch eines Mädchens, 1914-1918* (Freiburg: F.H. Kerle, 1982), 314.

meaning, something less than unconditional surrender – were virtually absent from soldiers' letters. Most, in fact, explicitly denied that they were prepared to fight for any terms: "It makes no difference to me how it happens. The main thing is that it ends."<sup>427</sup> Once Germany had opened negotiations with the Allies, and it had become clear that Germany would be facing harsh terms, there was disappointment and sadness in many quarters. But nowhere – at any rate, not among front line troops – did the severity of the Allied terms prompt soldiers to contemplate further resistance. They regarded them as unfortunate, but undeniably better than the alternative. Following the hourly news bulletins covering the peace negotiations, one soldier remarked "That the terms will be harsh is plain to see. But it can't be helped ... we are headed into difficult times. But I would rather work from morning till night than bear this sad life any longer."

These were the words of a man who was ready to give up, if ever there was one – who was ready to lay down his arms and walks away from the battle. And he could hardly have been deterred by the threat of punishment. He might, at worst, have spent a few months in military detention behind the lines. But this man did not give up. Like almost all of his compatriots, he kept fighting until the armistice; indeed, he stayed with his unit for some time after the war was over (and in a tragic postscript, was drafted again in 1943, and fought alongside his son on the eastern front). This is a fact that existing theories, locked into a consent/coercion paradigm, simply cannot explain. Nor will they ever be able to. They attempt to deduce attitudes from actions. But clearly these man did not act according to their attitudes. So why not? Why was there such a glaring gap

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<sup>427</sup> BfZ, Lips, 16 Oct. 1918.

between what they did and what they wanted to do? These are questions that I will pursue in the following chapters.

## Chapter 4: Disintegration

In the previous chapter we explored some of the traditional explanations for combat morale. These explanations, as we've seen, approach the problem primarily at the level of the individual, and so focused largely on issues of motive. They proceeded on the assumption that, on some level, soldiers had made a decision to keep fighting, and that we could understand that decision if we were able to grasp the relative pressures and incentives that the individual was confronted with. For the moment, these kind of explanations have led us to something of a dead end. All the evidence presented thus far suggests that soldiers did *not* choose to fight. The evidence, rather suggests that every clear motive for fighting had begun to break down by the war's final year – that soldiers had ceased to care about the outcome, and simply wanted it to be over as quickly as possible.

Given this, it seems fruitless to continue talking about motives, and individual choice. What seems to be the more salient question is why private opposition to the war had not been translated into open action against the war. Why, in other words, was there so little open resistance? Military historians have sometimes conflated questions of motive with those of resistance; “Why did soldiers fight?” and “why didn't soldiers give up?” have been treated as almost interchangeable. Studies of resistance in other contexts, however, make it clear that there is no straightforward connection between the two. Motives are transformed into action only through complex social processes. To quote from Charles Tilly, doyen of the study of rebellions and revolutions, “In between

interest and opportunity, and less obviously, comes a third factor: organization.”<sup>429</sup> The task at hand, then, is to understand these processes, and how they operate in this context. The analytical focus must shift from understanding individual motives, to explaining the social processes that give rise to action.<sup>430</sup>

### **The Social Bases of Resistance**

Before we go too far with this line of argument, perhaps we should address an obvious objection: does it make sense to try to find explanations for something that *didn't* happen? Doesn't that imply unfounded assumptions about what “should” have taken place? While we must certainly be wary of such assumptions, here I think we can answer these charges in the negative. When we ask “why was there no resistance to the war?” it is not because we embrace an ideological framework that tells us resistance should have happened. We ask that question because it is suggested by soldiers' stated attitudes and beliefs. Given the enormous discontent with the war, why was there not any significant action to stop it? Why did soldiers not act on their views? This strikes me as an entirely

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<sup>429</sup> Charles Tilly, “Getting it Together in Burgundy, 1675-1975,” *Theory and Society* 4 (1977): 483.

<sup>430</sup> This is not a common position within mainstream military history, but it not an entirely novel approach either. The first major attempt (of which I am aware) to study the social processes of resistance in a military setting was undertaken by Cornelius Lammers, “Strikes and Mutinies: A Comparative Study of Organizational Conflicts Between Ruler and Ruled,” *Administrative Science Quarterly* 14, no. 4 (Dec. 1969). For other works in this vein, see Christopher Bell and Bruce Elleman, *Naval Mutinies in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: An International Perspective* (London: Cass, 2003); Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*; Vanda Wilcox, “Generalship and Mass Surrender During the Italian Defeat at Caporetto,” in *1917: Beyond the Western Front*, Ian Beckett ed. (Boston: Brill, 2009); Robert Rush, “A Different Perspective: Cohesion, Morale, and Operational Effectiveness in the German Army, Fall 1944,” *Armed Forces & Society* 25 (1999); Bruce Allen Watson, *When Soldiers Quit: Studies in Military Disintegration* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1997); John Bushnell, *Mutiny Amid Repression: Russian Soldiers in the Revolution of 1905-06* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), Tony Ashworth, *Trench Warfare, 1914-1918: The Live and Let-Live System* (London: Macmillan, 1980). Leonard Smith examines mutiny through a lens of Foucauldian power relations, which results in a similar kind of analysis. Smith, *Between Mutiny and Obedience*.

reasonable line of inquiry. It seems all the more reasonable, given that such instances were by no means uncommon. While conventional military history has not paid a great deal of attention to them, mutinies and other episodes of “collective indiscipline” occur fairly regularly. History has recorded hundreds of these incidents over the last two centuries alone; and even the most major incidents, those involving entire armies, are not especially rare.<sup>431</sup> This was above all true of the First World War, in which at least four of the nine major armies involved suffered disciplinary collapse at one time or another. We are not, in other words, asking about remote possibilities.

Of course, resistance can take any number of forms, so let us also be clear about what sorts of resistance we are interested in here. Resistance in military contexts is generally divided into two types. One type is individual resistance – that is, forms of resistance that involve only one person.<sup>432</sup> This would include behaviors such as insubordination, desertion, or malingering. It would also embrace many of the less overt, low-risk behaviors that fall under the heading of “everyday resistance,” things like foot dragging, the selective interpretations of orders, and so on.<sup>433</sup> The second type is collective resistance. And this includes the kind of actions which are most commonly associated with the word “resistance” – mutinies, revolts, collective refusal to fight or to obey orders. I am mainly concerned here with the latter type. This choice of focus, again, is not grounded in ideological assumptions about what “real” resistance is, but is suggested by the facts of the case. If longing for peace was widely shared, why did

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<sup>431</sup> See Lammers, “Strikes and Mutinies.”

<sup>432</sup> Military literature handles collective resistance very differently from individual indiscipline. See Elihu Rose, “The Anatomy of a Mutiny,” *Armed Forces and Society* 8 (1982).

<sup>433</sup> Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*; for military contexts, see Ashworth, *Trench Warfare*; and Smith, *Between Mutiny and Obedience*.

individuals not join together to try and alter their circumstances? Wouldn't it make sense to work together towards a goal that was universal? The general features of military life would also seem to make collective resistance a more practical option than strictly individual forms. The army's disciplinary machinery, even if it was not particularly severe, could easily quash individual protests. Only collective efforts would seem to hold out any prospect for changing the overall situation.<sup>434</sup>

The question, then, is under what circumstances collective resistance can arise? And specifically, we need to know how collective action can emerge at the grass roots level. Under ordinary circumstances, formal organizations (eg. political parties) play an important role in mobilization. But that is obviously not the case here. For soldiers in any army, it is practically impossible to join or form formal organizations of this kind, because military life does not permit of a "public sphere" in the usual sense, in which individuals can meet and express ideas. This was especially true of the German army, which maintained strict rules regarding organizations. Soldiers were legally barred from joining any organization without the express permission of their commanding officers.<sup>435</sup> Still, it is clear that formal organizations, however important they may be, are not always a necessary component in the emergence of collective resistance. There are many instances in which protests movements have been known to occur with any formal organizational structure. Most spontaneous outbreaks, such as riots, fall into the category. But this has also happened with much larger movements. In the early phases of the Russian Revolution, for instance, popular protests emerged spontaneously in many parts

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<sup>434</sup> Jerry Rose argues that protest occurs when 1. Large numbers are dissatisfied, 2. They can be mobilized into collective.

<sup>435</sup> Kitchen, *German Officer Corps*, 159-160.

of the country, despite the indifference or outright hostility of the established political parties and unions.<sup>436</sup> So how does protest take shape in oppositional settings, where formal organization is not possible?

Four or five decades ago, this point was still the subject of considerable debate. Many social scientists argued that resistance movements took shape precisely *because* formal organizations broke down. Without the restraining influence exerted by religious, familial, and community organizations, individuals were more likely to gravitate towards social movements.<sup>437</sup> In this view, resistance movements were primarily composed of the rootless, the isolated, and the atomized. Subsequent research has largely demolished this position however.<sup>438</sup> It is now fairly well established that this kind of bottom-up resistance require some level of pre-existing social cohesion – not formal structures, but informal networks of familiarity, trust, and consensus.

There are several reasons why this is so. There are first of all practical reasons. Collective action always carries risks, and in military contexts, the risks can be particularly severe. The primary defense against these risks is in numbers. The more people involved, the greater the likelihood of success - and in the event of failure, the

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<sup>436</sup> Rex Wade, *The Red Guards and Worker's Militias in the Russian Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984).

<sup>437</sup> This view, often called “mass society theory” is rooted in the sociological theories of Emile Durkheim and Ferdinand Tönnies, and in the work of some conservative critics of modernization, such as Jose Ortega y Gasset. In the middle of the twentieth century, this idea was taken up by a new generation of sociologists, such as C. Wright Mills (*White Collar: The American Middle Class*) and David Reisman (*The Lonely Crowd*). It also received a partial endorsement from members of the Frankfurt School, (albeit from a very different ideological perspective) who pointed to “mass culture” as a force which works against social change. See especially Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1947).

<sup>438</sup> For discussions about the decline of mass-society theory, see Irene Tavis Thomson, “The Theory that Won't Die: From Mass Society to the Decline of Social Capital,” *Sociological Forum* 20, no. 3 (Sep. 2005): 421-448 (here esp. 421-22); Edward Shils, “The Theory of Mass Society,” *Digones* 10, no. 45 (1962); Marx and McAdam, *Collective Behavior*, 79-81.



harder it would be for the authorities to find and punish everyone.<sup>439</sup> Individuals, then, will commit to acts of collective resistance only if they feel reasonably confident that their peers will support them. There is an element of rational calculation to this. But there is also an emotional element. People *feel* more comfortable taking risks in the presence of loyal supporters.<sup>440</sup> Trust networks can also help to draw less-willing members of the group into acts of resistance, as social psychologists argue. People tend to be quite attuned to the behaviors of those around them, and they will often adjust their behaviors to match that of friends and allies – even if they would never have engaged in those behaviors on their own.<sup>441</sup>

Social networks also serve critical communicative functions. Information about resistance spreads primarily through such networks. When resisters look to find potential allies, they first seek out those they know and trust. And people are more likely to join in protests when solicited by others they know.<sup>442</sup> On a somewhat deeper level, the existence of informal networks facilitates the development of the kind of moral consensus that underpins action – meaning, broad agreement on question about what the problem is, how it is to be solved, and what means can be used. In large or diffuse groups, such

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<sup>439</sup> P.G. Zimbardo, “The Human Choice: Individuation, Reason, and Order Versus Deindividuation, Impulse, and Chaos,” in *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation*, eds. W.J. Arnold and D. Levine (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969).

<sup>440</sup> The general tendency of individuals to be more risk averse than groups is well established. M.A. Wallach, N. Kogan, and D.J. Bem, “Group Influence on Individual Risk Taking,” *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 65 (1962), 75-86. For examinations on the importance of trust in risk taking, see Roger Mayer, James Davis and F. David Schoorman, “An Integrative Model of Organizational Trust,” *The Academy of Management Review* 20, no. 3 (Jul. 1995): 709-734; T.K. Das and Bing-Sheng Teng, “The Risk-Based View of Trust: A Conceptual Framework,” *Journal of Business and Psychology* 19, no. 1 (Fall 2004).

<sup>441</sup> The classic (and still much cited) work on social conformity is Solomon Asch, *Social Psychology* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1955).

<sup>442</sup> See C.D. Bolton, “Alienation and Action: A Study of Peace Group Members,” *American Journal of Sociology* 78 (1972): 537-61; David Allen Snow, *The Nichiren Shoshu Buddhist Movement in America: A Sociological Examination of its Value Orientation, Recruitment Efforts and Spread* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1976).

consensus can be built only slowly, through an extended process of public dialogue. And even in the best of circumstances, it is never total; some level of conflict and ambivalence remains. In more tightly knit groups, consensus can be reached much more effectively, through direct, face to face conversations.<sup>443</sup> This consensus is then often inscribed into the language and culture of the group.

The importance of informal networks has been highlighted by a multitude of cases studies, in a wide range of contexts. Many researchers, for instance, have pointed out that “wildcat” strikes are not simply spontaneous expressions of frustration. Rather, they emerge from “the mutual trust based on pre-existing shop floor relationships.”<sup>444</sup> Francis Hearn, in his studies of the French proletariat, likewise concludes that “informal, often opaque, structures and institutions of the viable community are indispensable to sustained, collective action.”<sup>445</sup> The same patterns have been observed in agrarian societies, both past and present. James Scott has studied in detail the ways in which Malay peasants are able to coordinate boycotts, work slow-downs, and other complex behaviors entirely through informal and largely underground channels, what he calls “networks of understanding and practice.” “No formal organizations are created,” Scott says, “because none are required, and yet a form of coordination is achieved that alerts us that what is happening is not just individual action.”<sup>446</sup> These networks can function in

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<sup>443</sup> W. Gamson, B. Fireman, and S. Rytina, *Encounters with Unjust Authority* (Hounwood: Dorsey Press, 1982). Doug McAdam, John McCarthy, and Mayer Zald, “Social Movements” in *Handbook of Sociology*, ed. Neil Smelser (Newbury Park: Sage, 1988); Naomi Rosenthal and Michael Schwartz, “Spontaneity and Democracy in Social Protest,” in *Organizing for Change: Social Movement Organizations in Europe and the United States*, ed. Bert Klandermans (Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1989).

<sup>444</sup> Rick Fantasia, *Cultures of Solidarity*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

<sup>445</sup> Francis Hearn, *Domination, Legitimation, and Resistance: The Interpretation of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century English Working Class* (Wesport: Greenwood, 1978); also cited in Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, 399, fn. 108.

<sup>446</sup> Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, 300-01.

military settings. John Helmer, in his study of the American army in Vietnam, concluded that unit cohesion “served to foster and reinforce dissent from the goals of the military organization and to organize refusal to perform according to institutional norms.”<sup>447</sup>

These networks could also form the foundation of much larger actions. Informal personal networks were found to have been indispensable in the development of the “Solidarity” movement in Gdansk,<sup>448</sup> and played a similar role in the growth of civil unrest in the GDR.<sup>449</sup> Historians have also shown that the corollary position to be true, that social isolation and fragmentation work to prevent the emergence of effective resistance. This argument is often invoked, for instance with respect to totalitarian societies – Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia.<sup>450</sup>

In the remainder of this study, I aim to apply these insights to the case of the German army in 1918. I will argue that resistance never materialized among German soldiers precisely because these networks were absent. They had existed, to some extent, in the Reich’s prewar army, and they survived into the first stages of the war. But by the last years of the war, they had ceased to exist. The army’s social fabric was literally disintegrating. This was partly due to pre-existing cleavages in German society, and partly due to the enormous pressures exerted by the war itself. The tremendous casualties involved in trench warfare, and the competition for ever-scarcer resources rapidly destroyed the personal and affective bonds among soldiers. In this sense, the social

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<sup>447</sup> John Helmer, *Bringing the War Home: The American Soldier in Vietnam and After* (New York: Free Press, 1974), 47.

<sup>448</sup> Marx and McAdam, *Collective Behavior*, 76

<sup>449</sup> Karl-Dieter Opp and Christine Gern, “Dissident Groups, Personal Networks, and Spontaneous Cooperation: The East German Revolution of 1989” *American Sociological Review* 58, no. 5 (Oct. 1995); Steven Pfaff, “Collective Identity and Informal Groups in Revolutionary Mobilization: East Germany in 1989,” *Social Forces* 75, no. 1 (Sep. 1996): 91-117.

<sup>450</sup> Detlev Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany: Conformity, Opposition and Racism in Everyday Life* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1989).

disintegration of the army was connected to the broader disintegration of German wartime society, which has been much studied by historians.<sup>451</sup>

## Turnover

Having now laid out the argument in general terms, the task is to develop it in more detail. What does it mean for the social fabric of an army to disintegrate? How is this disintegration experienced by the army's members? What is the precise connection between this sort of isolation and the political powerlessness I outline above? Indeed, what exactly is the meaning of terms like 'isolation' or 'cohesion'? How can they be measured?

These definitional problems are not easy to sort out. For decades, social scientists have struggled to measure the intensity of human connections. Dozens of different models and metrics have been proposed.<sup>452</sup> Indeed there continues to be disagreement over how such terms should even be defined.<sup>453</sup> In light of these disputes, let us first consider only the most fundamental requirement of cohesion – contact between individuals. All sources agree that familiarity and trust do not develop all at once, but gradually, through an extended period of regular interaction. Only through such contact can individuals work out points of conflict amongst themselves, and develop some intuitive sense of their role within the group. It takes time, likewise, to build up a body of

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<sup>451</sup> Chickering, *Urban Society*; Koeka, *Facing Total War*; Ziemann, *War Experiences*.

<sup>452</sup> For an illuminating survey, see Leif J. Braaten, "Group Cohesion: A New Multidimensional Model," *Group* 15, no. 1 (1991): 39-55.

<sup>453</sup> Peter Mudrack, "Defining Group Cohesiveness: A Legacy of Confusion," *Small Group Research* 20, no. 37 (1989).

shared experiences, and to discover like-minded individuals with which to associate and cooperate.<sup>454</sup> As we shall see however, even this most basic requirement for cohesion was increasingly absent by 1918. This fact is striking, because the German army (like most other modern armies) was designed to ensure stable relationships among its members. The army was organized into discrete units, whose membership remained relatively fixed over time. If everything worked the way that it was intended to, soldiers would spend virtually all of their time with the same small group of people. This rigid system of organization could not be maintained under the pressures of war however. A high rate of turnover prevailed within these units. This was partly the result of the massive casualties produced by the fighting on the western front. Partly, too, it was the result of the army's efforts to stretch its diminishing supply of manpower to meet its increasing needs. Turnover increased over the course of the war, and by 1918 had become astronomical. At some point, it becomes almost misleading even to speak of "units," in the sense of a stable, discrete collection of individuals. They were perhaps better described as way-stations, temporary stopping points for a continuous stream of individuals.

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<sup>454</sup> For the most direct discussion of this process in a military context, see Stephen Wesbrook, "The Potential for Military Disintegration" in *Combat Effectiveness: Cohesion, Stress, and the Volunteer Military*, ed. Sam Sarkesian (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1980), esp 266. For more theoretical views on this subject, see Mayer, *Organizational Trust*, 727-730; H.W. Kee and R.E. Knox, "Conceptual and Methodological Considerations in the Study of Trust," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 14 (1970): 357-66; R. Boyle and P. Bonacich, "The Development of Trust and Mistrust in Mixed Motive Games," *Sociometry* 33 (1970): 123-139; R.J. Lewicki and C. Wiethoff, "Trust, Trust Development, and Trust Repair," in *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice*, eds. Morton Deutsch and Peter Coleman (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000). See also Bruce Tuckman, "Developmental Sequence in Small Groups," *Psychological Bulletin* 63, no. 6 (1965): 384-99. Tuckman's is still the most widely accepted theory of the evolution of small groups. And while Tuckman is not explicitly concerned with 'trust,' he studies how a small group becomes a functional unit, capable of smooth cooperation. He posits that this sequence proceeds in a series of more-or-less discrete steps, and so takes time. For a more detailed investigation of what this process involves in practice, and why it is necessarily slow, see Opp and Gern, "Dissident Groups," 662.

In large part, of course, the high rate of turnover in individual units was the product of battlefield casualties. As discussed in Chapter 1, combat casualties during the last year of the war were astronomically high. Between January and November of 1918, 1,836,000 German soldiers became casualties, of which about a third were killed, captured, or declared missing. Over this span, another 3 million reported sick, of which about a million were suffering from the Spanish flu.<sup>455</sup> Many of these men were eventually returned to the ranks after they had been released from military hospitals. For the war as a whole, some 70% of wounded men were eventually returned to the ranks.<sup>456</sup> From the perspective of General Headquarters these men were not “losses,” they had only been temporarily removed from duty. From the perspective of the individual unit however, once a man had passed into the hands of the military medical system he was unlikely to return – or if he did, not for a very long time. Even though military hospitals were under increasing pressure to return men to duty as fast as possible, the process could only be accelerated so much. Only about 10% of cases handled by military doctors were classed as “light,” meaning that they could be returned to duty within a few days.<sup>457</sup> The rest required more extended periods of treatment. About half of all cases had to be transported back to large reserve hospitals in the rear, and a third were shipped to hospitals back in Germany, where they typically remained for months or years.<sup>458</sup> Those who were eventually deemed fit for service were usually not returned to their units right away. Many were given a period of home leave, and then forwarded to their units training company, where they would be worked back into military shape. It was the army’s policy

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<sup>455</sup> *Sanitätsbericht III*, Tafel 147-50.

<sup>456</sup> *Sanitätsbericht III*, 62

<sup>457</sup> McRandle and Quirk, *Blood Test*, 688

<sup>458</sup> *Sanitätsbericht III*, 788

that returning convalescents should be returned to their former units, but in practice this was often impossible. Many men were not healthy enough to return to their former duties, because of the continuing effect of their wounds. 1 in 10 were declared permanently unfit for service on release.<sup>459</sup> A much larger number were declared fit only for rear-area duty, and were accordingly transferred to an auxiliary unit. Those deemed fit for field duty were still not guaranteed to be returned to their original unit, because of the way the replacement system worked. Men were not dispatched individually to their units. Instead, they were accumulated at the field-recruit depots behind the lines. From there, they were sent in cohorts to wherever they were needed most, depending on the strategic situation and the relative manpower needs of units in the area.<sup>460</sup> A man was sent back to his original company only if he happened to be in the depot when his company was scheduled to receive replacements, and if there were not some other tactical emergency nearby. In other cases, a man's original unit no longer existed, having been reorganized or folded into another. It is difficult to make firm generalizations. But based on unit rosters, the likeliest scenario seems to be that a man was sent back to his original division, but placed within a different company.<sup>461</sup>

We can begin to glimpse the scale of the turnover if we compare the number of casualties to the total size of the army. Over the campaign season of 1918, more than 5 million German soldiers were killed, captured, or wounded, or reported sick. Over that

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<sup>459</sup> *Sanitätsbericht III*, 69, 29

<sup>460</sup> French Army, *Notes on the German Army*, 27.

<sup>461</sup> This is my conclusion, based on the *Stammrolle* that I have surveyed. The number of men who were transferred back into the company after having been wounded was quite low. In the 1<sup>st</sup> company, 180<sup>th</sup> Regiment, only about 1% of men who passed through the unit served multiple stints in the same company. See HSASt M468 Bd 1-2, discussed more fully at the end of this chapter. Benjamin Ziemann makes a similar point as well. Ziemann, *War Experiences*, 33. See also Wisberg, *Heer und Heimat*, 88-90.

same span, the total strength of the German army in the west averaged about 3.5 million men.<sup>462</sup> In purely nominal terms, then, the army suffered a loss rate of about 140% in a little over eight months. At the same time, 1.5 million men were dispatched to the army as replacements, mostly consisting of raw recruits and men stripped from rear area units.<sup>463</sup> This is a very rough calculation, of course, intended only as a starting point. The actual rate of turnover in any given unit was highly variable, and depended on a host of situational factors. Obviously, battle casualties were concentrated in front-line units, which comprised about half of the field army's total personnel.<sup>464</sup> And among front-line units, there was uneven distribution. Artillery and logistical units suffered less, while the infantry suffered comparatively more. Casualties were the most terrible in elite divisions, and in the special storm trooper battalions. Casualties in such units could easily reach 60 or 70% in a single month.<sup>465</sup>

From the perspective of individual soldiers, turnover on this scale meant the constant and severe disruption of their social world. This was all the more true since, in most cases, the boundaries of that world were so narrow. A soldier was not just a member of a single unit. He was a member of many units simultaneously, within a vast nested hierarchy. A soldier was a member of a specific company, for instance, but also of the battalion to which that company belonged, the regiment to which that battalion belonged, and so on. While a soldier sometimes had some level of identification with higher formations – regiments or battalions – most of his social interaction took place at the lower levels, especially company level. Most facets of a soldier's interaction with the

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<sup>462</sup> *Sanitätsbericht* III, Tafel 147-50.

<sup>463</sup> Wrisberg, *Heer und Heimat*, 89

<sup>464</sup> See Ayers, *Amiens to Armistice*, 17, for rifle strength. Compare to *Sanitätsbericht*, note 34 above.

<sup>465</sup> See *Histories of the Two Hundred and Fifty One Divisions*, for instance 10, 27, 73, 129.



military were mediated through the company. His immediate commanding officers were members of the same company. Food, home leave, mail, pay and other necessities were distributed through the company's administrative machinery.<sup>466</sup> The world of the company was fragile, however, because it was relatively small. The official strength of a company was about 250.<sup>467</sup> But the actual number at any given time was considerably less than this, taking into account men on detached duty, men on leave, and (as the war progressed) casualties. By 1917, companies typically had between 150 and 200 men. In the last half of 1918, average company strength had fallen to 70 or 80, and in some fewer than 50.<sup>468</sup>

Within a group this small, any large-scale movement of men would effectively obliterate existing networks of social connection. This was most commonly the case when a unit suffered heavy casualties in battle, losses which were subsequently replaced by new men. The survivors often felt themselves to be strangers in their own unit. After hard fighting in the early autumn of 1918, one soldier wrote to his wife that the unit now contained "purely foreign faces." In this situation, he ceased to even consider himself a member of the unit at all. "It is a disastrous life," he wrote "when one has no company and knows no people."<sup>469</sup> In September of that year, another soldier wrote to his wife to inform her that he was moving back to a unit he had been stationed with previously. Ostensibly good news, he reported it without much relish, as this unit had recently been

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<sup>466</sup> Notes and accounts of cook staff and postmen show that the primary unit of distribution was the company. See BfZ Lips, end ephemera; BfZ Pechthold, 20. This was an extension of peace-time practice; in home postings, companies usually lived together in their own barracks, dined as a unit, trained together, and performed most other tasks together. See for instance, Eli Helmick, "Military Observations in Germany," *Infantry Journal* 3 (1906): 22-54.

<sup>467</sup> Nash, *Imperial German Army Handbook*, 40.

<sup>468</sup> BA-MA PH 5I/25 "Vergleich der Eigenen und Feindlichen Infanteristischen Frontbesetzung..." 21.10.1918; See also the remarks in Stephenson, *The Final Battle*, 16 fn. 20.

<sup>469</sup> BfZ, Lips, 6 Oct 1918.

destroyed and reformed. “I don’t like it at all anymore,” he wrote, noting that “too many changes had happened.”<sup>470</sup> Even where casualties had not been excessive, the continual ingress and egress of men changed the face of a unit quickly. Walter Pechthold returned to his unit in early 1918, after being out sick for several months. He found that “the spring offensive throws its shadow over [the unit]. The company has been replenished to 200 men. Many unknown faces among them. Equipment, regulations, training all different.”<sup>471</sup> The experience of returning to a changed unit would become a familiar one for him. Lightly wounded in the summer, he returned to his unit after a few days to find a multitude of newcomers. He was given a few weeks of light duty in a wood chopping detachment, to allow for further recovery. When he returned again, he could not even find his original unit. “I searched for my platoon, but did not find a familiar face.”<sup>472</sup> He at least took comfort in the fact that the high rate of turnover made the itinerant life less difficult. After he was ordered to join a new regiment, he remarked “the departure was not too difficult for me. There were very few of my old comrades there, and these were mostly at headquarters.”<sup>473</sup>

It is clear that when soldiers said that their units had completely changed, that this were not simply the exaggerated griping of old campaigners. Any man who was with his unit for more than a few months, and who had occasion to reflect on former days, invariably realized that few if any of its former members were left. Men were often moved to such reflections before a major operation, or in its aftermath, as they tried to calculate its cost. After costly fighting in June of 1918, one depressed *Musketier* confided

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<sup>470</sup> BfZ, Ehlers, 4 Sep 1918.

<sup>471</sup> BfZ, Pechthold, 151.

<sup>472</sup> BfZ, Pechthold, 51.

<sup>473</sup> BfZ, Pechthold, 110.

to his wife “from the old unit there are only a few still here; everyone is new.” Such thoughts clearly did not inspire much optimism. “It is terrifying,” he went on “to think about how many there are [who have become casualties].”<sup>474</sup> At nearly the same time, on a different part of the front Ernst Jünger was preoccupied with almost the same thoughts. He reckoned that, of the men with the company at Christmas, only five were left.<sup>475</sup> By the last months of the war, these calculations had become depressing indeed. In September, a battalion cook noticed that he was the only one of his immediate comrades to have been with the company since 1914. After thinking about it further, he concluded “I believe [I am] the only one in the regiment.”<sup>476</sup>

Sickness and death were by no means the only source of turnover. While soldiers were being physically destroyed by the enemy, they were also confronted by the ever-increasing demands of the home front and the war economy. The authorities’ efforts to satisfy these conflicting demands gave rise to an endless series of transfers and reorganizations. As discussed above, the most serious constraint on the German war effort was a lack of manpower. Despite having the second largest population in Europe, there were simply not enough men to simultaneously support the demands of the military, the war economy, and the home front. The state responded with measures designed to increase the available supply of manpower, such as the Auxiliary Service Law – which stipulated that all men between the ages of 17 and 60, and who were not already in military service, were liable for conscription into the war economy. These efforts

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<sup>474</sup> MKB, Stein, 6 June 1918.

<sup>475</sup> Jünger, *Storm of Steel*, 110.

<sup>476</sup> BfZ, Lips, 1 Sep 1918.

produced disappointing results however.<sup>477</sup> The only other option was to try and squeeze more work out of the existing labor force, most of which was already locked up in military service. What developed was an *ad hoc* system of work sharing, in which soldiers were required to take on tasks outside of the military sphere. In practice, this meant that soldiers were increasingly loaned out to other organizations, and spent less time with their units.

The most well-known examples of this sort of sharing relate to the war economy. As the war continued, the military increasingly found ways for soldiers to split time between military and economic functions. The largest of these systems developed in the agricultural sector. German agriculture had been hard hit by the demands of war. 4.5 million agricultural workers would eventually be drafted into the army, which amounted to nearly 40% of the entire workforce in that sector.<sup>478</sup> Those losses were difficult to replace, especially in southern and western Germany, where labor-intensive small-holding agriculture prevailed.<sup>479</sup> The first years of the war accordingly saw total agricultural production decline by a third. This was particularly alarming, in light of the Allied naval blockade, which cut Germany off from the overseas food imports upon which she previously relied.<sup>480</sup> To prevent a total collapse of production, as early as 1915 the army began granting special leaves to soldiers who worked in agriculture, so that they

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<sup>477</sup> Chickering, *Imperial Germany and the Great War*, 81. Herwig, *The First World War*, 264.

<sup>478</sup> Ziemann puts the number of agricultural workers drafted as up to 4 million. Ziemann, *War Experiences*, 37. The number of individuals employed in the agricultural sector in 1913 was about 10.7 million. Berghahn, *Imperial Germany*, 306, table 23.

<sup>479</sup> For the structure of agriculture in south and west Germany, see J.H. Clapham, *The Economic Development of France and Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 198-200. For the consequences on conscription in these areas, see Bob Moeller, "Dimensions of Social Conflict in the Great War: The View from the German Countryside," *Central European History* 14, no 2. (June 1981).

<sup>480</sup> Offer, *First World War*, 25.

could assist with farm work.<sup>481</sup> The timing and length of these leaves was decided on an individual basis, depending on the crops involved, the local labor situation, and other factors. Most farmers expected to receive two such leaves per year, each of several weeks. With a modicum of good fortune, a soldier might expect to spend two months per year back on his farm. Particularly important or well-connected farmers might receive much more, up to six months.<sup>482</sup> Some men were gone so often that their fellow soldiers described them as “professional leave-takers.”<sup>483</sup> Considering that farmers constituted a full third of the army, this system represented a major drain on the army’s effective strength.<sup>484</sup>

In industry, a more informal system of sharing emerged. Here the flow of personnel was governed not by a set of explicit regulations, but by the shifting importance placed on military and economy goals, which fluctuated according to the larger situation. The fundamental dilemma in industry was the same as in agriculture: the same men were needed both to fight, and to produce weapons and other critical goods. Given the nature of industrial production, it was not possible to neatly divide an individual’s time between military and economic tasks; there was no harvest season. What therefore developed was a series of policy adjustment and reversals, whose effect in practice was to shuttle workers between factory and front. At the beginning of the war, large numbers of industrial workers were drafted into the army – up to 40% of all skilled workers. There were few draft exemptions available for workers, because there had been little serious preparation for a long war. With the onset of stalemate in the west, the

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<sup>481</sup> Ziemann, *War Experiences*, 45-46

<sup>482</sup> BA-MA, RH 61 1035, memo 28 Sep 1917; BfZ, Lips 18. Sep. 1917.

<sup>483</sup> Ziemann, *War Experiences*, 47.

<sup>484</sup> Ziemann, *War Experiences*, 3.

government was forced to make preparations for a more extended campaign. Many industrial workers, especially skilled workers in key industries, were released from the army in early 1915.<sup>485</sup> Over the next year, the military grip on industrial labor began to tighten again, as it tried to replace heavy losses. Military exemptions became more difficult to obtain, or were revoked, and manpower bled back into the army.<sup>486</sup> But the rise of Ludendorff in the summer of 1916 saw another policy reversal. Ludendorff insisted upon a massive increase in armaments output, and to get it, he was prepared to sanction a mass transfer of men from the army back into industry. Between September of 1916 and July of 1917, 700,000 soldiers were shifted back into industry.<sup>487</sup> In 1918, the flow of manpower became more erratic, as different authorities scrambled to satisfy the competing needs of army and industry. To prepare for the offensives (and later, to make up the losses suffered in them), the army began to call up industrial workers yet again. 30,000 were called up in each January and September, with further levies later in the fall.<sup>488</sup> But at the same time, industries – under intense pressure to meet weapons quotas – continued to reclaim men from the field, and civil and military authorities often worked at cross-purposes. In September, for instance, more workers left the army than entered it.<sup>489</sup> The army's handling of manpower was damaging to production, but it was equally disruptive for unit cohesion. Nearly a million workers were subjected to these transfers, and thousands were moved several times.<sup>490</sup>

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<sup>485</sup> Strachan, *First World War*, 1038.

<sup>486</sup> Chickering, *Urban Life*, 137.

<sup>487</sup> Feldman, *Army, Industry and Labor*, 301

<sup>488</sup> Norman Louis Kincaide, "Sturmabteilungen to Freikorps: German Army Tactical and Organizational Development, 1914-1918" (unpublished dissertation, Arizona State University, 1989), 176.

<sup>489</sup> Wrisberg, *Heer und Heimat*, 91-92.

<sup>490</sup> E.O. Volkmann, *Der Grosse Krieg, 1914-1918* (Berlin: Reimar Hobbing, 1922), 179.

Other sorts of manpower sharing developed, on a lesser scale, in different sectors. To help keep the army supplied with clothing and other necessities, the army established special *Wirtschaft* companies, whose members engaged in artisanal and light manufacturing work. 150 such companies were ultimately formed.<sup>491</sup> It was intended to staff these units with less-fit men, or those recovering from wounds. But men from front line units often served in them as well, particularly if they possessed the needed skills. As in industry, assignment to such companies was indefinite and subject to frequent change. Men were shuttled back and forth between field and workshop depending on the needs of their parent unit. Into this category fell men like Wilhelm Schulin, a cobbler by training who was drafted into an infantry regiment in 1915. He spent most of the war on the Western Front, but also served half a dozen stints with *Wirtschaft* units making shoes for military use.<sup>492</sup> Government officials and civil servants fell under a system more akin to that in industry, with the allocation of manpower being determined by the push and pull of military and domestic authorities. Local and regional governments often petitioned the military directly for the return of men deemed critical to government functions. The requests were sometimes granted, but with complex conditions attached. Sometimes, local governments had to provide substitutes for the returned man.<sup>493</sup> In other cases, men would be released only for a specific term, after which they would be required to return to the front.<sup>494</sup>

Soldiers were not only divided between the demands of the military and the war economy. They were simultaneously confronted with the practical demands of their

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<sup>491</sup> *German Army Handbook*, 145.

<sup>492</sup> BfZ, Schulin, esp. fall 1917 entries.

<sup>493</sup> Chickering, *Urban Life*, 137.

<sup>494</sup> BfZ, Ehlers, 22 Oct. 1917.

families back in Germany.<sup>495</sup> Of the 13 million soldiers who passed through the army, only a tiny fraction were professional soldiers. The vast majority were ordinary men, who were not accommodated to the demands of long-service, and who left behind lives and relationships at home. There were children to be raised, relationships to nurture, farms and businesses to maintain, households to be kept solvent. Authorities at all levels realized that these needs could not be neglected indefinitely, at least not without critically damaging the morale of both soldiers and civilians. One response was to devise legal and administrative machinery which made it easier for soldiers to manage their households in absentia – for instance, rules which permitted men to conduct their personal banking by proxy. The main response, however, was to physically share soldiers out to home front, through a system of home leave. Home-leave was an old practice, which developed in the long-service armies of the old regime. The First World War marked the one of the first times that home leaves were granted on a large scale to soldiers in wartime. The rules governing leaves were never formally laid down, but a series of conventions and unwritten rules developed in the early part of the war. The army generally tried to give each man one leave per 1 – 1.5 years.<sup>496</sup> A regular leave was about two weeks long, though extensions were possible, and overstaying leave was among the most common of military offenses.<sup>497</sup> The number of soldiers on leave at any given time was determined by local commanders, and was based on the tactical situation. During major operations, all leaves might be cancelled, but generally the number of men on leave ranged between

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<sup>495</sup> For a much longer discussion of how soldiers met these demands via the post, see Chapter 6. Here, I am mainly interested in the army's leave policies in relation to family life.

<sup>496</sup> Ziemann, *War Experiences*, 45-46.

<sup>497</sup> According to criminal statistics for the Württemberg contingent, for instance, criminal prosecutions for overstaying leave were almost as numerous for all other categories of crime combined. HSA-St M 1/7 Bu 275, "Übersicht über die bei den Württembergischen erfolgten Bestrafungen...", n.d.



2 and 12% of a unit's total strength. Special leaves were also granted for a wide variety of situations – death or sickness of a family member, household hardship, births, and marriages. Such special leaves often outnumbered regular leaves.<sup>498</sup> Leaves of all types generated an enormous and continuous flow of soldiers. Railway officials calculated that by the end of 1917, 30,000 men on leave were in transit on any given day. Over the course of a month, that amounted to nearly 1 million men, or 20% of all German forces in the field.<sup>499</sup>

A third source of turnover was the continuous internal restructuring of the army, as the army adapted itself to the unforeseen demands of the world war. The restructuring of the army began in the first months of the war. In August 1914, the German army was the second largest in Europe (behind only Russia), with a total field strength of more than two million. But as the war widened, the army's leaders quickly concluded that this would not be nearly enough. The battle fronts were lengthening dramatically, especially on the Eastern Front. At the same time, the army had to provide garrisons for occupied territories, and had to take on new commitments in Italy, the Balkans, and the Middle East. To meet these needs, the army concluded that it needed more units. The first new units were created in early 1915. And by the summer of 1917, more than a hundred additional divisions had been created. In 1914, the fully-mobilized army counted some 96 divisions. By the summer of 1917, the number of divisions reached 240.<sup>500</sup> The creation of new units, especially on such a vast scale, required massive reallocations of manpower

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<sup>498</sup> See HSA-St M1/4 Bu 1625, "Verzeichnis der von den Eisenbahnüberwachungs-reisender erforderlich" 29. Oct [1918].

<sup>499</sup> Sarter, *Deutsche Eisenbahnen*, 98.

<sup>500</sup> Haythornethwaite, *Sourcebook*, 193-94. For a full discussion of the expansion of the army, see Wrisberg, *Heer und Heimat*, 15-101.

and severely disrupted existing units. When new units were formed, the rank and file could be drawn (at least initially) from the army's manpower reserves. But new divisions could not be formed simply from new recruits; they contained thousands of specialist personnel – officers and administrators, doctors, engineers, signals specialists, logistical troops, reconnaissance units, and so on. There was no surplus of such specialists; indeed there were not enough to fully meet the needs even of the existing army. This meant that the necessary personnel could only be taken from existing units.<sup>501</sup> The process became more difficult later in the war, when the army's manpower reserves were exhausted. Past that point, new units could only be formed by breaking up existing units and redistributing their manpower. Originally, each infantry division consisted of 4 regiments (each of about 3,200 men). In 1915, however, the number of regiments in each division was reduced to three, and the surplus regiments were recombined to form some 30 new divisions.<sup>502</sup> The process involved the transfer of hundreds of thousands of men.

Over the last year and a half of the war, internal restructuring focused on the problems of contraction rather than expansion. The size of the field armies peaked in the summer of 1917 and thereafter declined, as replacements could no longer keep pace with the rate of loss. The challenge for military authorities was how to maintain a core of effective units, given the inexorable decline of total strength. The first move was to shift units from administrative and logistical units into combat units, a process-known as “combing out.” In the spring and summer of 1918, 132,000 men were combed out of rear-area units. A further 62,000 were combed out of auxiliary branches – transportation,

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<sup>501</sup> Altrichter, *Die seelischen Kräfte*, 187-190.

<sup>502</sup> Wrisberg, *Heer und Heimat*, 27.

aviation, intelligence, and so on.<sup>503</sup> At the same time, the army tried to concentrate the fittest men together. The process was carried out only partially, but still involved the massive transfer of men on an army-wide scale. By March of 1918, the bulk of the fittest men had been grouped into some 74 “mobile” and “attack” divisions, while the less fit men were transferred to the remaining divisions, designated “trench” divisions.<sup>504</sup> These measures provided only temporary relief however, because casualty rates continued to rise. By the last phases of the offensives, the “attack” divisions had been worn out through continual use. To sustain their strength, they had to be replenished by men from the “trench” divisions, effectively reversing the earlier reorganization and erasing the distinction between the two types of unit.<sup>505</sup>

By the late summer, the high command was disbanding entire divisions, and redistributing men to other formations. 22 divisions were ultimately disbanded in this way, and their components distributed among more than 50 of the remaining units.<sup>506</sup> At lower levels, much the same thing was happening. The remnants of shattered battalions and companies, rather than being gradually built back up with replacements, were simply combined and made into new units. This had been relatively standard practice throughout the war, especially during periods of hard fighting, but it had been primarily a temporary measure. In 1918, it became more or less standard practice. The scale of this practice was suggested by the constant stream of protests from local commanders, that these “newly formed, entirely incohesive units” were not fit for operations. “The sense of unit

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<sup>503</sup> Kincaide, *From Sturmabteilungen to Freikorps*, 371

<sup>504</sup> Herwig, *The First World War*, 395.

<sup>505</sup> Foley, *From Victory to Defeat*, 80

<sup>506</sup> BA-MA, PH 5 I/40 “Auffüllung von Divisionen durch Teile aufgelöster Division,” 1 Oct. 1918.

identity,” read one report “and unit pride was not yet fully developed.”<sup>507</sup> The chaos which attended this process can also be seen in the accounts of the men involved. Soldiers wrote to family to tell them they were now in new units, because their old units had ceased to exist.<sup>508</sup> Many no longer had a clear sense of which unit they even belonged. One man scolded his family for sending letters to the wrong unit, only to discover later that he had been giving her the wrong information.<sup>509</sup>

### **Demographic Complexity**

The formation of social networks emerges out of regular interactions among individuals. But of course, such networks do not emerge *automatically* out of such interaction. Simply putting individuals into close proximity with each other does not produce familiarity. Many other factors come into play. One important consideration is what sorts of individuals make up the group, and how similar they are to one another. Social scientists generally agree that highly heterogeneous groups do not cohere as easily as more uniform ones. Individuals with similar characteristics are more likely to seek out attachment with each other.<sup>510</sup> And in the critical early stages of group formation, when conflicts among members are brought out into the open, these conflicts are more easily resolved when the contestants share similar beliefs and experiences.<sup>511</sup> That’s not to say

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<sup>507</sup> HSA-St, M 30/1 27.9.18 “Erfahrungen der 14. Reserve-Division...,” 27 Oct. 1918.

<sup>508</sup> BfZ, Blecher, 2 Oct.1918; BfZ, Lips 26 Oct. 1918.

<sup>509</sup> KM-B, Pfeffer, 13 Apr. 1918.

<sup>510</sup> Don Byrne, *The Attraction Paradigm* (New York: Academic Press, 1971); Forsyth, *Group Dynamics*, 63-64.

<sup>511</sup> Jeffrey Pfeffer, “Organizational Demography,” in *Research in Organizational Behavior*, eds. Larry Cummings and Barry Shaw, vol. 5 (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1983); Frances Milliken and L. Martins,

that heterogeneous groups cannot form, or that they cannot function. In some ways, these groups enjoy functional advantages. Other things being equal, however, trust and familiarity form more readily among homogenous groups. The German mobilization system was designed to maintain social homogeneity to the greatest extent possible. Like so many others, however, these safeguards were not designed to cope with the demands of a long war, and broke down. By 1918, the army had come to more closely resemble the society from which it was drawn: complex, dynamic, and highly fragmented.

To most observers at the time, the most striking change in the army's make up was its changing age profile. In the pre-war army, men were usually called up for service at age twenty. Service could be deferred, for those men with family obligations, but only up to two years. Men served for a fixed period of time, the duration of which depended on service branch – usually two years. Under this system, the vast majority of rank and file soldiers were between the ages of 20 and 25.<sup>512</sup> Once the war broke out, the army's age structure would change radically. In general, the men who had traditionally constituted the regular soldiery – men in their early twenties – declined as a proportion of the army. Meanwhile, the proportion of middle aged men and teenagers increased. In other words, the center of the age structure was squeezed, while the edges bulged. The change had two separate causes. One was the expansion of the army. The field army rapidly expanded during the war, from 2.9 million to a peak of 7.3 million.<sup>513</sup> There were not enough men of traditional soldiering age to support this expansion. These men

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“Searching for Common Threads: Understanding Multiple Effects of Diversity in Organizational Groups,” *Academy of Managements Review* 21 (1996); Ivan Steiner, *Group Process and Productivity* (San Diego: Academic Press, 1972).

<sup>512</sup> *Germany Army Handbook*, 9-11.

<sup>513</sup> *Sanitatsbericht* III, 8 übersicht 1.

therefore had to be drawn from other age groups, both older and younger. By 1915, the army had called up all eligible males up to age 45, and as young as 18. Thereafter, young men continued to be called up as they came of age, while the age of call up was made earlier. The first age cohort to be called up during the war was called up in the regular time, in the fall of 1914, by which time most of the men had reached the age of twenty. By 1916, men were being called up a full year early, and by 1918 more than two years early, by which time some of the recruits had not yet turned 18.<sup>514</sup> Of the 13.2 million men drafted during the war, somewhere around half were outside what the army considered to be optimal soldiering age. Between 1.5 and 2 million were drafted at age 18 or younger. Around 4 million draftees were aged 30 or more, and as many as 1.5 million were forty or more.<sup>515</sup> The age structure was further imbalanced because of combat losses. These losses were not evenly distributed among age groups. They fell heaviest upon men in their twenties, as these men – typically the strongest and fittest – were over-represented in combat units. The imbalance was significant. Calculations conducted after the war determined that 42% of men killed during the war were between the age of 20 and 24.<sup>516</sup>

The age imbalance was most marked in the last years of the war. By that time, the only sources of fresh manpower were teenage recruits. This produced many units where the average age was exceptionally low – in some cases no more than 19. The soldiers

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<sup>514</sup> Drury, “Storm Trooper,” 29-30; *German Army Handbook*, 12.

<sup>515</sup> A comparison of the 1910 census with the wartime 1916 census (which does not count men in the field) gives a rough but fairly reliable guide to the number of men from each age cohort who were drafted. This indicates that about 3 million men aged 30 and over had been drafted by 1916. For the whole war, a reasonable estimate seems to be about 4 million. Given that the army drafted 80% of all military aged males, the figure could not have been much lower. See *Statistisches Jahrbuch für das Deutsche Reich 1919*, Section I, 12-13, 6-7. *Notes on the German Army*, 24.

<sup>516</sup> Ziemann, *War Experiences*, 24

themselves were acutely aware of these changes. Some were able to find humor in the situation, describing their units as the ‘Jugendwehr’ or the ‘Boy Scouts.’<sup>517</sup> More often, soldiers reacted with anxiety or despair, as they wondered how their units could possibly continue to function. One man described the new men in his unit as “all young, for the most part sedate lads.” He then added, pessimistically, “with these we have to fight against many nations.”<sup>518</sup> Another soldier expressed almost the same sentiments, noting that unit now contained nothing but “young, loud faces ... no one over 19. Up to the group leader, it was their first time against the enemy.”<sup>519</sup> Even Allied soldiers began to notice the change. Allied soldiers had generally been impressed with the bearing and appearance of German soldiers. The British, in particular, held them in high regard. In 1918, however, they were surprised to find themselves fighting an army of “greenhorns and greybeards.” In July of 1918, a British infantryman with the Sutherland Highlanders observed several hundred German prisoners being led off into captivity. He described them in his diary as “a mixed lot. Many boys among them, but also a fair number of older men.”<sup>520</sup>

As the age profile was changing, so was the geographical profile. The German recruitment structure was organized on a regional basis. Each unit drew its manpower from a specific geographical district – referred to as a “corps district,” of which there were 24 – which ensured a reasonable degree of regional homogeneity. This system was designed to function during wartime as well. When units in the field suffered losses, they

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<sup>517</sup> See for instance, DTA 1083, August 1918.

<sup>518</sup> BfZ, Lips, 5 Jun. 1917.

<sup>519</sup> BfZ, Pechthold, 129.

<sup>520</sup> MacKay, 18 Jun. 1918.

drew replacements from the same district in which they were originally formed.<sup>521</sup> Once the actual war broke out, however, the system began to break down almost immediately. Here again, the expansion of the army raised serious difficulties. Expansion was achieved by taking reserve manpower and using it to make new units. Relatively few districts, however, had enough reserve manpower on hand to form entire divisions. They typically formed smaller units (regiments or battalions) which were then combined to form divisions. The process of combination had not been foreseen in the pre-war period, and so proceeded hastily and haphazardly.<sup>522</sup> New units were formed from whatever units happened to be on hand at the moment. Newly formed divisions often ended up being composed of men from all over the empire. The 16<sup>th</sup> *Landwehr* Division, formed in the fall of 1914, was cobbled together from elements of at least six different regiments, from four different corps districts.<sup>523</sup>

A different set of problems was raised by the way the empire was divided. The boundaries of the corps districts were drawn by military rather than political authorities, and with military necessities in mind. They therefore did not conform to the empire's political and ethnic divisions. The IX corps district, for instance, straddled three different federal states (Prussia, Oldenburg and Mecklenburg), as well as the city state of Hamburg. The Second Bavarian corps district included northwest Bavaria and the Palatinate, the area latter being politically unified with Bavaria but culturally distinct and geographically non-contiguous. This meant that even divisions formed from men within a single corps district were by no means totally homogenous. The corps districts, whose

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<sup>521</sup> For a concise discussion of this system, see *German Army Handbook*, 14-17.

<sup>522</sup> "Forming New Units;" also Wrisberg, *Heer und Heimat*, 15-17.

<sup>523</sup> *German Forces in the Field*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: General Staff, 1918), 188.



boundaries were revised only infrequently, were not equal in terms of area and size. The most densely populated districts contained many hundreds of thousands more men than their neighbors.<sup>524</sup> Some districts therefore exhausted their supply of manpower before others did. Compounding this problem was the fact that the each district commander controlled recruitment within his district, and these commanders were not formally subordinate to the Minister of War, with whom overall responsibility for manpower resided. Corps area therefore called up their men at different rates.<sup>525</sup> When an area ran low on men, and could no longer provide replacements to its units, then replacements had to be drawn from other districts. This occurred also during times of tactical emergency. During stretches of heavy fighting, many areas would exhaust their manpower reserves. Commanders at the front usually were not willing to wait for them to recruit and train new men, a process that took months. To keep their units up to strength, they requested units from other corps areas.<sup>526</sup> Initially a stop-gap, this measure eventually became widespread. By 1917, it had largely eroded the regional identity of many units.

A good example is provided by the Württemberg contingent, which mobilized ten infantry divisions during the war. These units were all based in the state of Württemberg, and drew their manpower from within its boundaries.<sup>527</sup> In theory, these units should have been composed entirely of Württembergers. Records show that this was not the case. Early in the war, the Württemberg War Ministry ordered its military courts to compile statistics on its proceedings, and to track judicial proceedings by (among other

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<sup>524</sup> *Armed Strength of the German Empire*, 8; also *Statistisches Jahrbuch fuer das Deutsche Reich, 1915*, 343-44.

<sup>525</sup> Wrisberg, *Heer und Heimat*, 84-85

<sup>526</sup> Wrisberg, *Heer und Heimat*, 90.

<sup>527</sup> The state of Wuertemberg, uniquely, was contiguous with the 13<sup>th</sup> Corps District

things) regional background of the defendant. Each year, the figures for each division were compiled, and the number of proceedings involving Württembergers was compared to the number involving non-Württembergers. If we work under the assumption that Württembergers were about as law abiding as their countrymen, these reports provide us with a rough sketch of the geographical composition of these units. These figures show, first of all, that many of these units were never composed entirely of Württembergers, even in 1914. This particularly applied to second-line units assembled in the months after the outbreak, such as the 2<sup>nd</sup> *Landwehr* Division. The units which had existed in peacetime (the 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> infantry divisions) clearly did have a strong regional identity, but this wore away rather quickly. By the middle years of the war, it seems reasonable to guess that somewhere between a quarter and a third of their members came from outside of Württemberg.<sup>528</sup>

By 1917, regional mixing had become a serious worry for political and military authorities. District commanders and local authorities wanted to keep a tighter control over where their men ended up; some ordered their depots to dispatch replacements only to units which belonged to their corps district.<sup>529</sup> There were also widespread fears that the presence of large numbers of “outsiders” could undermine discipline and effectiveness. In the summer of 1918, the high command took steps to reverse regional mixing. Men serving in ‘foreign’ units were to be transferred to units belonging to their own region. It is unclear to what extent this actually happened; even Ludendorff admitted that it often proved impossible.<sup>530</sup> In many cases also, different military initiatives

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<sup>528</sup> Figs based on HSA-ST, M1/7 275 “Nachweisung über die Strafrechtspflege”

<sup>529</sup> Haythornethwaite, *Sourcebook*, 207.

<sup>530</sup> Ludendorff, *Ludendorff's Own Story*, 247-48.

worked at cross-purposes. In a letter from February 1918, one soldier described how the oldest men in his unit were being transferred out, to ensure more uniformity of age. But their replacements were all men from Halle, despite the fact that the unit was based in Silesia.<sup>531</sup> In any event, whatever was done was soon undone. The last half of 1918 was one of perpetual military crisis. The dwindling number of replacements were thrown into combat wherever needed, and the battered remnants of units were folded together. Maintaining regional integrity was rarely a priority. In the early summer, a soldier in the 38<sup>th</sup> division, which was based in Thuringia, noted that the unit was receiving most of its replacements from Alsace.<sup>532</sup> Around the same time, one infantryman observed “now we get replacements for our losses from all over Germany, lightly wounded now-healed soldiers from our spring offensives.”<sup>533</sup> Even the semblance of territorial integrity was difficult to maintain. In early November, the commander of the 5<sup>th</sup> Ersatz Division (originally a Hannoverian unit) complained that his unit was receiving replacements from multiple regions: Lower Saxony, Saxony, Western Prussia, and Alsace.<sup>534</sup> These are not isolated incidents; military records are bursting with similar reports. By the war’s end, the army’s regional organization had largely ceased to exist.

Changes to the army’s class structure were less dramatic, in large part because the army was relatively heterogeneous in this respect even before the war. By comparison to its neighbors, German society was highly complex. Rapid industrialization had created new economic sectors, and a complex division of labor. At the same time, established groups displayed a surprising resilience. Germany was left with a peculiar constellation

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<sup>531</sup> MKB, Stein, 17 Feb. 1918,

<sup>532</sup> BfZ, Pechthold, 164.

<sup>533</sup> Hoover, Schetter, 31-32.

<sup>534</sup> BA-MA, PH5 I/40, memo 4.11.18 “Betr. 5 Ers. Division”

of classes, both the pre-modern and the highly modern. By 1914, for instance, Germany possessed Europe's largest and most efficient industrial work force. At the same time, Germany continued to have powerful aristocracy and a vast agricultural sector; as late as 1912, the number of Germans employed in industry and agriculture was about equal.<sup>535</sup> There were, moreover, cleavages and structural divisions within classes. The rural class embraced both small-holding peasant cultivators, and landless wage-laborers who worked on large mechanized farms. The middle class was likewise divided between an 'old *Mittelstand*' of the towns – small scale merchants and tradesmen – and a 'new *Mittelstand*' whose economic activity was oriented towards the industry, including people such as clerks, managers, and technical specialists.<sup>536</sup> The country's development raised doubts about whether men from diverse backgrounds could fight well together, and whether they would make good soldiers.<sup>537</sup> In the decades before the war, the army therefore tried to maintain some level of class uniformity. Above all, it tried to exclude members of the urban working class, which it viewed as politically suspect and physically degenerate. Workers were subject to a range of discriminatory practices, and local recruitment boards were instructed to disqualify men of suspect political leanings.<sup>538</sup> After the turn of the century, though, the army had to loosen these restrictions. To keep pace with its rivals, the army had to continually expand in size. At the same time, the urban working class expanded as a proportion of the total population. It became impossible to keep them out of the ranks.<sup>539</sup> After war broke out, the devices for

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<sup>535</sup> See also Berghahn, *Imperial Germany*, 306, table 23; also 1-2.

<sup>536</sup> Berghahn, *Imperial Germany*, 50-53.

<sup>537</sup> Friedrich Bernhardt, *Germany and the Next War*, (New York: 1914), see Ch. 13.

<sup>538</sup> Kitchen, *German Officer Corps*, 151-162.

<sup>539</sup> Nash, *Imperial German Army Handbook*, 19.

controlling the class composition were simply abandoned. The need for manpower was too great for the authorities to turn anyone away. Men were recruited, for the most part, regardless of their class or political background. As a general matter, the social composition of the army was close to that of society at large. The agricultural classes, who comprised about 30% of the working population, constituted a third of those mobilized during the war.<sup>540</sup> Members of the SPD and free trade unions composed about a sixth of both the army and the adult work force.<sup>541</sup> University students accounted for about .3% of the population and .4% of the army.<sup>542</sup> There were more substantial variations within the army, as some branches tended to attract men of certain backgrounds. Middle class men, for instance, were more likely to be posted to administrative or technical branches. The largest branches, above all the infantry, could not afford to be too selective however. They drew in men from every background.

### **Demographic Change: The Case of the 1<sup>st</sup> Company**

To better illustrate how these macro-level changes manifested themselves at the small unit level, it may be helpful to examine a single case in more detail. For this purpose, I have chosen to study the first company of the 180<sup>th</sup> Regiment. Its parent formation was the 26<sup>th</sup> Reserve Division, which belonged to the Württemberg army contingent. It was headquartered in, and drew its men from, the 13<sup>th</sup> Army Corps District, which was basically congruent with the political boundaries of Württemberg. This unit

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<sup>540</sup> Ziemann, *War Experiences*, 34, 85. Berghahn, *Imperial Germany*, 306.

<sup>541</sup> Ziemann, *War Experiences*, 85; Berghahn, *Imperial Germany*, 337.

<sup>542</sup> Jaraus, "German Students in the First World War," 311, 318.

was “average,” in most important ways. As a company of infantry, it was the most common type of unit in the army. It faced heavy action throughout the war, especially in 1916, when it was heavily engaged on the Somme, and in 1918, when it participated in the Michael offensive, and was caught up in the subsequent Allied offensives. But in comparison to other units of its kind, this was not an unusual or exceptionally difficult service record. It was not deployed to some secondary theater; formed at the outbreak, it spent the entire war on the Western Front. And while it had a good combat record, it definitely was not considered an elite unit. In most ways, it was more or less indistinguishable from the other 3,000 infantry companies formed during the war. The point is not to argue that this unit was representative of the army as a whole; I am not trying to make such extrapolations here. It is only to say that there is no obvious reason to believe that this case is an outlier.

My analysis here is based on the company’s official roster [*Kriegsstammrolle*].<sup>543</sup> These registers contain a great deal of data. They record not only who was a member of the unit, and for how long. They generally also contain demographic data – age, birthplace, profession, family status – and service history. Taken together, this can tell us a great deal about the unit’s composition. To make sense of this data, I have organized it into a series of “snapshots” – that is, a complete profile of the unit at a particular moment in time. When these snapshots are placed side by side, it becomes possible to trace changes over time. The first snapshot is from August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1914, the day the war started and before the unit has been fully mobilized. The second, November 1<sup>st</sup> 1914, is after mobilization has been completed. The third (September 1<sup>st</sup> 1915) and fourth (February 1<sup>st</sup>

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<sup>543</sup> HSA-St, M468, Bd 1-2.

1917) take place in the aftermath of difficult campaigns. The fifth shows the state of the unit on the eve of the spring 1918 offensives, and the sixth is ten days before the armistice is signed. (See Appendix II).

**Table 2 – The First Company, Manpower Summary<sup>544</sup>**

Total Number of Men Who Served:	1313
Average Strength:	241
Average Monthly Turnover <sup>545</sup>	
1914	6.4%
1915	5.5%
1916	9.4%
1917	8.9%
1918	14.6%
Manner of Exit	
Killed	11.2%
Captured/Missing	8.6%
Wounded, sick, injured	49.3%
Transferred	17.2%
Promoted out	0.2%
Released	12.2%
AWOL	0.7%
Not Recorded	0.5%
Other	0.1%

<sup>544</sup> Figures 1 and 2 are based on my own calculations. The data is drawn from the *Kriegsstammrolle* of the 1<sup>st</sup> company, HSAS<sup>t</sup> M468 Bd 1-2

<sup>545</sup> Number of men who exited the unit, on average, per month. Calculated as a percentage of

Probably the most immediately striking feature of the data is the sheer number of men who passed through the unit. Over the course of the war, 1,301 men would serve with the unit – more than five times the unit’s initial strength, which was about 245.<sup>546</sup> Not surprisingly, most of the men who left the unit did so because of combat casualties. About a fifth were killed or declared missing; 50% were transferred to an Ersatz battalion, which almost always means that the man was wounded –men treated in a field hospital were usually released to an Ersatz unit in Germany for recovery and retraining. One can also see the effect of the army’s manpower policies here. 225 men were transferred out to another field unit, for work at home, or to a *Wirtschaft* company. Of those men who entered the unit after 1915, 73% had previously served with another unit, and most of those had served in multiple previous postings. Some had served in ten or even twenty different units before reaching the 1<sup>st</sup> Company. We can also note here, in reference to the discussion in Chapter 1, that desertion did not seem to be a serious problem. Only 9 men were charged with absence without leave, and all but one of those occurred after the war was over. If there was any mass desertion in the closing months of the war, it has left no paper trail. None of the men, moreover, simply disappear from the records. All of them are properly accounted for. Of the men who were alive at the armistice, all of them were officially discharged; the records include the place and date of discharge, and even details about discharge pay and the return of personal effects, along with the signature of the commanding officer.

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<sup>546</sup> The number of men “on the books” was somewhat greater than the actual number in the unit, since some men would be detached and serving elsewhere, or were in hospitals etc. The company’s authorized strength was about 245.



Given the large number of men who passed through the unit, their stay was necessarily brief. Of the 1,300 men who served, a third spent less than 90 days in the unit, half were in the unit less than six months, and 80% fewer than a year. Only about 4% served with the unit for 3 or more years, and nearly all of these were either on detached service with a rear area formation, or were only nominally members of the unit – meaning, they remained on the register, but were actually in a military hospital. The less time men spent in the unit, of course, the greater the rate at which they came and went. The actual rate of turnover fluctuated radically. It spiked during periods of intense action. In the fall of 1916, for instance, the unit lost half its strength in two months while fighting on the Somme. It fell again during periods of inactivity. Even during quiet periods, though, the monthly rate of turnover rarely fell under 4 or 5%. In general, it is also clear that the rate of turnover increased over the war, particularly in the last year. In 1915, about 5% of the company's men departed each month, on average. In 1918, the average rate of turnover was 15% per month (or a nominal rate of 180% per year). This rate of turnover rapidly destroyed any continuity of personnel. In September 1915, only a year after the war had broken out, only 50% of the unit's original complement remained. By February of 1917, only 15% remained. At that time, in fact, only a quarter of the unit's men had been with the unit even since September of 1915.

In general, the unit's demographic profile followed the same pattern as in the larger army. We can see this most clearly in the company's age structure. At the outbreak, the company's age structure was quite uniform. 82% of its men were aged 20 to 26. This fell somewhat after mobilization, as the unit incorporated some older reservists, and some teenage recruits. The percentage of men in their early twenties continued to fall

in subsequent years. These men suffered casualties at a much higher rate than their compatriots in other age brackets. Nearly 60% of all men captured or killed fell into this age range. They were replaced primarily by middle-aged men. At the same time, the volunteers who had joined up in 1914, most of whom were very young, gradually disappeared. By early 1917, only 5 remained. The unit's 'aging' peaked in 1917, by which time a quarter of the men were aged 30 or older. Thereafter, the average age fell again, owing to the incorporation of a large number of teenage recruits. At the armistice, 20% of the unit was aged 19 or under. The proportion of men in their early twenties had fallen to about 40%. Family status correlated with age. At the outbreak, only 4 men in the company were married. By 1917, a quarter were. Regional affiliation changed less markedly than age, but still showed a clear pattern. The proportion of non-Württembergers gradually increased, and over the war as a whole, a quarter of the men who served in the company were from outside Württemberg. 22 of the empire's 39 states were represented, and every geographical region, from East Prussia to the Rhineland, and from Schleswig to Bavaria.

From the perspective of class, the 1<sup>st</sup> company also seems to conform to patterns in the larger army. The class composition of the unit did change somewhat over the war, and in ways that were generally tied to larger social developments and policy decisions. Students, who comprised a sixth of the unit in peacetime, gradually disappeared from the rolls. This follows the gradual disappearance of students in Germany, as university-aged men were drafted and universities forced to shut their doors.<sup>547</sup> The number of industrial workers declined in the middle of the war, as Ludendorff's great armaments program was

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<sup>547</sup> Jaraus, "German Students in the First World War," 319-20.

getting under way. The number of white collar workers, meanwhile, increased somewhat, probably due to the army's efforts to transfer men from rear-area units to combat units. As in the larger army, however, what is remarkable is not so much the changes that happened, but the complexity which prevailed throughout the war. Every major occupational group was represented in the unit, but at no point did any group constitute a majority. At most points, there was not even a clear plurality. The men of the company were more or less evenly divided among four occupational groups – agricultural, industrial, artisanal, bourgeois – whose share of the unit shifted between 15 and 25%. The picture becomes even more complex if we take religion into account. I had originally expected that there be a correlation between religion and occupational structure, given that some professions were considered to be “catholic” or “protestant,” at least in some areas.<sup>548</sup> But this was not the case in the first company. The occupational breakdown of Catholics and Protestants was similar overall, and changes in one did not predictably follow changes in the other. This suggests that religious differences cut across occupational differences, rather than reinforcing them. And Catholics were not a small minority. They constituted a quarter of all men who passed through the company. This data cannot tell us whether other companies were similarly diverse, but there is nothing to suggest that this company was somehow exceptional in this respect. It was drawn from a region whose social structure resembled that of the larger region, and the nation as a whole.<sup>549</sup>

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<sup>548</sup> Wilfried Loth, *Deutscher Katholizismus im Umbruch zur Moderne* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1991).

<sup>549</sup> *Statistisches Jahrbuch für das Deutsche Reich 1919*, Section I, 9-10

Subsequent chapters will show the ways in which these larger demographic changes affected actual face-to-face relationships among soldiers. For now, at least, we can conclude this much. The units of the German army were composed of men who increasingly did not know one another, and who, in terms of culture and background, were foreign to one another. For this reason alone, there is good reason to be skeptical that the networks of trust and familiarity, which are a critical prerequisite of collective action, in fact existed.

## Chapter 5: Conflict and *Kameradschaft*

The movement of personnel within the army set in motion several distinct social processes. The first process, which we discussed in the previous chapter, relates to the dissolution of functional and affective ties among individuals. Men did not serve together long enough for such bonds to solidify. Rapid turnover, moreover, rendered the army more heterogeneous, which undermined cohesion still further. Soldiers were increasingly surrounded by men unlike themselves, men with whom they were less able to interact with, and less inclined to trust. The heterogeneity of the army also led to outright conflict within and among the ranks of the army. As men from different backgrounds were compelled to serve together, pre-existing social conflicts spilled over into the ranks of the army. These conflicts were exacerbated and complicated by the material shortages under which the German war effort increasingly labored. In the army, as in society more broadly, these shortages were distributed very unevenly. But the patterns of distribution were unpredictable, and did not always conform to pre-war patterns. This produced conflicts that were confused and many sided.

Every group of soldiers will experience conflicts, probably over a whole range of subjects, from disagreements over command decisions, to simple conflict of personalities. But most types of conflicts can be defused, or at least managed, given some degree of willingness and competence among the group's members. The conflicts which afflicted the German army were of a different character. They could not be resolved in any straightforward fashion, both because the conflicts themselves were complex, and because they were tied to deep-seated social divisions. These conflicts, moreover, often

involved access to basic resources, and so they became woven into the fabric of everyday life. Disputes over say, the awarding of medals, would emerge into the open only every now and again. But disputes over food could not be really be suppressed; they were contested and re-contested every day. What all this meant was that conflicts tended to fester. They became a permanent feature of social interaction, and one of the central features of the soldiering experience. They easily overwhelmed any positive attachments generated through battlefield cooperation and shared exposure to danger.

Conflict of this kind rapidly undermined the feelings of trust which underpin collective action. Trust tends to grow out of cooperative interactions. As the members of a group work together, each member will develop expectations about how the other members of the group will behave in the future – especially about their willingness to adhere to the group’s norms and values.<sup>550</sup> When interactions among group members are highly conflicted, members will likely conclude that their norms and interests are not in harmony; they will be inclined to doubt whether their colleagues will support them in a conflict in which those interests are at stake. On a more general level, persistent conflict tends to create a general climate of hostility, which undermines group feeling, and obscures the larger interests that the group’s members share. Group feeling involves a rational component – calculations about one’s own interests, and how those interests coincide with others. But it clearly also involves an emotional component. To feel oneself to be a member of a group involves some positive emotional attachment to the other members. And feelings of group attachment do not exist separate from other kinds of

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<sup>550</sup> For a theoretical perspective, see Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (New York: Basic Books, 1984); For a discussion of this in military context, see Westbrook, “The Potential for Disintegration,” 255, 267. See also Tuckman, “Developmental Sequence,” 72.

emotional attachment. They exist alongside of, and tangled up with the other feelings that members have for one another. Material conflicts can easily influence how individuals feel about their attachment to the group. This would seem to be the case especially where the conflicts are persistent. When individuals are in constant conflict with each other, those conflicts grow to dominate their relationships.<sup>551</sup>

We can see both of these processes at work in the German Army. As internal conflicts grew worse, soldiers became more suspicious of each other, and eventually they took measures to protect themselves against the other men in their unit. At the same time, conflict caused the general quality of social interaction to decay. Men interacted with each other less often, and those conflicts carried less emotional charge. These men could still work together, on some level, where the army's administrative and disciplinary machinery pressure them to do so. They could cooperate to dig a trench, for instance, or operate a machine gun, or perform the other basic tasks of military life. But they completely lacked the social and emotional resources to generate *independent* action. They remained at best a very loosely connected group of individuals.

### **Underlying Social Conflicts**

For military historians, one of the key methodological insights of the last half century is that the soldier is not "somehow different in nature from the civilian."<sup>552</sup> That is, the soldier carries into military life all the cultural and ideological baggage that he has

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<sup>551</sup> Forsyth, *Group Dynamics*, 81-82, on states of perpetual conflict

<sup>552</sup> J.G. Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion armies, 1914-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 177.

accumulated in his civilian existence. From this perspective, it should come as no surprise that the German army was beset by social conflict. Wilhelmine society, while in many respects highly advanced, was also highly fragmented. And it was not the case, as it was in many other countries, that society was divided along a single major fault line. Rather, there were a multitude of social divisions, which cut across and became entangled with one another. By the first decade of the twentieth century, these divisions had already rendered the empire nigh ungovernable, as evidenced by perpetual parliamentary deadlock, suggestions of civil war, and pessimistic cultural currents.<sup>553</sup>

Regional difference was among the most fundamental fault lines in Imperial society. Until 1871, Germany had consisted of many small states and principalities. These states had been politically autonomous for many centuries, and while they shared a common language, each had developed unique political and cultural traditions. In the years since unification, the central government in Berlin made only limited efforts to integrate these various regions. The Reich's strong federalist structure allowed state and local governments to retain a good deal of autonomy.<sup>554</sup> When the state did seek to promote integration, its heavy handed efforts often proved counterproductive. The state's efforts to break the political and cultural power of the Catholic Church – collectively known as the *Kulturkampf* – only galvanized opposition to the state, and ended up worsening religious divisions.<sup>555</sup> Nor had economic modernization yet achieved the

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<sup>553</sup> William Hagen, *German History in Modern Times: Four Lives of the Nation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), esp. 149-51.

<sup>554</sup> The Empire's federal structure was generally understood to be support to the monarchy, rather than an impediment to it, since it was designed partly as bulwark against democratization. Berghahn, *Imperial Germany*, 202.

<sup>555</sup> Ronald Ross, *The Failure of Bismarck's Kulturkampf: Catholicism and State Power in Imperial Germany, 1871-1887* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1998); Margaret Anderson,



formation of a cohesive national community. The expansion of road and railway networks had clearly done much to weld the Reich together, but the process was very far from complete. As late as 1910, 40% of Germans still lived in communities with less than 2,000 inhabitants (17% lived in communities of under 500), most of which remained outside the transportation networks.<sup>556</sup> These communities, if not entirely isolated, were only tenuously connected to national culture. It has been pointed out, moreover, that industrialization in some ways exacerbated regionalism. Because industrialization proceeded at different rates in each region, it tended to sharpen the differences in lifestyle between one place and another. And where national culture does fuse with regional culture, the process did not perform uniform results. “Ideas blend and become hybrid,” according to one recent study, “but in different ways in different places.”<sup>557</sup>

Regional particularities therefore remained quite strong. Most regions retained a distinct dialect, local culture, historical consciousness, and self-perception.<sup>558</sup> Cultural particularities also gave rise to (and were reinforced by) inter-regional rivalries and

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*Practicing Democracy: Elections and Political Culture in Imperial Germany* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000), 94-101.

<sup>556</sup> *Statistisches Jahrbuch für das Deutsche Reich – 1919*, table 6

<sup>557</sup> Brett Fairbain, “Economic and Social Developments,” in *Imperial Germany, 1871-1918*, ed. James Retallack (Oxford, 2008), 77-80, quotation on 77; also Knut Borchard, “Regional Variations in Growth in the Nineteenth Century with Particular Reference to the East-West Developmental Gradient,” in *Perspectives on Modern German Economic History and Policy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 30-47.

<sup>558</sup> See Abigail Green, *Fatherlands: State Building and Nationhood in Nineteenth Century Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). 22-34. It has also been pointed out that the emergence of regional particularities is not an entirely organic process. It is often initiated and encouraged by local governments for political purposes; often it was linked to the efforts of German states to integrate new territories and to consolidate themselves politically, in the wake of the territorial reorganizations in the first half of the nineteenth century. See Green, *Fatherland*; see also Karl Rohe, “Politische Kultur, regionale Identität, und Regionalismus im Ruhr-gebiet,” in *Von Revier zum Ruhrgebiet: Wahlen, Parteien, Politische Kultur*, Karl Rohe (Essen: Reimar Hobbing, 1986), 61-85. New work has focused on the ways in which regional identities became linked with national identities, for instance Celia Applegate, *A Nation of Provincials: The German Idea of Heimat* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). But such a coupling does not diminish the power of regional particularities.

antagonisms. Bavarians, to cite only the most well-known example, tended to harbor a dislike of Prussians and Prussianness – which they associated with militarism, Protestantism, and the Hohenzollern dynasty. This rivalry also drew on a long history of real military and political conflict, as the two had found themselves on different sides in many European wars.<sup>559</sup> Regional antagonisms dealt in stereotypes, and to some extent were stereotypes themselves; it is not as though all Prussians automatically disliked all Bavarians. These stereotypes nevertheless had substance. Inter-regional marriages, for instance, were highly problematic, and remained rare until the 1950's.<sup>560</sup> When people from one region migrated to another, they often lived in separate neighborhoods, with their own churches, businesses, and civic institutions.<sup>561</sup>

A second fundamental division was class-political. In most of continental Europe, the economy remained dominated by agriculture. In Germany, by contrast, several large classes had emerged. By about 1900, the industrial workforce had exceeded the number employed in agriculture; the commercial and tertiary sectors, meanwhile, had also become quite large.<sup>562</sup> And in the half-century before the war, these class groups formed increasingly well-defined identities.<sup>563</sup> Class groups became linked to certain churches or political parties – the urban working class with the Social Democrats, bourgeois

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<sup>559</sup> Dan White, "Regionalism and Particularism," in *Imperial Germany: A Historiographical Companion*, ed. Roger Chickering (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996), 135-36.

<sup>560</sup> Barbara Willenbacher, "Zerrüttung und Bewährung der Nachkriegs-Familie," in *Von Stalingrad zur Währungsreform: Zur Sozialgeschichte des Umbruchs in Deutschland*, eds. Martin Broszat et al. (München: R. Oldenbourg, 1988), 605.

<sup>561</sup> Wilfried Loth, "Integration und Erosion: Wandlungen des katholischen Milieus in Deutschland" in *Deutscher Katholizismus im Umbruch zur Moderne*, ed. Wilfried Loth (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1991), 266–281.

<sup>562</sup> See *Statistisches Jahrbuch 1914*, 2, 14-15. Also Barrington Moore, *Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt*, 175.

<sup>563</sup> There is a vast literature on the composition of Wilhelmine society and the development of a "class society." For a sober discussion of the relevant literature, see Berghahn, *Imperial Germany*, section II, esp. 123-131

professionals with the liberal parties, and so on. They likewise developed their own network of civic institutions, voluntary organizations, printing presses, along with their own norms and customs. By the end of the nineteenth century, it was possible to speak of definite sub-cultures or milieus, which largely enclosed the worlds of their members, and did much to structure their beliefs.<sup>564</sup> For instance, the urban working classes, which formed perhaps the most cohesive milieu, not only had the same kinds of jobs, but voted for the same party, were members of the same associations and trade unions, even drank in the same bars and played football in the same clubs.<sup>565</sup> People of different milieus, like those of different regions, were able to exist together through a complicated set of cultural restrictions and physical segregation. In most communities, people of a given milieu lived in particular neighborhoods, and patronized particular businesses and churches.<sup>566</sup> Such segregation was also internalized. When people from different milieus happened to be in the same place, they still tended to avoid one another and stay with their own kind.<sup>567</sup>

The war quickly shattered these systems of segregation, as we have seen already in Chapter 3. Men were thrown together into the same unit, regardless of class or

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<sup>564</sup> The emergence of milieus, if not uncontested, is widely accepted among German social historians. The foundational work here M.R. Lepsius, "Parteiensystem und Sozialstruktur: Zum Problem der Demokratisierung der Deutschen Gesellschaft," in *Deutsche Parteien vor 1918*, ed. Gerhard Ritter, (Köln, Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1973).

<sup>565</sup> The most important works in this vein are Guenther Roth, *The Social Democrats in Imperial Germany: A Study in Working-Class Isolation and National Integration* (Totwa, NJ, 1963) and Dieter Groh, *Negative Integration und revolutionärer Attentismus: Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie am Vorabend des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Frankfurt am main, 1973). See also Vernon Lidtke, *The Alternative Culture: Socialist Labor in Imperial Germany* (New York, 1985).

<sup>566</sup> Chickering, *Urban Life*, 31-32, 50-53; Christopher Clark, "Religion and Confessional Conflict," in *Imperial Germany: A Historiographical Companion*, ed. Roger Chickering (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996), 91.

<sup>567</sup> Armin Owzar, *"Reden ist Silber, Schweigen ist Gold": Konfliktmanagement im Alltag des wilhelminischen Obrigkeitsstaates* (Constance: UVK Verlagsgesellschaft, 2006).

background. Military authorities generally maintained that, when such men fought shoulder to shoulder in defense of the fatherland, social differences would fade away. This did not happen, however. If anything, physical proximity only intensified social differences. In close quarters, men could actually witness the strange and repugnant habits from which they had hitherto been shielded. The shock of this experience was probably greatest for men of solidly bourgeois background, whose sensibilities tended to be somewhat more refined. One such man, joining his company in the summer of 1917, was repelled by the cursing, hard-drinking, and chain smoking of his lower-class comrades, “There is too much weakness here,” he complained in a letter to his wife, and described the men as “indistinguishable from beasts.”<sup>568</sup> Others took issue with workers’ apparent indifference to appearance and hygiene. One recalled, upon reaching the recruit depot, that “the differences among individuals, in terms of clothing and education, immediately and glaringly stood out. Here one carefully and elegantly dressed, there someone ragged and degenerate, with repulsive manners.”<sup>569</sup> Those of religious belief were likewise appalled by militant atheism and “moral degeneracy” they often found among the working classes. One deeply religious man, quartered with his unit in church, recalled with horror how “another company came into the church, loud, drunk, fighting.”<sup>570</sup> Not long after, he adds “I have become very conscious of the godlessness of the men.”<sup>571</sup>

The lower classes, for their part, were struck by the excesses and hypocrisy of their social “betters”, especially since their claims to social pre-eminence often invoked a

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<sup>568</sup> BfZ, Blecher, 12 Jun. 1917.

<sup>569</sup> Lempelius, 9-10.

<sup>570</sup> BfZ, Schulin, 5 Dec. 1916.

<sup>571</sup> BfZ, Schulin, 9 Mar. 1917.

kind of moral superiority. A favorite target for derision was the wild cavorting of well-off men, whose ample funds found many outlets in the occupied territories. Such attacks were so widespread that they became a source of concern for higher authorities. Confidential reports repeated warned of the spread of rumors, that young officers were to be seen in “the most questionable nightspots.”<sup>572</sup> Others commented on the naked self-interest of merchants and businessmen. One soldier recalled the candid admissions of another man in his unit that “he has a business and because of it he must, as he says, lie.”<sup>573</sup> Many were simply irked by the haughtiness and pretensions of upper-class men. Especially hated were men like “Otto”, who served as a clerk in his company. Though not holding any rank, he earned the contempt of his comrades by constantly addressing them in an authoritative and quasi-aristocratic manner.<sup>574</sup> Soldiers often amused friends and families by cataloguing the absurd expressions that their men like him were so fond of.<sup>575</sup>

Regional and classist stereotypes were rooted in real social differences, but they remained in currency also because they served many practical purposes in military life. They could be used to explain every manner of problem or inconvenience. Finding the trenches in his new sector in a state of disrepair, one annoyed soldier immediately concluded that they had been “neglected by the Saxons,” who were widely held to be lazy and unmotivated.<sup>576</sup> When an operation failed, or a relieving unit failed to appear, the blame was very often laid on the Bavarians (whether or not any Bavarians were, or were

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<sup>572</sup> HSA-St M 77/1 457, memo 18 Feb. 1918, Gundermann to Stellv. Generalkommando XIII.

<sup>573</sup> BfZ, Schulin, 65.

<sup>574</sup> BfZ, Pechthold, 75-76.

<sup>575</sup> BfZ, Geidel, Nov 16 1916

<sup>576</sup> Hoover, Schetter, 11.

supposed to be, in the area). While credited as able fighters, the Bavarians were generally seen to be reluctant allies of the Prussians, and always ready to give up the fight. If there were rumors that some unit had mutinied, or refused to go into combat, the unit was almost invariably said to be Bavarian. Indeed this was one of the most persistent rumors of the last half of the war.<sup>577</sup> Even baser motives were imputed to the ‘suspect’ nationalities – Jews, Poles, and Alsatians. If a man was believed to be undeservedly promoted, it was often said to be because he was Jewish, or because he had paid off Jews higher up in the chain of command. Letters are rife with contemptuous references to the Jew who had “stumbled into” the officer corps,<sup>578</sup> or who had “never seen battle” yet “somehow become an officer.”<sup>579</sup> Accidents and unforeseen problems could likewise be attributed to the inherent stupidity of certain groups. One man, describing the unlikely scenario in which a man had managed to blow himself up with his own hand grenade, felt it necessary to include only one word of explanation, “Saxon.”<sup>580</sup> Alternatively, stereotypes could be used to explain why things had gone right. If another man seemed particularly competent or dependable, it was not simply because of his personal attributes, but because he was “one of us.” One farmer, for instance, describes an exceptional officer as “the first typical Landesknecht I ran into.”<sup>581</sup>

It was the Prussians, probably, who were mostly commonly the object of these kinds of attacks. Blaming the Prussians for the frustrations of military life was both plausible – given their well-established reputation for militarism and formalism – and

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<sup>577</sup> See BA-MA, RH/61 1035, Stimmungsbericht 31 Aug. 1918; HSA-St M 1/4 Bu 1625, “Bericht über die Tätigkeit der Eisenbahnüberwachungsreisende für die Zeit vom 1.7 bis 30.9.1918.”

<sup>578</sup> DTA, #1083, 117.

<sup>579</sup> BfZ, Pechthold, 157.

<sup>580</sup> DTA, #1040, 17-18 Apr. 1918.

<sup>581</sup> BfZ, Pechthold, 99.

drew upon the considerable negative feelings which were already directed against them. There were few things that could not be blamed on the Prussians, in one way or another. If the commander insisted upon some point of protocol, he was denounced as doing things the “Prussian Way.”<sup>582</sup> If he took a hardline on discipline, he was trying to impose the “Prussian slave life.”<sup>583</sup> Authorities noted, moreover, that anti-Prussianism was spreading. In former times, it had been found primarily among Bavarians and Swabians – formerly independent groups still unreconciled to Prussian hegemony. But during the war, it emerged among all groups of Germans, including many who lived with the boundaries of Prussia itself, like Rhinelanders, Hannoverians, and Silesians.<sup>584</sup>

These sorts of stereotypes were not universal of course, nor were they indestructible. Contact with men of different backgrounds could sometimes make a favorable impression. Even where this happened, however, it usually served only to highlight the general climate of regional antagonism. A soldier from Waldecker, for instance, described to his family how his unit now contained men from all over Germany. With a touch of surprise, he notes that some of these men are to his liking. “Actually,” he writes “the Thuringians are kind and affable.” But this leaves us to wonder what he thought about the Thuringians before, and what he thinks about the Saxons, Bavarians, and Württembergers who are also in his unit.<sup>585</sup> We see something similar in Ernst Jünger’s diaries. After a difficult engagement, Jünger praises the heroism of a Pole in his unit, a man he had formerly taken to be a “cretin.” The Pole was no doubt glad to earn the

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<sup>582</sup> BfZ, Blecher, 14 Sep. 1918.

<sup>583</sup> BA-MA, RH/61 1035, Stimmungsbericht 12 Jul. 1918.

<sup>584</sup> BA-MA, RH/61 1035, Stimmungsbericht – Verpflegung, 23 Jun. 1918.

<sup>585</sup> BfZ, Reckart, 20 Jul. 1916

regard of his comrade. Yet we are not left with the impression that Poles are generally held in high regard.<sup>586</sup>

How did these social tensions affect the social life of the unit? Under normal circumstances, they manifested themselves as an ubiquitous, low-level hostility. Men of different backgrounds tended to self-segregate. They staked out “territories” in which they congregated, ate and socialized. They even worshipped separately; most units held separate worship services for Protestants, Catholics, and Jews.<sup>587</sup> ‘Foreigners’ were not welcome in their company, as they took care to make known. One man, who otherwise took a favorable view of his service, gave a vivid account of this. “Relations between members of different states are not happy,” he writes. “When I came to a Bavarian canteen as a Prussian Uhlan, my money and my kind words got me absolutely nothing. When I happen to come to Hannover, it is just the same.”<sup>588</sup> When these men were forced to interact, they openly broadcast their distaste for one another. Soldiers invented derisive nicknames for men of different backgrounds – “Mr. Hamburger, Big-nose Berliner,” “the professor,” “street trash”.<sup>589</sup> Or they simply referred to each other by their status or origin, often with a palpable air of contempt. A hated officer, for instance, is referred to simply as “the Jew.”<sup>590</sup> A man of suspect character was routinely called “the son of a merchant.”<sup>591</sup> Where social antagonisms were particularly pronounced, open harassment often developed. Men who insisted on flaunting their wealth and privileges found

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<sup>586</sup> Junger, *Storm of Steel*, 211

<sup>587</sup> Hoover, WWI Coll. Box 9, Folder: Heeres Tagebriefe, Order from Mob. Et. Kommandatur 58, Nr. 38, 12. Sep 1918.

<sup>588</sup> Hoover, Abel, Essay #68.

<sup>589</sup> BfZ, Reckart, 24 Jul. 1916; BfZ, Pollet 10 Jun. 1917; BfZ Wenzel 8 Feb. 1918.

<sup>590</sup> DTA, #1085, 84.

<sup>591</sup> BfZ, Pechthold, 51.



themselves driven into holes while on march, or discovered that their belongings had gone missing.<sup>592</sup>

Members of ethnic and political minorities considered “suspect” certainly had the worst time of it. It was rare for any single unit to contain more than a few such soldiers, meaning that they lived largely solitary lives. They were, moreover, distrusted by the military authorities, and subjected to openly discriminatory policies. Jewish soldiers had their service records scrutinized, as part of an officially mandated effort to determine whether Jews were systematically evading service in the armed forces (the notorious “Jew count”).<sup>593</sup> Alsatians were subject to similar scrutiny. The army undertook efforts to determine whether they were deserting at higher rates than other soldiers,<sup>594</sup> and later attempted to concentrate them in units serving on the eastern front – so that they could not cross over to French lines.<sup>595</sup> Limits were also set on how many could serve in a given unit. Men known to be members of the socialist party could be assigned to a unit only after notifying its commander.<sup>596</sup> Such measures were deeply humiliating to the soldiers themselves,<sup>597</sup> and also helped to legitimize harassment against them. Violence and threats of violence, not uncommon within the ranks, were most frequent in cases involving suspect minorities. Such incidents, in fact, were usually reported with pride. Typical is the case of one infantryman, who recalls serving a night watch with a Polish

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<sup>592</sup> BfZ, Pechthold, 72.

<sup>593</sup> Chickering, *Imperial Germany and the Great War*, 129-30.

<sup>594</sup> Some of the findings of this effort are contained in HAS-St, M30/1 Bü 77.

<sup>595</sup> Alan Kramer, “Wackes at War: Alsace-Lorraine and the failure of German national mobilization, 1914–1918,” in *State, Society and Mobilization in Europe during the First World War*, ed. John Horne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), esp. 113.

<sup>596</sup> This was a continuation of pre-war policies, though its enforcement was spotty. Kitchen, *German Officer Corps*, 155.

<sup>597</sup> Egmont Zechlin, *Die deutsche Politik und die Juden im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1969).

soldier. Noticing that the Pole appears “restless,” he instantly concludes that the man means to desert. He then informs his companion that “he could try it, but... my ready pistol would make a convincing argument against any more talk of desertion.”<sup>598</sup>

### **Conflict over Resources**

Pre-existing conflict among social groups was clearly severe – more severe than in most other armies, arguably.<sup>599</sup> But understanding these kinds of conflicts is only the first step in apprehending the larger dynamics of conflict within the army. These pre-existing antagonisms are, in some ways, only the terrain upon which more serious struggles unfolded. The primary engine of conflict was the human and material shortages imposed by the war – and, crucially, the way in which those hardships were distributed. Where hardship is shared more or less equally among the members of a group, its negative consequences are limited. The experience of shared hardship can in fact serve an integrative function.<sup>600</sup> But where deprivation is shared unequally in a group of nominal equals, conflict arises within the group, and solidarity is undermined. This is what happened in the German army. Material hardships fell much more heavily on some groups than others, partly as a result of policy, partly as a function of existing economic

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<sup>598</sup> Hoover, Abel, #210.

<sup>599</sup> Most of the other major armies were far more socially homogenous than the German army. Half of the French army was made up of peasants, and they made up an even higher proportion of the combat branches. The proportion was far higher in the Bulgarian, Ottoman, Italian, and (especially) Russian armies. David Stevenson, *With Our Backs to the Wall, Victory and Defeat in 1918* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2011), 268. The British army was somewhat more socially complex. But in the British case, social cohesion was maintained by deeply entrenched notions of hierarchy and deference. See Gary Sheffield, *Leadership in the Trenches: Officer-Man Relations, Morale, and Discipline in the British Army on the Eve of the First World War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

<sup>600</sup> See David Burwell, *Morale as a Principle of War* (School of Advanced Military Studies, 2000).

and political structures. This generated jealousy and bitterness among soldiers who found themselves among the have-nots. At the same time, this generated competition among soldiers, who became rivals in the quest for increasingly scarce resources.

The relationship between pre-existing social conflicts and wartime conflicts over resources is a complex one, and difficult to summarize. It is clear that existing social categories exerted a large influence on how material conflicts unfolded. The sacrifices one was called on to make, and the means available for meeting them, depended to a large extent on where one was located in the social structure. In the competition over food, for instance, farmers held a clear advantage over workers. But the war also radically reshaped the economy. The realities of supply and demand were completely changed, along with the system through which goods were distributed. The consequences for individuals were sweeping, yet uneven and unpredictable. New opportunities opened up for some, while others saw their advantages disappear. This meant that conflict took place not just between groups, but within them and outside of them. With everything in short supply, a whole host of different conflicts developed. The most serious conflicts revolved around the most coveted good and privileges: home leave, assignment to choice jobs, food and basic necessities. Each unfolded somewhat differently, depending on relative scarcity, military policies, systems of distribution, and a range of other factors. Often the different conflicts overlapped to some extent. Food or cash, for instance, were often traded for other privileges. The next paragraphs will focus particularly on the conflicts over food, which was the most intense and most pervasive of all such conflicts.

As has been mentioned, Germany suffered from increasingly serious shortages of food as the war went on. This was partly the result of the Allied naval blockade, which

cut off Germany from the foreign sources upon which she had depended before the war.<sup>601</sup> It was also partly due to the decline of domestic production, as resources were shifted into war production. By 1917, total agricultural production had declined to 40% from its pre-war levels.<sup>602</sup> Soldiers felt the effects of these shortages less than others, since the army enjoyed priority access to food supplies. According to one set of estimates, the army consumed some 30% of the nation's total supply of food, though it contained only about 10% of the population.<sup>603</sup> But the mere fact that soldiers were better provided for than other groups does not mean that they did not experience deprivation. Military rations began to be reduced in 1915, not long after similar reductions were placed on civilian consumption.<sup>604</sup> Thereafter, rations continued to be reduced. By early 1918, the caloric value of military rations had declined some 20% -- from 3,100 to about 2,500 -- and continued to fall.<sup>605</sup> Across the lines, American rations contained about 4,700 calories.<sup>606</sup> The nutritional value of the "standard ration", moreover, was a purely theoretical figure, calculated based on official estimates of the total food supply. Actual rations rarely corresponded to the standard. The promised supplies often arrived spoiled or not at all, because of transportation delays, or because the expected supplies simply had not materialized.<sup>607</sup> Military kitchens often had to rely upon what could be obtained

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<sup>601</sup> Offer, *First World War*, 25.

<sup>602</sup> Harrison and Broadberry, *The Economics of World War I*, 46

<sup>603</sup> N.P Howard, "The Social and Political Consequences of the Allied Food Blockade of Germany," *German History* 11, no. 2 (1993). These raw figures probably overstate the extent to which soldiers were better provided. In the first place, the army consisted entirely on young and middle-aged men -- who naturally required more food than other segments of the population. Secondly, all of the food requisitioned by the army was not used to feed soldiers. Large amounts were placed in reserve.

<sup>604</sup> Christian Leffeldt, *Die Tagebücher des Theodor Herzog: Aufzeichnung aus dem Ersten Weltkrieg* (Wagner, 2007), 25.

<sup>605</sup> Herwig, *The First World War*, 396

<sup>606</sup> Van Bergen, *Before My Helpless Sight*, 114.

<sup>607</sup> See HSA-St, M 77/1 457, memo 2 May 1917.

from local markets.<sup>608</sup> When food was on hand, it often could not be got to the men in forward areas. In the interests of efficiency, food was prepared in large batches, at company kitchens. But these kitchens had to be kept fairly far behind the lines, to protect them from enemy fire, and to prevent them from interfering with friendly operations.<sup>609</sup> The food prepared in these kitchens therefore had to be carried long distances, over trackless battlefields and often under enemy fire. Many nights, ration parties arrived at the front with only a fraction of the food they set out with, the rest having been lost or abandoned along the way.<sup>610</sup> In other cases, hungry soldiers would set out to find what had become of their dinner, only to discover the corpses of their comrades “aluminum canteens half filled with food... still in their hands.”<sup>611</sup>

At the same time, the quality of soldier’s diets was deteriorating. As part of a larger effort to maximize production, luxury items –flavor enhancers, like butter and sugar – were de-emphasized in favor of staple crops. Production of items which required extensive processing (like beer), or which required large amount of land (grazing animals) were also scaled back, and resources diverted to more efficient uses.<sup>612</sup> Meats, fats, and sugars largely disappeared from soldiers’ diets. By 1918 soldiers consumption of meat had fallen to 12% of its pre-war level, and consumption of fats to 7%.<sup>613</sup> They were replaced chiefly by vegetables, especially by hearty tubers and legumes – potatoes, parsnips, turnips, beans – or by Ersatz products which were ultimately derived from the same sources. Marmalade, for instance, was increasingly made with carrots and other

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<sup>608</sup> Hoover, Schetter, 5.

<sup>609</sup> See HSA-St, M 30/1, “Erfahrungen der 14 R.D...,” 12 Jun. 1918.

<sup>610</sup> See Jünger, *Storm of Steel*, 47

<sup>611</sup> Hoover, Schetter, 28.

<sup>612</sup> Offer, *First World War*, 25-26.

<sup>613</sup> N.P. Howard, *Social and Political Consequences*, 164.

vegetables. Flour was cut with substitutes made from potatoes, bran or flax, with the substitutes sometimes comprising 86% of the total.<sup>614</sup> To stretch supplies even further, the available food was made into thin soups or stews. These were universally despised by soldiers, who complained that they were “pure water”, and who struggled to identify the mysterious chunks of matter floating therein (weeds and thistles, according to many).<sup>615</sup> When prepared in the field, it was often impossible to keep these soups free of sand and dust.<sup>616</sup> From a purely nutritional perspective, such changes were harmful. Caloric value was maintained only by eliminating proteins and vital nutrients. Heavy consumption of starchy and fibrous vegetables also caused widespread digestive ailments.<sup>617</sup> Subjectively, the impact of these changes was even greater. Before the war, German enjoyed one of the best and most diverse diets in the world. By the second half of the war, they subsisted on a monotonous diet of crusty breads and vegetables stews. Virtually all soldiers’ correspondences mention hunger at one time or another. Some talk about little else, describing the daily search for food in painstaking detail.<sup>618</sup> Phrases like “miserable food,” “damn scarce,” and “continually hungry,” are ubiquitous.<sup>619</sup> Many complained they could not sleep for hunger, or described how much weight they had lost in the army.<sup>620</sup>

While shortages were felt by all soldiers, they hit some much harder than others.

These inequalities stemmed, in part, from the military’s own policies. The army’s

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<sup>614</sup> Lutz, *Causes of the German Collapse*, 186.

<sup>615</sup> BA-MA, RH/61 Stimmungsbericht, 23 Jun. 1918

<sup>616</sup> See BfZ, Wolff, 19 Apr. 1916.

<sup>617</sup> BA-MA, RH/61 1035 Stimmungsbericht, 23 Jun. 1918; MKB, Stein, 21 Jan. 1918.

<sup>618</sup> See for example BfZ Roeder, BfZ Klimamel.

<sup>619</sup> BfZ Ehlers, 12 May 1918; BfZ Wenzel Feb 6 1918; BfZ Reckart July 20 1916.

<sup>620</sup> BfZ Wenzel, Nov 29 [no year]; BA-MA, RH/61 1035 Stimmungsbericht, 12 Jul. 1917.

policies regarding food were vaguely defined and often contradictory. Many officials grasped that an unequal distribution of resources damaged morale, and urged that steps be taken to ensure basic fairness. Supervisory organs were set up, and the high command issued reminders to officers not to draw attention to their privileges.<sup>621</sup> Wherever possible, they advised, soldiers should be made to see that officers are “exposed to the same dangers, the same deprivations.”<sup>622</sup> At the same time, however, military policy continued to be riddled with glaring exceptions and special privileges. Men belonging to elite units, such as fighter *Staffeln* and stormtrooper battalions, were given more food and better food than the ordinary rank and file.<sup>623</sup> Men in combat zones were given more food than those in quiet sectors and rear area postings.<sup>624</sup> Commissioned officers enjoyed the greatest advantages. Except when in combat, they dined in the officers’ mess [*Kasino*] rather than with their men. *Kasinos* generally received the best of what was to be had – including the bulk of meats, fats, spices, alcohol, and other luxury goods. Food was prepared by trained chefs, and served restaurant-style by an attached wait staff. Portions were reduced as the war went on, but less drastically than among the rank and file, meaning that the gap in consumption between officer and man actually increased over time. Even by the summer of 1918 – by which time most soldiers had to make due with barley soup and boiled roots – officers still dined relatively sumptuously. In the lean summer of 1918, for instance, one officer recalls an evening meal that included roasted potatoes with asparagus, soup, butter, rice pudding with wine sauce, and topped off with

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<sup>621</sup> Watson, “Junior Officers,” 44; BA-MA, RH61 1035 Stimmungsbericht, 12 Jul. 1917.

<sup>622</sup> BA-MA, RH61 1035 Stimmungsbericht, 12 Jul. 1917.

<sup>623</sup> Ian Drury, “German Stormtrooper,” in *War on the Western Front: In the Trenches of World War I*, ed. Gary Sheffield (Oxford: Osprey, 2007), 11.

<sup>624</sup> It is not clear whether this was a matter of explicitly policy or not, but it was nevertheless widely practiced, and was frequently commented upon. See BA-MA, RH61 1035 Stimmungsbericht, 23 Jun. 1918.

beer, cigars, and real coffee.<sup>625</sup> Around the same time, another officer described *Kasino* fare as a “fantasy” after the food in the field – that is, the food and which the enlisted men were served.<sup>626</sup> There were a good many men who sought membership in the officer corps for no other reason than to eat better.<sup>627</sup>

Unequal access to food stemmed also from the particular dynamics of the economic system which existed in and around the army. With regular rations declining, most soldiers looked for ways to supplement their diet. But they found little help in the legitimate market. Shops and markets in the occupied territories had almost nothing to sell. Local production had declined massively during the war, owing in large part to the conscription of men for forced labor, and leaving Belgium on the brink of famine.<sup>628</sup> To obtain goods, soldiers usually had to work through less formal means; they had to bypass the ordinary channels of buying and selling, and to seek out other access points to the supply of food. In most cases, this meant exploiting personal connections, either with those who produced the food directly, or who worked in the official networks of distribution.

This situation obviously favored certain groups over others. The best positioned here were the soldiers who worked in farming, and especially those who operated larger farms.<sup>629</sup> These men could simply arrange for family members to send them food via the

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<sup>625</sup> BfZ, Bader, 24 May 1918.

<sup>626</sup> DTA, 1221, 6 Jun. 1918.

<sup>627</sup> BfZ, Geidel, 29 Nov. 1916.

<sup>628</sup> For the food situation in Belgium, see Hoover, *An American Epic, Volume I: The Relief of Belgium and Northern France*, (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1959) esp. chapter 41 and 42. On forced labor, see Audoin-Rouzeau, *Understanding the Great War*, 75-85. Also, Von Kohler, *The Administration of the Occupied Territories, Volume I – Belgium* (Washington DC., Carnegie Endowment, 1942), “Shortages of Foodstuffs.”

<sup>629</sup> Soldiers of urban background tended to regard anyone who worked on the land as a “farmer”, and as being therefore much better fed than the rest. But in fact, only a quarter of the individuals who worked in



post. This practice was officially frowned upon, because it wrought havoc on the state's efforts to regulate the domestic food supply, but it was widely tolerated and sometimes even tacitly encouraged by unit commanders.<sup>630</sup> Also at an advantage were those assigned to garrison units in rural areas of Belgium and France – units which usually consisted of older and less-fit men. These semi-permanent garrisons often made tacit 'arrangements' with local farmers and merchants. The producers would sell their produce only to men of the garrison, or reserve some portion of it for them.<sup>631</sup> In exchange, the garrison would let them operate with a minimum of trouble, and perhaps tolerate some "unauthorized" sales on the side. If soldiers from other units passed through, they were rarely allowed to purchase much. And if they tried, military police were sent to run them off or arrest them.<sup>632</sup> Veteran soldiers usually did not even attempt to purchase goods in towns where the garrison was firmly entrenched, as only the men of the garrison would know "where to get anything."<sup>633</sup> These arrangements violated international law and Germany's stated occupation policies.<sup>634</sup> But they were nearly impossible to control, since the crimes were being committed by the men who were charged with enforcing the law.

The black market offered another possibility for obtaining extra food. Many illegal sellers operated behind the lines and in the occupied territories. Some of these operations were run under the auspices of (or directly by) the local garrison. But here

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agriculture owned their own farms, and of those, 60% farmed plots of less than five acres, and produced very little surplus. See *Statistisches Jahrbuch* 1913, 36-37, and *Statistisches Jahrbuch* 1919, 28-29.

<sup>630</sup> Many military officials endorsed this practice, as a way of sustaining the all-important supply of food to the field army. See HSA-St, M77/1 457, memo 2 May 1917.

<sup>631</sup> See HSA-St, M1/7 306, April 1916. Also DTA 1040 27.5.17

<sup>632</sup> BfZ, Wenzel, 10 Aug. 1917.

<sup>633</sup> BfZ, Lips, 30 Jun. 1917.

<sup>634</sup> As early as 1917, Germany had pledged not to requisition foodstuffs in Belgium and occupied France. Hoover, *American Epic*, 216-17.

again, certain groups were at a huge advantage over others. Within Germany, black-market goods were routinely sold for ten or even twenty times their legal price. And in the occupied territories, prices tended to be even higher. The “fantasy prices” commanded by these illegal sellers were the object of much derision among soldiers. In practice, this meant that the black market was open only to those with large amounts of cash. This included members of the upper classes, of course. But it also included many war workers released for military service, especially young and unmarried men, who had fewer demands on their resources. The huge demands for skilled labor in war-industries (together with the bargains struck between big business and organized labor) caused nominal wages to skyrocket.<sup>635</sup> These men often showed up to the front with huge bundles of cash, which they freely used on the black market. In the process, they drove up prices even more, and even further beyond the reach of ordinary soldiers.<sup>636</sup>

The difference in consumption between the haves and the have-not was often quite large. As we have seen already, by the second half of the war military rations were failing to keep pace with the physical needs of the soldier. Men who relied exclusively on rations often suffered physical deterioration – dramatic weight loss, diet-related diseases, and chronic exhaustion. A good many were reduced to begging at kitchens and supply depots behind the lines.<sup>637</sup> Well-connected peasants and garrison troops, by contrast, often had more food than they could eat. Many received food packages from home every

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<sup>635</sup> Albert Ritschl, “The Pity of Peace,” in *The Economics of World War I*, eds. Harrison and Broadberry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 56. Gerhard Bry, *Wages in Germany, 1871-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), 199.

<sup>636</sup> HSA-St, M30/1, “Stimmung der Truppe;” Ludendorff, *Ludendorff's Own Story*, 215.

<sup>637</sup> MKB, Stein, 23 Apr. 1918.

single day, or even multiple packages.<sup>638</sup> Particularly enterprising soldiers could build up an entire network of suppliers, based on family and friends located throughout Germany. They often spent considerable time managing these networks, writing dozens of letters per month to different family members, inquiring about what they had available, and striking complicated deals.<sup>639</sup> These overstuffed soldiers often gave away their regular rations, “because they get so much from home.”<sup>640</sup> Others sent their regular rations back home, not to be consumed, but as souvenirs or curiosities.<sup>641</sup> Not only did these men eat more food, they ate much better food as well, including meat, dairy and luxury items that had virtually disappeared from the ordinary soldier’s diet. One man, the son of prosperous farmers in Holstein, received almost daily care-packages from home, containing ham, cheese, eggs and bacon.<sup>642</sup> Many others received similar bounties, including sausage, pork-cutlets, fresh fruit, butter, and pastries.<sup>643</sup> All of this was no secret to the other men, who carefully watched what everyone received. There was little way of concealing it; mail was distributed publicly, before the eyes of the entire unit. And even the dullest soldier could hardly fail to notice that for some, the packages “had piled up to a mountain,” while others left “with empty hands.”<sup>644</sup> In any case, many men had no desire to hide their good fortune, and used the daily mail call as a way of taunting their less-fortunate peers. In a letter from 1917, one soldier described this kind of encounter: “Others always say that the post has stopped, if they don’t get anything... I say again, ‘I

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<sup>638</sup> See BfZ, Ehlers.

<sup>639</sup> See BfZ Röder, BfZ Blecher.

<sup>640</sup> MKB, Pfeffer, 24 Jun. 1917.

<sup>641</sup> See account in Blecher, 26 Jan. 1918.

<sup>642</sup> BfZ, Ehlers, 5 Jun. 1918.

<sup>643</sup> See BfZ Blecher 30 Sep. 1917, Klimamel 9 Dec. 1917; Wenzel 31 May 1918.

<sup>644</sup> DTA, #1751, 7-8.

don't know. I always get something.' Many write home, that they don't want any more [food packages]... But I think their families have nothing more to send, and I say so."<sup>645</sup>

Soldiers tended to be highly sensitive to these inequalities. It is worth remembering here that most soldiers were acutely aware of material inequalities before the war. These men had grown up in a society which was highly stratified by class, and in an era during which economic differences were generally growing wider.<sup>646</sup> The markers which were used to distinguish between members of different classes (and the complex gradations within classes) were increasingly linked to consumption. To navigate their social world, Germans learned to pay careful attention to their neighbors' patterns of consumption – what they ate, what they wore, what leisure activities they took up.<sup>647</sup> These sensitivities were heightened by the war. In part, this was the result of simple economic realities. As consumer goods became scarcer, they also become more valuable. Differences that might have once seemed negligible – the difference between one bread ration and one-and-a-quarter rations, say – now became impossible to ignore. Inequalities that were once the source of merely resentment now became a cause for outrage. But soldiers' responses to inequalities were about more than just material self-interest. Moral factors played a role as well. As part of its broader strategy to maintain political consensus during the war, the state insisted that soldiers were well provided for, and that every soldier received an equal share. Soldiers found these claims particularly infuriating. To suffer inequality was bad; what was worse was to suffer inequality while the state

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<sup>645</sup> Schulin, letter from 2 Mar. 1917.

<sup>646</sup> Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, 702-711, esp. 711; Berghahn, *Imperial Germany*, 6-9.

<sup>647</sup> The classic articulation of this theory is Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (1899, reprint: New York: Modern, 1934).

steadfastly denied its existence. Soldiers wrote angry letters to their families, warning them about the “great lies” circulating in the press.<sup>648</sup>

Inequality was growing worse, and soldiers were becoming more aware of it. The result could only be discontent, and on a massive scale. The scale of soldiers’ anger is best illustrated by the findings of the authorities themselves. From 1916, the army commissioned regular surveys of soldiers’ morale. Virtually all of them concluded that the unequal distribution of food and “unlawful privileges” were among the primary causes of low morale.<sup>649</sup> The privileges enjoyed by farmers and officers were a particularly common cause of resentment.<sup>650</sup> Domestic authorities agreed with these findings completely. The reports of police and intelligence agencies routinely cite the “countless complaints and appeals... from every part of the country, concerning unjust privileges of individual soldiers.”<sup>651</sup> Mail censors noted the same thing, observing that questions about food distribution “play the most important role in the soldiers’ life.”<sup>652</sup> Railway police arrested hundreds of people a month for uttering such complaints in public.<sup>653</sup> Local leaders and Reichstag delegates, meanwhile, received thousands of written complaints and appeals, some of which found their way into legislative debates.<sup>654</sup> Other (often anonymous) complaints were mailed to military authorities and district commanders.<sup>655</sup> By 1917, soldier’s anger over food distribution had become so

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<sup>648</sup> BA-MA, RH/61 1053, 12 Jul. 1917.

<sup>649</sup> HSA-St, M30/1 “Deutsche Propagandatätigkeit;” *Summary of Information*, No 219.

<sup>650</sup> HSA-St, M77/1 457, memo 15 Oct. 1917.

<sup>651</sup> HSA-St, M77/1 “Betr. Strafbare Handlung...” 12 Dec. 1916; *Dokumente aus Geheimen Archiven IV*, “Stimmungsbericht 99,” Juli 19 1918, (pgs. 283-84).

<sup>652</sup> BA-MA, RH/61 1035, 12 Jul. 1917.

<sup>653</sup> M1/4 Bu 1625, Bericht über Tätigkeit der Eisenbahnüberwachungsreisenden für die Zeit vom 1.7 bis 30.9.1918,” 6. Oct 1918.

<sup>654</sup> Ay, *Entstehung einer Revolution*, 104.

<sup>655</sup> M77/1 457, note 17.8.1917

immense that it was beginning to become a problem for *civilian* morale. “A damaging influence on popular morale,” according to one police report, “is to a considerable extent a result of soldiers coming from the field with stories about [allerhand Unregelmässigkeiten und vermeintliche Ungerechtigkeiten]... They concern mostly the use of provision.”<sup>656</sup>

This discontent manifested itself in different ways. To some extent, it appeared in a relatively abstract form, as a kind of generalized hatred against privileged groups. Something similar occurred in other belligerent countries, above all in Russia, where they played a critical role in soldiers’ turn against the state.<sup>657</sup> But the process unfolded somewhat differently in Germany. In Russia, conflicts within the army generally reinforced existing social divisions – urban vs. rural, peasant vs. aristocrat. In Germany, though, these conflicts did not occur in so straightforward manner. There developed instead a series of overlapping conflicts that, when viewed all together, looks like something closer to all-against-all. The front economy, as we have seen, favored some groups over others. But the resulting hierarchy did not correspond exactly to the normal (that is, peacetime) power structure. Its upper rungs were occupied by some groups – peasants, war workers – which were normally consigned to the lower rungs of the social ladder. This made it difficult to understand the conflict over food simply in terms of rich vs. poor.

At the same time, the fault lines in the food economy cut across existing cleavages, giving rise to conflict within groups. For instance, all officers were in an

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<sup>656</sup> M30/1 77, Betr. Volkstimmung 23 Okt [1918]. This of course, contradicts the argument of German conservatives, that civilian complaints weakened soldiers’ morale. The process worked both ways.

<sup>657</sup> Wildman, *End of the Russian Imperial Army I*, 159-201.

advantaged position, in terms of food. But while the officer corps was drawn largely from the upper classes (the aristocracy and the educated bourgeoisie), by no means all upper class men belonged to the officer corps. There were a great many well-off men who, for one reason or another, were not officers – and yet who were not wealthy enough to regularly buy food on the black market. These men often leveled bitter attacks on their peers in the officer corps, charging that they had advanced in ranks “on their good names alone,” and that their life in the field was simply an extension of their peacetime privilege.<sup>658</sup> They made similar attacks on farmers – men who were nominally their social inferiors. They accused farmers of driving the middle class into ruin with their extortionist prices. It was even said that farmers were helping to prolong the war. Making huge profits at home, and eating like kings in the field, they had every reason to see the fighting continue.<sup>659</sup> Similar sorts of divisions existed within the farming class. More than three quarters of all men who farmed for a living were small-hold farmers or rural wage laborers, and who generally received little in the way of extra food from home. These men attacked wealthier land-owners who “never wanted for food,” and did not have to wait “for a half hour in the rain” for their dinners.<sup>660</sup> These tensions were not fully grasped by urbanites, who tended to lump together everyone who worked the land. But they were extremely intense; after the war, they would erupt into serious labor unrest and rural violence.<sup>661</sup>

At the level of face-to-face interaction, conflict over food played out somewhat differently. Here, it manifested itself as more or less constant tension and suspicion

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<sup>658</sup> Metzger, *Phänomenologie*, letter from 17 Aug. 1915.

<sup>659</sup> BfZ, Ehlers, 1 Nov. 1918.

<sup>660</sup> BA-MA, RH/61 1035, 12 Jul. 1917.

<sup>661</sup> Ziemann, *War Experiences*, 205-209.

among soldiers. Soldiers kept a hawk-like watch on each other, and had a good idea of everything that was consumed in the company. Their letters contain lengthy description of their comrades' eating habits, paying special attention to those who ate (in their opinion) too much. It is hard to find a correspondence which does not make sneering reference to "our fat major, who could polish off two mess tins," or the young recruit who would "lick the pot clean."<sup>662</sup> Many correspondences even included detailed catalogs of what the other men were eating. They would sometimes devote multiple paragraphs to the subject, especially when a comrade had reaped some unexpected windfall – a surprise package from a distant relative, or a winning ticket in the company raffle.<sup>663</sup>

Soldiers' vigilance usually peaked around mealtimes. In the field, food was prepared and delivered in large quantities, rather than in individually sized servings – large kettles of stew, wheels of cheese, large loaves or bricks of bread. It was the job of the company cooks to divide up the food available, so that everyone was provided for. This was nothing like an exact science. The quantities of food available changed daily, depending on local supply and other factors, and the number of mouths to feed also changed regularly.<sup>664</sup> The tools of the trade – ladle and mess tin – did not permit of great precision. Invariably, some got more than others. The distribution of food was therefore scrutinized by the whole company. Portions were endlessly compared and measured, and countless complaints were lodged. Kitchen workers, routinely accused of blatant favoritism or corruption, agreed that the work was "a thankless business."<sup>665</sup> All the while, troops pushed and shoved one another, in an effort to reach the front of the line

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<sup>662</sup> BfZ, Lips, 1 Sep. 1918; 16 May 1917.

<sup>663</sup> MKB, Stein, 24 Feb. 1918.

<sup>664</sup> See BfZ, Lips, 23 May 1917.

<sup>665</sup> BfZ, Lips, 16 May 1917.



before supplies were exhausted.<sup>666</sup> Mealtimes – which had traditionally been the center of the unit’s social life – became a bitter and exhausting business. Eventually, the military took some serious steps to address these problems. In 1916, all units were instructed to appoint a commission of trusted men to ensure that each man received an equal part. Inspectors were also dispatched to oversee the operation of kitchen and bakery units.<sup>667</sup> Their effect was limited however, and often their efforts backfired completely, as the overseers themselves were suspected of corruption.<sup>668</sup> As the war dragged on, complaint gave way to more active responses, most notably theft and property crime. In fact, it is probably more accurate to describe theft as a permanent state of existence than as a collection of individual acts. It was happening all the time, everywhere, among virtually everybody. Any consumables left unattended, no matter how briefly, was subject to being taken. This was a fact of military life with which every soldier quickly became familiar. “Everything has to be watched carefully,” one man informed his wife, “it will get stolen... nothing is secure.”<sup>669</sup> “The men steal like ravens,” another observed.<sup>670</sup> Nighttime provided the best opportunities, especially in the cramped confines of the trench or dug-out. Mess tins and packs easily got “mixed up,” and choice items disappeared.<sup>671</sup> Nor was food the only target. Any item of value was subject to theft, usually not to be kept, but to be bartered or sold for necessities. Officers’ personal effects – watches, sidearms, cameras – were particularly prized, as they were usually the

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<sup>666</sup> BfZ, Schulin, 10 Sep. 1915.

<sup>667</sup> MKB, Stein, 28 Apr. 18.

<sup>668</sup> HSA-St, M77/1 Bü 457, 22 memo 15 Oct. 1917.

<sup>669</sup> BfZ, Schulin, 1916

<sup>670</sup> BfZ, Wolff, 27 Nov. 1918.

<sup>671</sup> BfZ, Schulin, 64.

most valuable items to be found at the front.<sup>672</sup> But failing that, equipment and items of all kinds were taken: rifles, razors, helmets, garments and underwear. These could be resold to locals, or on the German black market. Even items of no apparent value were raided, such as gas masks. By 1918, few soldiers retained any personal belongings at all. One soldier, who decided to write out a kind of will, took a few moments to catalogue his personal effects. He found that he no longer had any of the items with which he had originally brought with him. Even the most esoteric items, like his bicycle headlamp, had “disappeared.”<sup>673</sup>

More ambitious thieves set their sights on larger targets. The most obvious were the company kitchens and baggage train, where the unit’s stockpiles of food were housed. Soldiers raided the kitchens under cover of darkness, and took as much as they could carry. Military police often apprehended thieves with huge quantities of food. One man was arrested with sixty loaves of bread; another man somehow contrived to make off with over a hundred sacks of oats and flour.<sup>674</sup> The kitchens were raided so often, that they had to be guarded by the kitchen staff round the clock.<sup>675</sup> Of course, the staff was not to be trusted more than anyone else. They routinely took extra portions for themselves, and sometimes even for friends and family.<sup>676</sup> This was common knowledge among the rank and file, who used it as a reason to watch the cooks all the more closely. “In this small unit,” one man observed “you always have to keep a sharp eye on the

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<sup>672</sup> Reports of such thefts are rife in the records of military courts. See for example HSA-St, M 1/7 308.

<sup>673</sup> BfZ, Ehlers, 24 Apr. 1918.

<sup>674</sup> HSA-St, M1/7 305, November 1917; HSA-St, M1/7 305, March 1918.

<sup>675</sup> MKB, Stein, 23 Apr. 1918; BfZ, Lips, 16 May 1917.

<sup>676</sup> MKB, Stein, 8 Apr. 1918; HSA-St, M1/7 303, October 1918. Later on, kitchen staff were assigned double rations, but this amounted to little more than an official endorsement of the status quo.

cooks.”<sup>677</sup> The ration parties – the men who actually ferried food from the field kitchens to the soldiers – were even worse offenders, because they had totally unsupervised access to food. And moving in darkness, often under enemy fire, they could plausibly claim to have simply lost it.<sup>678</sup> Also notorious for theft were the military postmen, who had access to food packages sent to and from Germany. Often they simply seized whole packages, or they would open up packages and remove the choice bits. More sophisticated thieves would alter addresses (or mark packages as undeliverable), so that they would end up in the hands of accomplices.<sup>679</sup>

Other thieves preferred to work through deception. Frauds and scams of every sort were rampant at the front. One particularly common trick involved men who were headed home on leave. They would volunteer to deliver comrades’ food packages to their families back in Germany. Then they would simply take the packages for themselves, often claiming that they had been lost or stolen en route.<sup>680</sup> In another variation of this scam, men on leave would actually visit comrades’ families, supposedly to deliver requests from their loved-one in the field. They would claim, for instance, that their son was asking for food or cash. When the goods were supplied, the scammer would keep it for his own.<sup>681</sup> In yet another variant, soldiers would seek donations on behalf of fictitious causes.<sup>682</sup> The sale of phony goods also flourished. Many dealers specialized in fake documents – like leave or medical passes – which could be bought for cash or

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<sup>677</sup> BfZ, Geidel, 5 Aug. 1917.

<sup>678</sup> See Junger, *Storm of Steel*, 47.

<sup>679</sup> See HSA-St, M1/7 307, February 1918; HSA-St, M1/7 305, April 1917.

<sup>680</sup> HSA-St, M1/7 308, October 1918.

<sup>681</sup> HSA-St, M1/7 308, October 1918; HSA-St, M1/7 308, June 1917.

<sup>682</sup> HSA-St, M1/7 308, September 1918.

rations.<sup>683</sup> Men who attempted to use these crude forgeries often wound up under arrest. Other frauds involved food directly. Dealers passed off ersatz items as the real thing, or sold outright fakes. One man was caught selling tins of jam – at the outlandish price of 32 Marks each – which contained only sand.<sup>684</sup>

Many forms of theft were accomplished through social pressure and intimidation. Well-provisioned men rapidly became among the most popular men in the unit. It soon became clear however that all of these newly-acquired “friends” expected a share of the riches. And if these requests were not met, they would harass their would-be benefactor with endless complaints, or even threats.<sup>685</sup> Others accused the hold-out of hoarding or dealing on the black market.<sup>686</sup> The best placed to use social pressures, of course, were officers. Officers were able to offer a range of bribes to the kitchen staff – home leave, better jobs, even cash – in exchange for additional food.<sup>687</sup> Even when there was no explicit arrangement in place, cooks still felt pressure to provide their officers with extras. They understandably feared isolating the men who controlled most aspects of their immediate lives.<sup>688</sup> Particularly unscrupulous officers took advantage of their pre-eminent position to steal with impunity. They simply took what they wished, knowing that their subordinates would be too fearful to report them. If there was any doubt raised about the fact, they took care to drive their position home. In one case, a captain seized all of the company’s butter and bacon. When the shocked cook asked what he was supposed to

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<sup>683</sup> See HSA-St, M1/4 Bü 1625, “Bericht über die Tätigkeit der Eisenbahnüberwachungsreisende für die Zeit vom 1.7 bis 30.9.1918.”

<sup>684</sup> HSA-St, M1/7 313, April 1918.

<sup>685</sup> See for instance BfZ, Pechthold, esp. 428

<sup>686</sup> MKB, Stein, 24 Feb, 1918.

<sup>687</sup> HSA-St, M1/7 305, April 1917.

<sup>688</sup> BfZ, Lips, end materials. Cook keeps separate notes for men and officers.

prepare, he was “roughly dismissed” by the officer.<sup>689</sup> In the event of serious difficulties, officers could use their resources and privileges to conceal their deeds. Some covered up their crimes by staging break-ins and filing false police reports. Others used bribes to keep subordinates quiet.<sup>690</sup>

Theft and fraud were extraordinarily corrosive to group cohesion, far more than the simple existence of inequality. Inequality created emotional divisions; the haves and the have-nots regarded each other with resentment and bitterness. Theft, by contrast, created direct and material conflicts. One soldier benefitted only when another lost. Acts of theft, moreover, were apt to generate other kinds of conflict. Over time, soldiers adopted more aggressive measures against thieves. Men caught in the act were treated roughly. Indeed, soldiers were often injured in these encounters, and some were killed. Judicial records reveal cases in which guns and knives were drawn over a scrap of food or some other trifle.<sup>691</sup> When the thief got away, victims found other ways of retaliating. Many stole items from the man they suspected, or set traps against future thefts.<sup>692</sup> Others reported thefts to officers or military police. The response of authorities was spotty, but could occasionally be relatively severe. The more effective strategy was to keep an eye on the suspected thief, and report him when he committed some later (and more verifiable) offense. This was often done by means of anonymous letter. In some units, anonymous denunciations became almost a regular feature of social life.<sup>693</sup> This only exacerbated the kind of universal suspicion which mass theft created. Everyone was a

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<sup>689</sup> HSA-St, M30/1 77 23, October 1918.

<sup>690</sup> HSA-St, M1/7 308 July 1918.

<sup>691</sup> HSA-St, M1/7 307 October 1918.

<sup>692</sup> DTA, #1083, 81.

<sup>693</sup> HSA-St, M1/7 313, January 1918.

potential thief, even (and often especially) those who were closest to you. Soldiers quickly learned to keep a close watch on everyone.

### ***Kameradschaft***

Having discussed conflicts among soldiers, it now seems necessary to consider the countervailing forces – the forces which unite and bind together. In any group, both integrative and disintegrative forces are always in operation. How the group functions, and whether it continues to cohere, cannot be understood by studying only one side of the equation. We must understand how the two forces interact, and which is more powerful. Military sociologists, at least over the last half century, have tended to emphasize the power of integrative processes.<sup>694</sup> The nature of the modern battlefield, they argue, makes these processes very strong. Units are increasingly confronted with complicated tasks, which cannot be accomplished by any single man, but require the unified and coordinated action of all the units' members. Membership in the unit, moreover, provides the only effective defense against the dangers and hardships of the modern battlefield. The survival of the group and the survival of the individual are therefore inseparably bound up. The individual's best chance for survival lies in maintaining the safety and integrity of the group. Men operating under these circumstances develop strong connections to one

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<sup>694</sup> There is a vast body of literature in this vein, which can only be outlined here. This position was first advanced by Samuel Stouffer in *The American Soldier* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949). Other major contributions include S.L.A. Marshall, *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command in Future War* (Washington, D.C.: Infantry Journal, 1947); Roger Little, "Buddy Relations and Combat Performance," in *The New Military: Changing Patterns of Organizations*, ed. Morris Janowitz, (New York: Russel Sage, 1964); Edward Shils and Morris Janowitz, "Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (Summer 1948). Leonard Wong provides a useful summary of this literature in *Why They Fight: Combat Motivation in the Iraq War* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2003).

another, both emotional and functional. As a general matter, many military experts maintain, these connections are stronger than the forces that push soldiers apart. This view has also drawn support from artists and writers. Many accounts of war stress the intense bonds of comradeship which developed among the men in the field.<sup>695</sup>

The question for us is how these connections developed in the particular case at hand. Did the bonds of camaraderie outweigh the material and ideological conflicts within the rank and file? On the whole, the answer to this question is no. To understand why this is the case, we need to emphasize again the close connection between social dynamics and the specific circumstances in which the group operates. It is beyond doubt that functional and affective ties do often develop among soldiers. At the same time, however, these ties do not develop automatically. They develop in response to specific challenges – challenges that are not faced by all units equally and which take different forms in different times and places. If we compare an infantry platoon in say, the Second World War against its counterpart in the Vietnam War, or the Franco-Prussian War, it is clear that they face very different demands, which affects the way their members interact. And when we examine the particular condition which prevailed during the First World War, we find that these are not especially conducive to social cohesion.

The development of personal ties is causally connected to the need for cooperation – the greater the need for cooperation, the tighter the bonds between members of the group.<sup>696</sup> The need for cooperation tends to be greatest when soldiers

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<sup>695</sup> For a summary of this literature, see Linder, *Princes of the Trenches*, especially ch. 6.

<sup>696</sup> This point is made most explicitly in Frederick Kviz, “Survival in Combat as a Collective Exchange Process,” *Journal of Political and Military Sociology* 6 (Fall 1978). Kviz approaches the problem from the angle of exchange theory. The same point is made in other ways in Charles Moskos, *The American Enlisted Man: The Rank and File in Today’s Military* (New York, Russel Sage, 1970); Guy Siebold “Military Group

fight in very close order, or when they are confronted with complex tactical situations. But combat in the First World War did not fit either criterion. To limit the damage inflicted by heavy weapons, units fought in very loose formations, with individuals spread over a large area, rather than concentrated in a solid mass.<sup>697</sup> Soldiers often could not even see one another in combat. They kept low to the ground and out of sight, advancing between points of cover in brief bursts. In the confusion of battle, moreover, different units became mixed up almost immediately, and “friend could hardly be distinguished from foe.”<sup>698</sup> Even officers had no clear idea which men belonged to which unit, as soldiers usually removed all unit badges and identifying insignia before battle (so as not to reveal their unit deployments to the enemy). “Much of the fighting,” to quote one tactical history, “was done by *ad hoc* groups of men, often from a number of different regiments, led by whatever officers were present.”<sup>699</sup> Soldiers often reported intense feelings of isolation on the battlefield. In the first moments of the Michael offensive, an operation involving nearly a million men, one officer reported that “in the midst of these masses that had risen up, one was still alone... I had lost my men from sight, they had disappeared like a wave crashing in the surf.”<sup>700</sup> Under these conditions, and in the absence of wireless communications, effective coordination between comrades was very limited.

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Cohesion” in *Military Life: The Psychology of Serving in Peace and Combat*, eds. Thomas Britt, Amy Adler and Carlos Castro (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2006); and Little, “Buddy Relations and Combat Performance.”

<sup>697</sup> For the evolution of open-order tactics in the German army, see Martin Samuels, *Command or Control? Command, Training and Tactics in the British and German Armies, 1888-1918* (London: Frank Cass, 1995), 61-93.

<sup>698</sup> BfZ, Pechthold, 219.

<sup>699</sup> Samuels, *Command or Control?*, 266.

<sup>700</sup> Jünger, *Storm of Steel*, 232.



The nature of combat also diminished the ability of the group to protect the individual. In combat conducted at short ranges, members of a unit can protect each other effectively. In a properly deployed formation, each soldier had his flank and rear covered by other soldiers. If one member is attacked, moreover, the other members are in a position to immediately assist. Combat in the First World War, however, was not usually conducted at close ranges, especially later in the war. Given the vulnerability of soldiers to modern weapons, all belligerents came to rely more and more on artillery and other long-range weapons to inflict damage on the enemy. In the German army, the number of artillery pieces in service increased about six-fold over the war, from about 5,000 to more than 30,000.<sup>701</sup> The number of the heavy artillery pieces increased about twelve times, peaking at about 7,000 in the summer of 1917.<sup>702</sup> By the second half of the war, the army had come to rely so heavily on artillery fire that (as numerous internal reports observed) the infantry “hardly make use of their rifles.” They simply refused to fire, preferring to wait under cover while the heavy weapons did their work.<sup>703</sup> Many soldiers barely knew how to operate their weapons, simply because they were so rarely required to use them. The increasing importance of long-range weapons is most clearly visible in casualty statistics. For the war as a whole, some 43% of all German casualties were caused by artillery fire.<sup>704</sup> This figure rose over the course of the war, as the number of tubes increased. It was also higher on the western front than in peripheral theaters, because of

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<sup>701</sup> Pieces of all calibers. *Statistisches Jahrbuch fuer das Deutsche Reich, 1919*, 27.

<sup>702</sup> Wrisberg, *Heer und Heimat*, 58.

<sup>703</sup> Harris, *Amiens to Armistice*, 150, which quotes official German history; HSA-St, M30/1, “Erfahrungen der 14 R.D...,” 12 Jun. 1918; Ludendorff, *Ludendorff's Own Story*, 201. This phenomenon was also widely observed in WWII. See Marshall, *Men Against Fire*.

<sup>704</sup> This figure refers to the percentage of non-fatal wounds. A considerably higher percentage of fatal wounds (56%) were inflicted by artillery fire. *Sanitätsbericht III*, übersicht 62, 68-71.

the greater technological sophistication of the armies there. In the campaign of 1918, up to 90% of all casualties were caused artillery, and most of the remainder were inflicted by other long-range weapons – snipers, gas projectiles, fire from aircraft.<sup>705</sup> The large majority of soldiers, then, would be wounded by projectiles fired from miles away, by an opponent that could neither be seen nor engaged. Under these conditions, there was relatively little that soldiers could do to actively assist one another. The best thing they could do, and what they were trained to do, was to keep a distance from one another, as groups of soldiers attracted the attention of enemy gunners.<sup>706</sup>

Soldiers' own descriptions of combat certainly do nothing to suggest that the individual's survival lay in the hands of his comrades. In many modern wars, soldiers' accounts almost invariably contain dramatic descriptions of soldiers assisting one another, usually at great risk – the soldier who takes a bullet for another, who leaps on a grenade to shield his comrades from the blast, who stays behind to cover the retreat of the others. These kinds of stories are very largely absent from soldiers' letters during the First World War, however. Far more common are stories that depict precisely the opposite, of soldiers abandoning one another, or turning on one another in order to save themselves. Consider, for instance, F. Meisel's description of the bitter fighting around Mount Kemmel. When his unit suddenly comes under gas attack:

I reached out for my gas mask, pulled it out of its container – then noticed to my horror that a splinter had gone through it leaving a large hole... Immediately I reverted to the primitive. I felt like an animal cornered by hunters. With the instinct of self-preservation upper-most, my eyes fell on

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<sup>705</sup> There is some variation in these estimates, but all agree that they were very high. Surviving reports from individual medical units suggest figures in the range of 75%. (*Sanitätsbericht III*, 71). Kramer suggests a figure of 85% (*Dynamic of Destruction*, 251). Van Bergen puts the figure at 90%. (*Before My Helpless Sight*, 166-67)

<sup>706</sup> Strachan, *First World War I*, 237-38; Geyer, "How the Germans Learned to Wage War," 34.

the boy whose arm I had bandaged. Somehow he had managed to put the gas mask on his face with his one good arm. I leapt at him and in the next moment had ripped the gas mask from his face. With a feeble gesture he tried to wrench it from my grasp, then fell back exhausted. The last thing I saw before putting on the mask were his pleading eyes.<sup>707</sup>

Less dramatic, but perhaps more illustrative, is Hans Zoeberlin's account of fighting in the southern sector. Under Allied bombardment, Hans rushes for cover when "a knot of yelling, screaming men push me to the side. They are striking and yelling at each other; everybody wants to get into the bottom of the hole before me. Are these what you would call comrades? How they tear and push and step on each other, as if they were mortal enemies!"<sup>708</sup> Military records make frequent references to similar types of episodes, suggesting that these were by no means isolated incidents. It seems to have been relatively common, for instance, for retreating infantrymen to refuse to stop and protect slower rear-echelon units; they simply continued on towards the rear, ignoring their pleas for help, and leaving these men to their fate.<sup>709</sup>

It became increasingly difficult for soldiers to render even the most basic forms of assistance to each other. At the outbreak of war, soldiers were trained and equipped to help treat wounded comrades. With the introduction of high powered rifles and other modern weapons, military doctors realized that wounded men would have to receive some immediate attention. If treatment was delayed until they were brought into a field hospital, the patient would very likely be dead already. Ordinary soldiers were accordingly issued with emergency bandage packs before battle, and given basic training

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<sup>707</sup> Account of F. Meisel, in Hart, 1918, 255.

<sup>708</sup> Hans Zöberlin, *Der Glaube an Deutschland: Ein Kriegserleben von Verdun bis zum Umsturz* (München, F. Eher nachf., 1942), 122.

<sup>709</sup> Harris, *Amiens to Armistice*, 150.

in how to render first-aid assistance to wounded comrades.<sup>710</sup> Soldiers also generally helped to transport wounded to the rear, as the division's small contingent of stretcher-bearers was rarely sufficient for the task. Accounts of field doctors in the war's early campaigns reveal that wounded soldiers were often brought in by other men in their units, often on improvised stretchers made from blankets or tent-canvas, or simply carried on men's backs.<sup>711</sup> As the battlefield changed, such heroics gradually disappeared. Commanders often prohibited soldiers from helping the wounded.<sup>712</sup> Each soldier who stopped to help the wounded was one less who participated in the fighting. And given the enormous casualties involved in frontal assaults, commanders endeavored to keep every possible man in the fight.

For their part, soldiers came to realize that helping a wounded comrade, however well intentioned, was simply foolhardy. On the fire-swept battlefields of the western front, a soldier who exposed himself for even a moment was liable to be hit; stopping to help a wounded man, to say nothing of carrying the man back to safety, would in all likelihood result in the death of both. The necessity of self-preservation gradually, but inexorably, drowned out pity for the wounded. One soldier, describing action in Ypres sector, captures this sentiment well. "The wounded are lying on the field and they are asking for help when they hear us passing, but we can hardly make it ourselves."<sup>713</sup> Among long-time soldiers, the sight of wounded comrades often produced no emotion at all. One soldier described how a wounded man stumbled into his unit, asking for help. But "the men had become so worn down, that they could not bring themselves to bind his

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<sup>710</sup> For example see BfZ, W. Vogt, 18 Aug. 1914.

<sup>711</sup> W. Vogt, August 1914 entries.

<sup>712</sup> Van Bergen, *Before My Helpless Sight*, 292.

<sup>713</sup> Hoover, Schetter, 9-10.

wounds.”<sup>714</sup> Where conditions permitted, units made some effort to collect their wounded in the aftermath of battle. But with battlefields often stretching over huge areas, locating individual men was often very difficult, and search parties did not always make heroic efforts. It was not uncommon for wounded men to go for days without help. August Oppr recalled being “left for dead” in the basement of a ruined house for three days after a battle. The experience left him bitter at his comrades even months later.<sup>715</sup> Those who were clearly beyond help were often left to die,<sup>716</sup> or sometimes even robbed of their belongings. Some bodies were found to have been entirely stripped, “with no clothes, no weapons.”<sup>717</sup>

Without the need for cooperation to hold them together, the affective bonds between soldiers remained relatively weak. Soldiers did not often develop intense emotional attachments to the other men in their unit. It seems more accurate to say that they tolerated them. At best this was a benign tolerance, with soldiers bearing no particular ill will towards their comrades, and even capable of sharing pleasant moments or light-hearted conversations. Just as often, though, it was a tolerance of a more sullen variety – a half-contained annoyance or bitterness towards others, which often found expression in an active withdrawal from social interaction. In either case, a soldier’s immediate comrades were a curiously marginal presence in his inner emotional world. This comes across quite clearly in their letters. In the more than 100 correspondences I surveyed in the course of my research, I found it to be fairly rare for a soldier to refer to other men in his unit by name, especially first name. Many correspondences contain

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<sup>714</sup> BfZ, Pechthold, 37.

<sup>715</sup> BfZ, Lips, 9 Aug. 1916.

<sup>716</sup> See Hoover, Schetter, 7-8.

<sup>717</sup> BfZ, Schulin 56.

hardly any a single such reference. This includes some very long correspondences, comprising hundreds of individual pieces.<sup>718</sup> When other soldiers are mentioned, they are rarely referred to in any especially fond way. Often the author mentions them only to complain about them.<sup>719</sup> In any case, they almost never become an important or permanent feature of the narrative. They are casually referred to once or twice and then disappear entirely. What also is striking is how soldiers refer to others in abstract or general terms, even where it seems strange to do so. Dead and wounded comrades, for instance, are often referred to in military euphemisms which mask the individual identity of the dead – as in “we took many losses” [*Verluste*].<sup>720</sup> Or they would adopt a matter-of-fact tone, which recalled official casualty reports. Describing the carnage caused by an enemy air raid on his unit, Otto Maute described the losses thus: “two men wounded, three horses and five cows dead.”<sup>721</sup> This habit is even more striking in longer correspondence, where it is often possible to see how a soldiers’ language changes over time. Take Wilhelm Schulin, who kept detailed diaries spanning most of the war. In the first years of the war, he takes care to record all of his wounded comrades by name; he constructs long lists of the dead, often including the date of death and other details. By the last year of the war, he had completely abandoned this practice. He referred only to “losses” and “the dead.”<sup>722</sup>

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<sup>718</sup> For a good example see BfZ, Ehlers. This correspondence contains several hundred pieces, spanning most of the war. Yet the author refers specifically to only one other soldier (not counting those who are pre-war friends), and this only briefly. For other telling examples, see BfZ Heinz, and BfZ Schmidt.

<sup>719</sup> See BfZ, Pollet, 8 Mar. 1917.

<sup>720</sup> BfZ, Schulin, 20 Aug. 1917.

<sup>721</sup> BfZ, Maute, 15 Apr. 1916; see also BfZ, Wolff, 22 Aug. 1918.

<sup>722</sup> BfZ, Shulin, 26 Aug. 1916; 10 Jun 1917.

Soldier's correspondence, likewise, rarely referred to *Kameradschaft*. It is not particularly common for soldiers to even use the word *Kamerad*. When it was used, it was often used in a purely practical sense, to denote the other members of their immediate unit or team. When new replacements arrived from the rear, for instance, soldiers would often say "we got some comrades."<sup>723</sup> This was closer to its original meaning – bunkmate or roommate, derived from the Latin word for "house" (*camera*) – and it carried little emotional or ideological weight. Soldiers often used the word in ways which mocked its nostalgic meanings. For instance, a soldier assigned to guard the kitchens quipped that he had to be on the lookout for "our good comrades" looking to raid the company stores.<sup>724</sup> It was quite rare for soldiers to discuss themes of *Kameradschaft* at any length. When they did so, they usually reached negative conclusions. Soon after arriving in his unit, Hugo Frick observes "not much camaraderie; egoism is instilled of necessity."<sup>725</sup> Another man, in an unusually extended and vivid discussion, compares soldiers to "repulsive molecules," that "attempt to get to get as far away from each other as possible."<sup>726</sup> Soldiers were often prompted to consider these subjects by reports, in civilian newspapers and military propaganda, about the excellent state of relations among the rank and file. "Don't believe what is written in the papers about good morale," one soldier warned his family, noting that such subjects are a fiction propagated by the military.<sup>727</sup> These words were written in the summer of 1918, but most soldiers had reached the same conclusions much earlier. In the fall of 1916, Arnold

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<sup>723</sup> BfZ, Schulin, 14 Jun. 1917.

<sup>724</sup> DTA, #1083, 91.

<sup>725</sup> BfZ, Frick, 8 Apr. 1915.

<sup>726</sup> BfZ, Bader, 8 Jun. 1916.

<sup>727</sup> BA-MA, RH/61 1035, Stimmungsbericht 31 Aug. 1918.

Metzger had written “So far as I see, the camaraderie in the field is rather doubtful, and the longer the war lasts, the more illusory it becomes. All these wonderful things the newspapers talk of, of the intimate rapport among officers and men, are untrue.”<sup>728</sup>

If *Kameradschaft* was largely a myth, then how was this myth made, and for what purpose? How did it come to occupy an important place in modern understandings of the First World War? There are two main answers to these questions. The first answer points to long-term changes in the relationship between military and society. Over the second half of the nineteenth century, most European armies abandoned small professional armies in favor of mass armies, built on universal conscription. To make military service more palatable, the state and its allies made a sustained effort to idealize the soldiers’ life. And the myth of *Kameradschaft* was a part of this idealized vision.<sup>729</sup> To give this myth the appearance of substance, military life was saturated with the language and images of comradeship. The German articles of war expressly required not only obedience to one’s superiors, but also “good, honest conduct towards one’s comrades.” Under the military penal code, crimes committed against one’s fellow soldiers were punished far more severely, and placed into a separate legal category. Military law, for instance, distinguished between ordinary theft [*Diebstahl*] and “comrade theft” [*Kameraddiebstahl*]. Officers lectured new recruits on the importance of loyalty to comrades, while the Kaiser and high-ranking officers greeted soldiers with the familiar ‘Kamerad!’ during reviews and inspections.<sup>730</sup> Bulletins and newspapers, meanwhile, carried huge numbers of stories and verse lauding the values of camaraderie. Some

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<sup>728</sup> Metzger, *Phänomenologie*, letter from letter dated 14.11.1916

<sup>729</sup> Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, 22-25.

<sup>730</sup> DTA, #1040, 20 Sep. 1918.



papers, like the army-sponsored *Champagne Kamerad*, incorporated the theme more explicitly. These themes were embedded even into the entertainments provided by the army. Comradeship was a major theme in the motion-pictures distributed to military movie houses, included films like “On the Field of Honor.”<sup>731</sup> “Ich hatte einen Kameraden” was a staple of regimental bands, and performed at military funerals.<sup>732</sup> If we study military life only through official documents, the dominance of these themes can be deceptive. It is easy to get the impression that comradeship was a central feature of the soldiers’ existence, when the reality was very different.

The growth of the *Kameradschaft* myth was also connected to soldiers’ post-war efforts to interpret and make sense of their experiences. For all those who fought in the war, and most especially for Germans, the war proved difficult to make meaningful. This was partly because of the nature of the fighting, which made nonsense of the notions with which combat had hitherto been invested with moral significance – things like honor, courage, skill-at-arms.<sup>733</sup> This was also due to the outcome of the war. German soldiers, unlike their Allied counterparts, could not connect their sacrifices to any tangible political accomplishment. The nation’s grandiose designs for expansion had gone unfulfilled. Quite the contrary, the war had led to Germany’s economic ruin and political humiliation. By any conventional measure, the war had been an abject failure. It was from this perspective of defeat that *Kameradschaft* began to take on a new importance; it offered ex-soldiers a way to extract something positive from their war experiences. It did so by shifting the focus of discussion from military/political achievement to personal

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<sup>731</sup> Welch, “Cinema and Society,” 33.

<sup>732</sup> Linder, *Princes of the Trenches*, 74-75.

<sup>733</sup> Leed, *No Man’s Land*, esp. 39-114.

transformation. Through the experience of camaraderie, it could be claimed, the soldier had become a better person. Totally submerged within the group, and dependent upon his comrades for survival, he had been purified of his crass materialism and petty personal ambitions. He became more closely attuned to the needs of the larger community.<sup>734</sup> These points are very often made explicitly, as in the work of Alfred Hein, who advised veterans to “forget the bad time you’ve had up the line as quickly as you can, but not all the good that has come of it – the genuineness, the self-respect, the comradeship! Those we will take with us into a free, peaceful, better life!... What was in us there is the finest and greatest thing I have ever experienced.”<sup>735</sup> In a similar fashion, *Kameradschaft* could serve as a way of responding to the social and political fragmentation which characterized the post-war world. Invoking a unified community of soldiers, in which social divisions had ceased to exist, served both as a means of critiquing existing society, and as a blueprint for changing it.<sup>736</sup> To many a young man (especially those with conservative and nationalist leanings) the solution to Germany’s political problems lay in applying the camaraderie of the army to society as a whole.<sup>737</sup> Men who held these views were understandably inclined to enlarge the role of comradeship as they looked back on their wartime service.

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<sup>734</sup> The inner transformation brought about by the war was an ubiquitous theme in war-writings. *Kameradschaft* is not always the primary agent of change. In some texts, for instance, it was the experience of material deprivation, or the proximity of death, which were seen to have caused this change. But even in these perspectives, *Kameradschaft* often plays an important role. In accounts which emphasize the transformative power of death, for instance, much of that power derives from the fact that the threat of death is shared equally by all members of the group. See Ann Linder, *Princes of the Trenches*, 101-113.

<sup>735</sup> Alfred Hein, *Eine Kompagnie Soldaten in der Hölle von Verdun* (Minden i.W.: Kohler, 1930), 361. Quoted in Linder, *Princes of the Trenches*, 112.

<sup>736</sup> Linder, *Princes of the Trenches*, 83-84.

<sup>737</sup> See Roger Woods, “Ernst Jünger, the New Nationalists, and the Memory of the First World War,” in *German Novelists of the Weimar Republic*, ed. Karl Leydecker (Rochester, NY: Camden, 2006).

The constructedness of the *Kameradschaft* ideal is apparent in the gradual process through which it took shape. As Thomas Kühne has pointed out, camaraderie did not emerge as a major component of right-wing culture until the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the nineteen thirties. For at least a decade after the war, depictions of front life were still dominated by the aristocratic “hero cult,” which emphasized individual courage and prowess. This view tended to emphasize the isolation of the individual, rather than his ties with the group. Camaraderie was often associated with “the masses,” and carried a leftist political tinge. Only as time passed, and as actual memories of the war became less distinct, could the *Kameradschaft* be put to a greater range of political purposes. In many cases, the process of evolution can be seen quite clearly.<sup>738</sup>

If we look at an individual’s body of work, we often see that the relative importance of comradeship changes over time. We see this clearly, for instance, in the work of Ernst Jünger – and especially in his most read work, *Storm of Steel*. First published on a small scale in 1920, the book went through at least eight different editions over the next decades, with each new edition featuring substantial revisions.<sup>739</sup> In the later editions, *Kameradschaft* is more often the object of explicit discussion. In one oft-quoted scene (to take one example), Jünger described the following encounter in the aftermath of a sharp battle:

and already on our first evening [after the battle] the happy sounds of reunited comrades could be heard from many of the dwellings. Such libations after a successfully endured engagement are among the fondest memories an old warrior may have. Even if ten out of twelve men had fallen, the two survivors would surely meet over a glass on their first

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<sup>738</sup> Thoman Kühne, *Kameradschaft: Die Soldaten des nationalsozialistischen Krieges und das 20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), 27-67.

<sup>739</sup> See Michael Hoffman, “Introduction,” in *Storm of Steel*, by Ernst Jünger (New York: Penguin, 2004), xi-xv.

evening off, and drink a silent toast to their comrades, and jestingly talk over their shared experiences. There was in these men a quality that both emphasized the savagery of war and transfigured it at the same time...<sup>740</sup>

This view of *Kameradschaft*, however, is strikingly different from those contained in earlier forms of the text, especially in the journals that Jünger actually kept during the war, and upon which *Storm of Steel* were purportedly based. These journals totally lack the fond descriptions of comradeship which appear in the published text. The above, scene, for instance, is nowhere to be found in the journals. (His entries for this period, in fact, record a striking scene in which he refuses to bury the corpses of several fallen Germans, declaring “The world belongs to the living!”)<sup>741</sup> The journals also describe many instances of conflict between Jünger and his unit, which do not find their way into the published text.

It is also worth pointing out that the emphasis on *Kameradschaft* was by no means universal. It may sometimes seem that way, given its prominent position in many war novels (including almost all of the war novels that became popular outside of Germany). But there were many soldiers whose memories of the war did not feature *Kameradschaft* at all. According to one study conducted at the end of the war, based on a collection of interviews, only one soldier in eight judged their social experiences to have had made an impact on them; only one in fifty deemed *Kameradschaft* specifically to have made a major impact.<sup>742</sup> Many soldiers’ accounts were openly skeptical of this proposition. Speaking of the chaotic final phases of the war, one soldier recalled that “for everybody,

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<sup>740</sup> Jünger, *Storm of Steel*, 99.

<sup>741</sup> Jünger, *Kriegstagebuch 1914-1918*. Ed. Helmuth Kiesel. (Stuttgart : Klett-Cotta, 2010), 29 Apr. 1917.

<sup>742</sup> Kühne, *Kameradschaft*, 49-50.

it was ‘save himself, who can.’”<sup>743</sup> Another veteran put the matter more bluntly. “Comradeship, there wasn’t much comradeship. Everybody there was the same as the next. Each one thinks, better you than me.”<sup>744</sup> Such sentiments were hardly isolated. Even in the 1930s, moreover, many tried to draw attention to the ways in which the *Kameradschaft* myth was being constructed by and for the benefit certain political groups. This included prominent communist writer Adam Scharrer, who dismissed the notion of wartime comradeship as “the greatest lie.”<sup>745</sup>

Let us take care not to overstate the case here. The German soldier was not a completely isolated individual. Soldiers had acquaintances and friends among their comrades. Some developed very close friendships. But there did not exist any generalized sense of closeness among all soldiers, much less the kind of mystical brotherhood that some novelists referred to. From all the evidence we have, it seems that soldiers’ social and emotional lives remained oriented towards their pre-war social circles, rather than towards the men in their units. While soldiers’ letters rarely mention the latter, they constantly mention the former. They share news about old friends, ask after those they have not heard from, and mention chance encounters with acquaintances from home.<sup>746</sup> In most correspondences, these are among the most common subjects of discussion. The importance of pre-war social connections comes across not only in what soldiers are writing, but who they are writing too. The vast majority of all their letters were addressed to family and pre-war friends. And interestingly, soldiers often corresponded with a relatively broad circle of individuals, including many individuals who they had not been

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<sup>743</sup> Osburg, ‘*Und plötzlich...*’, testimony of August Urban, 428-29.

<sup>744</sup> Munch, *Verdun*, 223.

<sup>745</sup> Quoted in Linder, *Princes of the Trenches*, 169.

<sup>746</sup> See for instance BfZ Blecher; BfZ, Hecker; DTA, Viktor.

particularly close to before the war. The circumstances of the war (perhaps, everyone's heightened awareness of mortality and loss) prompted soldiers to contact those they had not heard from in years – aunts, cousins, godparents, old girlfriends, school acquaintances. Many letter collections contain letters from scores of different people. By contrast, it was rare for soldiers to correspond with people they had met during their time in the army. Given the rate that soldiers were shifted among different units, the average soldier would have had hundreds of former unit-mates scattered throughout the army. But there is scarcely a trace of these men in the correspondences. On special occasions, holidays or promotions, soldiers sought out the company of old friends, rather than the men in their units.<sup>747</sup> If they received a day or two off duty, they used it to visit family or schoolmates posted nearby, not to visit injured comrades in the hospital, and still less to be with their friends at the front.<sup>748</sup>

Proponents of the *Kameradschaft* myth argued that the bonds of comradeship disrupted the bonds between a home and front. When a man was in the field, he belonged to his comrades rather than his family. Indeed, his comrades were his family – in a more genuine sense than his biological family was. In fact, the opposite seems to have been true. Connections with home interfered with and overwhelmed the bonds among comrades. Soldiers had a finite amount of time to devote to relationships, and it was increasingly dominated by relationships with family. This left him less time to form meaningful bonds with soldiers. This also worked at the level of consciousness. The more

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<sup>747</sup> Hoover, Schetter, 32.

<sup>748</sup> BfZ, Lips, 20. Sep 1918.

the soldier was connected to home, the more it occupied his thinking. These themes will be explored in more detail in the next chapter.

## Chapter 6: Family Men

One of the principle themes in the literature that came out of the First World War was the fundamental division between soldiers at the front and civilians back home. While state propagandists insisted that home and front were united in pursuit of a common goal, authors like Walter Flex and Erich Remarque argued that, at an emotional and experiential level, the two sides were separated by an unbridgeable gap.<sup>1</sup> For all their genuine goodwill, for all their efforts to help, civilians simply could not understand the realities of the front. Some authors understood the consequences of this division to be primarily practical and political. Soldiers, who knew the true face of war, desired nothing more than that the fighting should be ended as quickly as possible. But civilians continued to support the war out of a misguided sense of patriotic duty – or worse, demanded that the war effort be escalated, so that a victorious peace could be achieved, and the nations' sacrifices vindicated. The scene which comes most readily to mind here is from Remarque's *Im Westen Nichts Neues*.<sup>2</sup> The narrator, home from the front on leave, is told by a local businessman that the individual soldier knows nothing about the larger issues of the war, and is then lectured about tactics. Other authors saw the disconnect between home and front in moral terms. When a man was separated from the routines of daily life, and when he was constantly compelled to confront his own mortality, he was apt to seriously reevaluate his goals and priorities. He was liberated from the struggle for trivial things, for material gains and social prestige. Afterwards, it was difficult for him to move again in civilian circles.

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the relevant German literature, see Linder, *Princes of the Trenches*, 58-60.

<sup>2</sup> Erich Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Berlin : Propyläen-Verlag, 1929), chapter seven.



The idea of the home/front divide became a major feature of the way in which we understand the experience of the war. Like the idealization of *Kameradschaft*, however, the notion of a clear home/front divide gives (at best) a highly distorted picture of what was actually happening. It was true, as the war novelists insisted, that civilians and soldiers did not fully understand the problems faced by one another, and that these misunderstandings were often the source of tension or emotional isolation. But in order to drive the point home, the extent of the break was often greatly exaggerated, and the interactions between home and front were simplified. It seems plain also that this break was (again like *Kameradschaft*) at least partly a post-war construction. It did not become a major theme of war literature until more than a decade after the struggle had ended.<sup>751</sup> By that time, complaints about the home front during the war were inevitably colored by the state's difficulties in rewarding and caring for its veterans after the war had ended.<sup>752</sup> They were influenced, too, by post-war efforts to reconstruct a masculinity which had been badly damaged by the experience of the trenches.<sup>753</sup> Most research has shown that, whatever the misunderstandings between soldiers and civilians, the emotional and practical connections between them were myriad. These connections were so strong that it hardly makes sense to talk about them as separate and antagonistic entities, as

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<sup>751</sup> For an insightful explanation of the trajectory of wartime literature, and the ways that this was connected to the changing circumstances of the post-war world, see Modris Eksteins, "All Quiet on the Western Front and the Fate of a War," *Journal of Contemporary History* 15 (1980).

<sup>752</sup> See Deborah Cohen, *The War Come Home: Disabled Veterans in Britain and Germany, 1914-1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

<sup>753</sup> See John C. Fout, "Sexual Politics in Wilhelmine Germany: The Male Gender Crisis, Moral Purity, and Homophobia," in *Forbidden History: The State, Society, and the Regulation of Sexuality in Modern Europe* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992); for a more nuanced treatment, Birthe Kundrus, "Gender Wars: The First World War and the Construction of Gender Relations in the Weimar Republic," in *Home/Front: The Military, War, and Gender in Twentieth-Century Germany*, eds. Karen Hagemann and Stefanie Schüler-Springorum (Oxford: Berg, 2002) .

Benjamin Ziemann and others have argued.<sup>754</sup> My study of soldiers' letters supports this position. It also suggests that the dynamic between soldiers and families contains a self-escalating dynamic. As the war dragged on, and conditions became worse, the more intense these bonds became.<sup>755</sup>

The close connection between soldiers and families inhibited the emergence of collective action among the rank and file – a fact which has long been apparent to leaders and organizers in movements of every sort. These organizers, of course, invariably attempt to use family connections as a way of inciting individuals to action. If we succeed in our goal, they urge prospective members, the benefits will flow as much to your families as to yourselves. While such arguments seem entirely reasonable, in actual fact family ties push individuals in exactly the opposite direction. Individuals with strong family ties are usually less likely to join resistance movements, or indeed social movements of any type.<sup>756</sup> Because they have family members who are dependent on them for their economic well-being, they are more reluctant to assume the risk that such membership entails. Just as importantly, they simply have no time or attention to devote

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<sup>754</sup> Ziemann, *War Experiences*, 7-8; also Karen Hagemann, "Home/Front: The Military, Violence and Gender Relations in the Age of the World Wars," in *Home/Front: The Military, War, and Gender in Twentieth-Century Germany*, eds. Karen Hagemann and Stefanie Schüler-Springorum (Oxford: Berg, 2002), esp. 5-6.

<sup>755</sup> This strikes me as a point which has not been sufficiently developed. Most existing literature on soldiers' letters (especially for Germany) generally emphasizes the way that letters are used to negotiate gender identities, and to order (or disorder) identities disrupted by the war experience. In one way or another, then, this literature tends to foreground conflict or tension in these texts. I would not dispute this point; but I will also argue that such conflicts can exist alongside increasing emotional dependency. See for instance Caroline Bland and Máire Cross, *Gender and Politics in the Age of Letter-Writing, 1750-2000* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004); Jenny Hartley, "'Letters Are Everything these Days:' Mothers and Letters in the Second World War" in *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter-writers, 1600-1945*, ed. Rebecca Earle (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999); Christina Hämmerle "'... wirf ihnen alles hin und schau, daß du fort kommst:' Die Feldpost eines Paares in der Geschlechter(un)ordnung des Ersten Weltkrieges" *Historische Anthropologie* 6, no. 3 (1998).

<sup>756</sup> Marx and McAdam, *Collective Behavior*, 91-92; Doug McAdam, "Recruitment to High-Risk Activism: The Case of Freedom Summer," *American Journal of Sociology* 92, no. 1 (1986): 64-90.

to such matters.<sup>757</sup> Practically and emotionally, they are fully occupied. This is more or less exactly what happened in the German army. Soldiers wished to end the war, and in other circumstances they would no doubt have been more receptive to opportunities for collective resistance. But constant combat left them with little time and few mental resources to devote to other causes. The resources that remained were entirely absorbed with the affairs of their family. To the extent that this was so, to the extent that their attentions were fixed on domestic issues, the possibilities for collective action were correspondingly less.

### **Husbands *in Absentia***

Regular communication between home and front is a relatively recent development in the history of warfare. The First World War was in fact the first major war in which there was regular and large-scale communication between rank and file soldiers and their families at home.<sup>758</sup> This was made possible by a series of technological and social changes over the preceding half century. Improvements in transportation, particularly the expansion of passenger railways, made long-distance

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<sup>757</sup> This point is consistent with resource-mobilization theory, which argues that collective action only occurs when the group possesses sufficient “organizational resources” – including money and time. See McCarthy and Zald, *The Trend of Social Movements in America* (1973). Most versions of this theory focus on material resources. But some have expanded the concept of “organizational resources” to include cognitive and emotional resources as well. When these resources are scarce, action cannot take place. See Frederick Harris, “Something Within: Religion as a Mobilizer of African American Political Activism,” *Journal of Politics* 56, 1 (1994): 42-68.

<sup>758</sup> Letters had been exchanged between home and front in other wars, of course. But before the twentieth century, the majority of letters had been written by officers, as the rank and file possessed neither the literary skills to compose letters or the resources to send them regularly. See for instance Bell Wiley, *The Life of Johnny Reb: The Common Soldier of the Confederacy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978) 199-201. Other conflicts were either too short (eg. the Wars of Unification), or took place too far away from home (eg. colonial wars) for the mass exchange of letters to develop.

communication much easier and more affordable.<sup>759</sup> A modern postal service – featuring cheap flat-rate postage, modeled on the British “penny post” system – was established in Germany in 1867, and total traffic grew apace with the expansion of the road and rail network.<sup>760</sup> At the same time, literacy levels were spiking, thanks to the state’s active educational policy over the past century. By about 1875, the German Empire achieved full male literacy, and a flourishing literary culture emerged.<sup>761</sup> In 1913, Germans were sending 113 missives per year, on average -- more than any other country in the world save Britain.<sup>762</sup> Military authorities embraced these changes, and did everything they could to foster communication between soldiers and their families, especially in wartime. Harboring deep reservations about the ability of civilian conscripts to withstand a prolonged campaign, the military saw this communication as a prop for morale. During the Wars of Unification, the military postal service was greatly expanded; Moltke the elder is supposed to have remarked that “war cannot be waged without an army postal service.”<sup>763</sup> These policies were continued during the First World War, especially once it became clear that the fighting would be prolonged. Soldiers were kept supplied with writing materials, and postage was made free of charge.<sup>764</sup> The army postal service, meanwhile, established offices in every regiment in the army, and in most military bases

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<sup>759</sup> Berghahn, *Imperial Germany*, 20-21.

<sup>760</sup> Rainer Baasner, *Briefkultur im 19 Jahrhundert* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1999), 10.

<sup>761</sup> David Vincent, *Rise of Mass Literacy: Reading and Writing in Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), 9

<sup>762</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>763</sup> Christina Hämmerle, “You Let a Weeping Woman Call You Home” in *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter-writers, 1600-1945*, ed. Rebecca Earle (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 154-55

<sup>764</sup> Holger Herwig, *The Marne, 1914: The Opening of World War I and the Battle That Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2009), 101-102.

and railway stations. To keep the service adequately staffed, large numbers of additional postmen and auxiliaries were sought out, including women.<sup>765</sup>

All things considered, the military postal service performed with astonishing efficiency during the war. This was above all true for the Western Front, which lay close to Germany, and where the relatively static nature of operations simplified the process of delivery. Under normal circumstances, a letter would travel between Germany and the front in three or four days.<sup>766</sup> The service was so fast and reliable that soldiers felt comfortable sending all manner of perishable items – including things like milk, meat, butter, and fresh-cut flowers.<sup>767</sup> Some men even sent home their dirty laundry to be washed (cautioning that it may not be lice-free).<sup>768</sup> The sheer volume of items handled was staggering. Over the course of the war, some 29 billion items were exchanged between home and front.<sup>769</sup> On average, that comes to about 4.5 pieces of mail per soldier per day – which is about ten times higher than the rate of exchange in peacetime.<sup>770</sup>

The efficiency of the post permitted soldiers to remain in intimate contact with friends and family back in Germany. They could, if they chose, keep abreast of everything that transpired at home, down to the smallest details. And most soldiers were only too happy to seize this opportunity. As we have already seen, only a tiny fraction of men in the German army were regular soldiers – meaning career, long-service soldiers, who had presumably accommodated themselves to long absences from home. Most were

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<sup>765</sup> See for instance BfZ, Wenzel, 4 Oct. 1917.

<sup>766</sup> Soldiers often kept careful track of how long it took for letters to be delivered, and were highly sensitive to delays. See for instance BfZ, Heinz, 22 Mar. 1917.

<sup>767</sup> See BfZ, Ehlers, 22 Apr. 1916.

<sup>768</sup> BfZ, Ehlers, Sep 27 1918

<sup>769</sup> Peter Fritzsche, “The Archive,” *History & Memory* 17, no. 1-2 (2005): 22.

<sup>770</sup> The 1913 volume of mail is 116 pieces per person per year, or about 0.3 per person per day. Vincent, *Mass Literacy*, 19. In wartime, it is about 1,640 per person per year (taking 4 million as the average strength of the field army over the course of the war), or 4.5 per person per day.

civilian conscripts who had been uprooted from their normal existence, and who left behind families and obligations. These could not be neglected, especially for long periods. To ensure the continued functioning of the family unit, these obligations had to be attended to.

Attending to family affairs became all the more urgent in light of the burdens imposed by the war itself. The problems faced by any particular family, of course, depended upon its configuration, and upon its place within the larger social structure. A family with many small children obviously faced different problems than a newlywed couple. But there were several basic problems that, in one form or another, most families had to contend with. Nearly all families, for instance, faced severe material and financial burdens. The cost of food and other necessities continually increased, as productive capacities were shifted from consumer goods to war materials. Over the course of the war, the cost of living (adjusted for inflation) more than tripled.<sup>771</sup> At the same time, Germans were becoming less able to bear these costs.

Most families lost men to the draft, depriving them of much of their labor and wage-earning capabilities. Shortages (along with reckless monetary policies) also produced inflation, which eroded purchasing power and wiped out cash savings.<sup>772</sup>

This combination of pressures caused standards of living to decline dramatically. Some groups fared worse than others, naturally. Those in war-industries, for instance, did better than those in other areas; rural producers generally did better than urbanites.<sup>773</sup> But virtually everyone felt the effects of the war. And by 1918, large segments of the

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<sup>771</sup> Kocha, *Facing Total War*, 17.

<sup>772</sup> Chickering, *Imperial Germany*, 105-108.

<sup>773</sup> Kocha, *Klassengesellschaft*, 14.

population were living at or near subsistence levels. The caloric value of the official rations had fallen to about 1,500 calories per day – which was only about half the number of calories prescribed by official nutritional standards.<sup>774</sup> Some were able to supplement their rations by purchases on the black market, but this option was unavailable to a growing number of people. In some towns and cities, two-thirds of the population lived below the poverty line, and depended on government subsidies and other forms of public assistance.<sup>775</sup> By the end of the war, some 3,000 public kitchens were in operation nationwide; in Hamburg alone, 18% of the population took their meals in them.<sup>776</sup> Civilians were also working longer hours, to meet the demands of the war effort and to compensate for the manpower lost to the front.<sup>777</sup> Overworked and underfed, disease was an increasingly serious problem, especially among children and the elderly. Child mortality rates more than doubled over the course of the war.<sup>778</sup> In brief, nearly all families experienced hunger and exhaustion, and many were facing the prospect of destitution.

Knowing that their families faced difficult circumstances, soldiers did what they could to help. As they would quickly discover, however, helping a family from which you are physically absent was no simple task. However efficient the postal service, the

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<sup>774</sup> Offer, *The First World War*, 29; Bumm, *Deutschlands Gesundheitsverhältnisse unter dem Einfluss des Weltkrieges* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt), 72. The caloric value of actual rations depended on time and place, and they tended to fluctuate dramatically. Moreover, the official ration (as Chickering argues) only “prescribed the maximum quantities that could be purchased; it guaranteed nothing”. (Chickering, 142).

<sup>775</sup> Chickering, *Great War and Urban Life*, 450.

<sup>776</sup> Chickering, *Imperial Germany*, 143. Belinda Davis, *Home Fires Burning*, 152-55. As Davis has pointed out moreover, a great many hungry people refused public assistance, primarily because of the social stigma associated with it.

<sup>777</sup> See Elizabeth Tobin, “War and the Working Class: The Case of Düsseldorf 1914-1918,” *Central European History* 18, no. 3-4 (1985): esp. 276-278.

<sup>778</sup> Whalen, *Bitter Wounds*, 77.

distance between home and front raised endless complications. Navigating these difficulties was a frustrating and exceedingly lengthy task. This was true even for the most basic and direct forms of assistance – which were typically the kinds that soldiers turned to first. Sending home cash, for instance, could be a surprisingly complex operation. Soldiers often did not know how much they could send, because they did not know exactly how much they were entitled to. Enlisted men earned a small regular salary (about 16 Marks a month, which was less than the average wage of a domestic servant).

<sup>779</sup> Many also received some supplementary pay from their peacetime employer, their trade unions, or other local organizations or charities. The formulae for calculating support payments were extremely complicated, however. There were additions and deductions for all manner of contingencies (like home leave or special assignments), and the rates were constantly revised and updated, with the changes sometimes applied retroactively.<sup>780</sup> The army made some efforts to clarify the regulations. Bureaus were set up to handle soldiers' inquiries, and informational articles were published in magazines and newspapers.<sup>781</sup> Somehow, though, soldiers never seemed to have a clear idea about how much they were actually receiving. Payments would mysteriously increase or decrease, or simply cease, leaving soldiers little choice but to inspect the fine print again.<sup>782</sup> Actually sending money home proved to be another problem.

Sending money home via the post was risky. Cash could get easily “lost” in transit, or sent to the wrong address.<sup>783</sup> And later in the war, shortages of paper forced

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<sup>779</sup> Ziemann, *War Experiences*, 74.

<sup>780</sup> See BfZ, Wenzel, Feb 16. 1918.

<sup>781</sup> For instance, *Champagne-Kamerad*, no. 101 (18 Nov. 1917).

<sup>782</sup> BfZ, Wenzel, 23 Jan. 1918; 13 Jul. 1918.

<sup>783</sup> BfZ, Pfeffer, 15 Jul. 1918.



many units to suspend cash payments.<sup>784</sup> Transferring funds between bank accounts raised fewer problems. But relatively few families maintained personal saving accounts at that time.<sup>785</sup> And if they did, usually only the male head of household could make transactions. A soldier usually had to request special permission from the bank for his wife (or other family member) to be able to access the account.<sup>786</sup>

Sending home food and goods proved to be even more difficult. There was very little to be had for purchase in the occupied territories, as we have seen. If a man's family were in particularly dire straits, he might attempt to find some, but the process required a great deal of effort. Some visited every shop and market in a twenty-mile radius before they found anything to purchase.<sup>787</sup> The black-market held out greater prospects of success, but required even more effort. It often took some time to get in touch with "the right people;" while the black market operated widely behind the front, most dealers did not do business openly. In the lean summer of 1918, Paul Hanbrich set out to obtain American canned fish and other hard-to-find staples on the black market (through "secret means," as he told his wife). He eventually acquired them, but it took him a month to do so, and more time still to get them home. Because it was risky to send illegally obtained items through the regular post, he had to arrange to have them trans-shipped via a third address.<sup>788</sup> Other soldiers turned to their extended social networks, making deals with distant family or friends-of-friends. Sometimes these involved multiple separate transactions. One man sent cash to his aunt in the country, in exchange for goods which

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<sup>784</sup> BfZ, Ehlers, 20 Feb. 1918; BfZ, Pechthold, 79.

<sup>785</sup> Chickering, *Great War and Urban Life*, 205.

<sup>786</sup> BfZ, Mixed, letter to Gustav Schneider, 7 Nov. 1918.

<sup>787</sup> See for example BfZ, Ehlers, 16 Nov. 1917.

<sup>788</sup> BfZ, Hanbrich, 27 Jul. 1918; and 24 Aug. 1918.

he then forwarded to his wife.<sup>789</sup> Some oversaw an elaborate network of economic connections, involving half a dozen private parties and exchanges in cash and kind. Managing these networks required a tremendous amount of time and effort. Men sometimes wrote dozens of letters a month to their various trading partners, inquiring about what they had and what was needed.<sup>790</sup>

Soldiers continued to look for ways to offer material assistance to their families; yet most men found themselves serving less as a provider and more as an advisor and manager. Given their limited resources, and given the practical problems involved in sending them home, they could make only a minor contribution to the household economy. What was easier to provide, and what was just as important for the continued functioning of the household, was technical advice. Most families operated according to a relatively conservative division of labor. Most of the household chores were performed by women and children, while adult men were responsible for making strategic decisions, as well as performing most of the tasks outside the home – banking, making major purchases, interacting with public authorities, and so on.<sup>791</sup> When families lost their men to the draft, those who stepped in to fill their roles – whether wife, older child, or some other relation – often did not possess all of the necessary expertise to do the job. This was especially the case when the household economy was relatively complex, a family-run farm or business for instance. Those left to manage these enterprises needed a great deal of technical instruction to keep these running. Soldiers' efforts to advise their families also had to do with their own emotional needs. Men who had controlled the affairs of the

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<sup>789</sup> BfZ, Blecher, esp. 24 Jun. 1918; 6 Jun 1917; 2 Dec. 1917.

<sup>790</sup> A good example is offered in BfZ, Wenzel, especially from fall 1917.

<sup>791</sup> Angelika Schaser, "Gendered Germany," in *Imperial Germany, 1871-1918*, ed. James Retallack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 134-38

household could be unwilling to relinquish that control. Some feared that their family members would be unable to manage the household in their absence, leaving them nothing to return to after the war. Others could not conceive of a world in which control over the household was exercised by someone else; there were some men who quite clearly believed that “my wife can no longer live without me.”<sup>792</sup> Governing and providing for one’s family were central to their understanding of what it meant to be a man, and these duties did not diminish with their departure from the household.<sup>793</sup> If anything, they became more urgent. They felt that, because they were not physically present, they needed to make a more active effort to meet their responsibilities.

Managing the household *in absentia*, if technically feasible, required an enormous investment of time and effort. To make effective decisions on any particular matter, a man had to be informed about all the relevant details and circumstances. When he was at home, and actively engaged in its affairs, he became aware of these details as a matter of course, and often without any special effort. But when he was away, these details must be laboriously transcribed, and subsequently clarified and expanded upon, as the need arose. This was especially true in wartime, as legal and economic circumstances rapidly changed. To play any role at all in the household, soldiers had to completely immerse themselves in its details.

By way of illustrating these points, let us look more closely at the correspondence of Heinrich Lips.<sup>794</sup> Before the war, Heinrich and his wife Lina had operated a small business, growing and selling fruit and making associated products. When Heinrich was

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<sup>792</sup> BfZ, Schmidt, 18 Jul. 1917.

<sup>793</sup> For a discussion of this see George Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 144.

<sup>794</sup> The following discussion draws on BfZ, Lips.

called up in 1914, Lina was forced to operate the business on her own, while also caring for the couples' two young daughters. Not surprisingly, this proved to be a serious challenge for her. While Lina had been active in the business in peacetime, she seems to have been involved primarily in manual labor tasks. The strategic and logistical aspects of the business had been handled by Heinrich. And while the business was fairly small, the mechanics of its operations were quite complex. They grew a range of different produce – cherries, apples, pears – which were harvested at different times, and required different methods of cultivation and care. They also manufactured a number of different products (such as wine, preserves, and cakes), each of which was produced through a different process, requiring different equipment, materials, and labor. The costs of production, moreover, had to be continually weighed against expected revenues, which continually fluctuated, owing partly to inflation and price-controls. It seems that Lina often felt overwhelmed by these responsibilities. She constantly asks Heinrich technical questions relating to the business, and seems to be perpetually on the verge of collapse.<sup>795</sup> She frequently alludes to stress, sadness, and exhaustion. Duly alarmed, Heinrich composed lengthy replies to her queries.<sup>796</sup>

At the same time, Heinrich began to offer a good deal of unsolicited advice and instruction. In part, no doubt, he was simply trying to be helpful – to anticipate what his wife would have trouble with, and where she would need help. But it is difficult to avoid the suspicion that Heinrich's increasingly active role in the household is also connected to his notions about how the family should operate. While Heinrich's relationship with

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<sup>795</sup>BfZ, Lips, 28 May 1917.

<sup>796</sup>BfZ, Lips, 7 Jun. 1917.

his wife was usually supportive, it is clear that he was never entirely comfortable with the fact that Lina has taken over control of the household, and he often makes efforts to remind her about where the power really resides. He often made subtle criticisms of her decisions, or lamented that he was not on hand to have offered guidance – “unfortunate that I could not be home now,” as he once remarks, after taking issue with some small decision of hers.<sup>797</sup> When particularly important decisions were looming, he often instructed his wife to “let it be for now, until I can come home and discuss everything.”<sup>798</sup> He asked friends and relatives to look in on the household, and make sure everything was in good order. Heinrich’s efforts appeared to grow more urgent in the last year of the war, as Lina becomes more comfortable with her duties, and the new power arrangement threatened to become permanent. His tone grew more insistent. He makes demands rather than offering advice, even as he admitted that he could not keep up with all the relevant circumstances and regulations.<sup>799</sup> He also tended to make bolder decisions with less input, as if to insist that ultimate power rests with him. In September of 1918, he curtly instructed Lina to subscribe to the latest war loan in the amount of 500 Marks, without discussing the matter with her at all.<sup>800</sup> This was a major financial decision for a family with very limited cash assets, and given Germany’s current military situation, it was also a highly risky one. It is hard to believe that this decision, or at least the manner in which he made it known, had nothing to do with his anxieties over the balance of household power.

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<sup>797</sup> See for instance BfZ, Lips, 15 Oct. 1918.

<sup>798</sup> BfZ, Lips, 1 Oct. 1918.

<sup>799</sup> BfZ, Lips, 1 Oct. 1918.

<sup>800</sup> BfZ, Lips, 24 Sep. 1918.

Whatever his precise motives, it is plain to see that over the last years of the war, Heinrich becomes far more actively involved in the operations of the business and the household. Economic and technical questions grow to dominate his letters. He often composed lengthy missives devoted entirely to these subjects, running to five pages or more. He gave advice on a whole range of subjects, often in extraordinary detail. He discussed pricing, weather, harvesting, labor, production, pricing, regulations, legal matters, long-term strategy.<sup>801</sup> Nor did he simply dispense information. He actively questioned Lina, and constantly pressed her to write more frequently. “I can well imagine that you have a lot of work right now,” he sternly reminded her, “but we are both obligated to write often.”<sup>802</sup> As a practical matter, this arrangement was not very functional. Heinrich often found that the more questions he asked, the more that came up. In the fall of 1918, for instance, the two engaged in a lengthy debate over the pear crop – whether and how to store the fruit, where to sell it, and so on. Each time Heinrich proposes a course of action, Lina questions it, citing some new circumstance or regulation that he was not familiar with. (In several cases, for instance, he instructs Lina to sell at prices that are above the legal maximum). This prompts Heinrich to ask further questions. Exasperated, Heinrich finally abdicated responsibility for the matter. “With the pears you can do as you think best,” he wrote, along with the belated admission that “If a man is not himself there for it, he can give hardly any advice.”<sup>803</sup> This admission did little to change his relationship with Lina, however. He continued to ask for updates and issue orders until he was discharged from the army.

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<sup>801</sup> For instance BfZ, Lips, 4 Sep. 1917.

<sup>802</sup> BfZ, Lips, 21 Sep. 1918.

<sup>803</sup> BfZ, Lips, 1 Oct. 1918.

For soldiers with children in their care, the management of the household was even more difficult. Besides seeing to their physical welfare, they had to ensure that the child was raised and educated properly. While this was challenging under any circumstances, the war posed special difficulties. It strained the resources available for supervising children. Male family members were called into service, while remaining members faced rising workloads.<sup>804</sup> At the same time, supervisory agents outside the family were also under strain. The school day shrank, and days of instruction were cut, as instructors were drafted and schools ran short of fuel with which to heat classrooms.<sup>805</sup> As a result, many children spent long portions of their day unattended. This gave rise to widespread fears that children would fall into idleness and troublemaking – fears which were apparently confirmed by rising rates of juvenile crime.<sup>806</sup> A second and related problem, especially for older children, had to do with career-training and professional development. For adults, the war years were a period in which time seemed to stand still, when plans and ambitions were put on hold, to be resumed at some indeterminate point in the future. In the case of children, however, their lives could not simply be put on hold in this way. When the war was over, normal economic life would resume, and they would have to find their place in it. This meant that they would have to have an education of some kind. Yet pursuing an education was very difficult during the war.

Apprenticeships were difficult to find, with so many skilled tradesmen in the field

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<sup>804</sup> Richard Wall, "English and German Families in the War," in *The Upheaval of War: Family, Work, and Welfare in Europe, 1914-1918*, eds. Richard Wall and Jay Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), esp. 61-62.

<sup>805</sup> Chickering, *Imperial Germany*, 120-21.

<sup>806</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

or occupied in other tasks.<sup>807</sup> Teenagers, meanwhile, faced other demands on their time. They were pressured to join paramilitary or volunteer organizations, or (with the easing of child labor laws) to take jobs outside the home.<sup>808</sup> After the passage of the Auxiliary Service Act, some teenagers were conscripted into civilian labor units.<sup>809</sup>

Under ordinary circumstances, punishment and threats played a large role in making sure that children maintained the proper priorities. But a man who was absent from the household obviously could not punish a wayward child. Even threats of future punishment, coming from a man who returned home only at an interval of years (if ever), made little impression on the mind of a child. Men like Willi Frisch, who struggled to control his increasingly unruly son, found his threats routinely ignored. This continued even after he devised increasingly harsh punishments, threatening at one point to put his son under the guardianship of his hated headmaster.<sup>810</sup> Given these realities, most fathers attempted to work through less confrontational means, through closer and more regular supervision of their children's lives. Men arranged for copies of their children's report cards to be sent into the field.<sup>811</sup> More involved fathers had children send their assignments, so that they could review and correct them personally – an insane amount of extra work, which some fathers nevertheless scrupulously carried out.<sup>812</sup>

Very often, the family's various needs conflicted with each other, further complicating efforts to put the household in order. Such conflicts often came over matters

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<sup>807</sup> Ibid., 122-23, Jarausch, "German Students in the First World War"

<sup>808</sup> Andrew Dobson, *Youth in The Fatherless Land: War Pedagogy, Nationalism, and Authority in Germany, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); for examples, see Hoover, Abel, #200, #213, #226; BfZ, Pechthold, 411.

<sup>809</sup> Herwig, *The First World War*, 264; see also Hoover, Abel, #240.

<sup>810</sup> BfZ, Frisch, 29 Aug. 1917.

<sup>811</sup> BfZ, Frisch, 13 Jul. 1917.

<sup>812</sup> BfZ, Lips, 23 Sep. 1918.



of health. Increased work and declining nutrition led to a range of health problems.<sup>813</sup> Major illness was a particular worry in wartime, because most families were already stretched to the limit of their resources. With so many husbands and fathers away, the loss of another family member might well prove devastating to the household economy. With this in mind, many soldiers paid careful attention to matters of health. They constantly asked about how their loved ones were feeling. If a family member mentioned any minor ache or pain, soldiers inquired about it ceaselessly, until they were sufficiently assured that the matter was not serious.<sup>814</sup> Many asked for pictures, not to serve as momentos, but to look for signs of ill health.<sup>815</sup> Problems arose when soldiers took personal responsibility for the medical care of their family – as they often did, when they believed that there was something seriously amiss. Consider the case of one father, who began to fear that his young son was malnourished, and who personally took charge over the boy's diet. He insisted that his wife buy much greater quantities of potatoes, butter, and other high-calorie foods. His wife obliged, but fulfilling these demands put a heavy strain on the family budget, which was already stretched thin. This prompted her to write worried letters to her husband, who eventually came to reconsider his position.<sup>816</sup> More severe conflicts arose when soldiers prescribed far-reaching changes in lifestyle or daily routine. This happened between Fritz and his sister Wilhelmina, who wrote to each other daily. Despite her assurances to the contrary, Fritz became convinced that Wilhelmina was seriously ill, probably suffering from nervous exhaustion. He therefore insisted that

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<sup>813</sup> Wall, "English and German Families," 53-55.

<sup>814</sup> See for instance BfZ, Blecher, esp. from fall 1917 (27 Sep. 1917; 30 Sep. 1917; 15 Apr. 1917)

<sup>815</sup> BfZ, Schmidt, 14 Apr. 1918.

<sup>816</sup> See BfZ, Wenzel, 24 Aug. 1917; 18 Sep. 1917.

she give up most of her regular activities, and spend most of the day at rest.<sup>817</sup> While no doubt well intentioned, this was obviously impossible to implement, as Wilhelmina was responsible for running the household. This provoked some testy exchanges between the two, and prompted Fritz to demand ever more frequent reports on her health. He also began to write independently to her physician.<sup>818</sup>

While it was often family men who took the most active and direct role in household affairs, non-married soldiers performed similar duties. Some of them had already served as *de facto* head of household before the war, especially where their parents were elderly, or where one had passed away. Many more would take on additional responsibilities as a result of the war. When soldiers sent home pay to bolster the family's finances, they naturally acquired more of a voice in its decisions.<sup>819</sup> In other cases, their older brothers and fathers were also by called into service – by 1918, all males up to age 52 or 53 were theoretically liable for service. In these cases, new responsibilities fell on the younger members of the family. A good example of this is Otto Hilpert, whose father and elder brother were drafted early in the war, leaving him to care for his mother and see to the household, which was increasingly short of food and funds. When Otto himself was drafted in 1918, he continued to perform these duties, especially after his brother was wounded.<sup>820</sup>

Young soldiers also took on responsibilities outside of the family. Many of them were, if not married, still in serious relationships, within which economic and practical connections had begun to form. And even relatively casual relationships could take on

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<sup>817</sup> BfZ, Hübner, 2 Oct. 1918.

<sup>818</sup> BfZ, Hübner, 30 Oct. 1918; 23 Oct. 1918.

<sup>819</sup> See for instance BfZ, Ehlers, from Feb 1918.

<sup>820</sup> See BfZ, Hilpert correspondence.

economic functions, out of sheer necessity. This was the case with Willi and Eugenie, who had been acquaintances before the war, but who began a romantic relationship only in 1916, after Willi began sending her letters from the field. The relationship could not be called serious. Eugenie made no secret that she wanted to things to proceed slowly, repeatedly ignoring Willi's suggestions of an engagement.<sup>821</sup> Nevertheless, he steadily assumed a larger role in her day-to-day affairs. The teenage Eugenie had left her parents' home on bad terms, and scraped by as a domestic servant. To make ends meet, she sometimes had to ask Willi for money or other items – requests which he happily obliged.<sup>822</sup> Her tales of hardship also invited Willi to give her advice and suggestions. In particular, he became concerned about her difficult working conditions. He often raised questions on this subject, and repeatedly advised her to seek out other jobs.<sup>823</sup>

### **Emotional Connections**

Soldiers' effort to maintain an active role in the management of the household tied them to their families in a practical sense. They spent hours reading and writing letters, informing themselves about the conditions at home, laying plans, giving advice, and performing other minor tasks. At the same time, soldiers were tied to the family at an inner and emotional level. The family increasingly weighed on their emotional life, and dominated their conscious thinking. The emotional connection between home and front was, in part, bound up with the practical and material problems faced by the household,

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<sup>821</sup> BfZ, Ehlers, 11 May 1917.

<sup>822</sup> BfZ, Ehlers, 16 Nov. 1917.

<sup>823</sup> See BfZ, Ehlers, 10 Mar 1917; 5 Oct 1917.

as the above discussion has already begun to suggest. The more deeply that they were involved with those problems, the more that those problems weighed on their minds. Emotional ties also flowed from the general problems of war and soldiering. Soldiers simply missed their loved ones, from whom they were separated for long stretches. And faced with the terrors of battle, they leaned on their families for emotional support.

These emotional bonds tended to become stronger with time. In the earlier phases of the war, the emotional relationship between soldier and civilian was to some extent limited by the practical constraints under which it was carried on. One set of constraints was imposed by the style and format of the letter itself. The letter was a relatively formal method of communication. Schoolmasters and epistolary manuals urged writers to strike the correct “tone,” alternatively described as “pleasant,” “conciliatory,” and benevolent.<sup>824</sup> They were therefore to avoid any potentially inappropriate or controversial topic. As a fundamentally literary mode of expression, moreover, letters were expected to possess a level of polish and craftsmanship well beyond that of a face-to-face conversation. Even letters between friends were written in proper German – avoiding colloquialisms, often in the formal register, and peppered with literary phrases that would never be used in ordinary speech.<sup>825</sup> Many writers found it difficult to express personal thoughts in such a formal manner.

Other writers restrained themselves for fear of upsetting their correspondents – what is usually referred to as “self-censorship.”<sup>826</sup> Such filtering occurs in all

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<sup>824</sup> Baasner, *Briefkultur*, 14-15.

<sup>825</sup> See, for example, BfZ, Hecker, 15 Oct. 1915.

<sup>826</sup> Self-censorship in soldiers' letters has been widely discussed. The strongest position is offered by Becker and Audoin Rouzeau. They argue that, in their letters, soldiers are likely to imaginatively construct a war experience which is likely to be very different from their actual experiences. (14-18, 53-58). More

communication, but it is particularly prevalent in wartime. When individuals are faced with difficult circumstances, their relatives understandably try to avoid upsetting topics. In Germany (as in other belligerents) the state and the military aimed to encourage self-censorship, by explicitly connecting it to issues of national security. Since German soldiers were defending the country from attack, it was the duty of civilians to sustain their morale and willingness to fight. The government produced pamphlets and articles, exhorting Germans to write “strong, cheerful letters” to those in the field, and to refrain from “letters of complaint.”<sup>827</sup> Soldiers were pushed to adopt similar practices. They were given “correct letters” to emulate, in soldiers’ newspapers and in published collections of letters. These began to appear as early as 1916, and while they cited real letters, the contents were heavily edited to highlight patriotism and optimism.<sup>828</sup>

Operating under such constraints, many soldiers produced letters which were highly formal and of limited substance. They have the appearance (to contemporary eyes, at any rate) of a polite and anodyne conversation between acquaintances. Such letters tend to be highly formulaic. They will often repeat, verbatim, whole sentences or series of sentences from one letter to the next. One young man, for instance, began all of his letters in exactly the same fashion: “My sweet *Liebchen*, I would once again like to share a few words with you. Hopefully it is going well with you, which is also the case with

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balanced positions are offered by Prost and Winter (*Great War in History*, 104-106), and Klaus Latzel, “Vom Kriegserlebnis zur Kriegserfahrung: Theoretische und methodische Ueberlegung zur erfahrungsgeschichtlichen Untersuchung von Feldpostbriefen,” *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen* 56 (1997). As I argue below, self-censorship breaks down to some extent over the course of the war.

<sup>827</sup> Hämmerle, “You Let a Weeping Woman,” 156-57; Nelson, *German Soldiers’ Newspapers*, 166-67.

<sup>828</sup> Hämmerle, “You Let a Weeping Woman,” 155-56; also Miriam Dobson, “Letters,” in *Reading Primary Sources: The Interpretation of Texts from 19th and 20th Century History*, eds. Miriam Domson and Benjamin Ziemann (London: Routledge, 2009), 62-63.

me.”<sup>829</sup> While these letters could be quite lengthy, they often treated with only a tiny handful of subjects: the minor comings and goings of mutual friends, the painstaking recording of past correspondences. Many soldiers, like the young man above, say little about their own experiences, or about the war. These exchanges, especially those between lovers, are often affectionate, yet contain little palpable emotion. Feelings are expressed through stock phrases (often drawn from romantic literature) and over-inflated rhetoric – for instance “my good and much beloved *Liebchen*, it makes me extremely sad that I cannot fulfill your request.”<sup>830</sup> Darker and more intense emotions – anxiety, fear, pain, sadness, lust – were simply never mentioned. This makes such correspondences seem, if not insincere, somewhat wooden and restrained.

As soldiers spent more time at the front, the constraints on expression began to break down; the relationship between soldiers and their families become more involved and emotionally charged. In part, no doubt, soldiers simply became more comfortable with the medium and more comfortable expressing themselves.<sup>831</sup> This process of adjustment is visible in various ways. In many correspondences, for instance, we see how soldiers gradually depart from the traditional format of the letter – inserting non-traditional elements that suit their particular needs and wishes. They would include drawings, short stories, jokes, or poems of their own composition.<sup>832</sup> More than anything else, however, soldiers’ willingness to speak more openly about their problems stemmed

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<sup>829</sup> BfZ, Blecher, most entries before summer 1917.

<sup>830</sup> BfZ, Blecher, 28 May 1917.

<sup>831</sup> In the later stages of many correspondences, we see soldiers experimenting with format. Men who once had trouble giving voice to any personal thought began to include drawings, short stories, jokes or poems of their own composition (one of the astonishing features of wartime correspondence was the outpouring of popular poetry and fiction).

<sup>832</sup> For a good example, see BfZ, Geidel, esp. 24 Jul. 1917. According to one estimate, tens of thousands of soldier’s poems were written each day. Fritzsche, “The Archive,” 22.

from a desire for emotional support. In difficult circumstances, soldiers wanted to discuss their troubles with others. They wanted their sacrifices to be heard, validated, justified, and commended; they wanted complain and commiserate.<sup>833</sup> These desires ultimately overwhelmed their inclination to shield their audience from the realities of front life. For this kind of support, soldiers turned particularly to their families. They could of course, complain to the other men in their unit, and they very often did so, as we will see in the next chapter. But when it came to more personal subjects – fears, anxieties, weaknesses – men usually felt more comfortable talking to family than comrades. These were the people they had known their whole lives, with whom they had long-established emotional relationships, and with whom they felt safe revealing personal information. In particularly lonely moments, soldiers would often make these points explicitly. One infantryman, pining for his wife, observed that “She alone can completely understand me, and appreciate my feelings and thoughts.”<sup>834</sup>

Soldiers sought out the support of their families for some matters in particular. Some of their most intense feelings revolved around their separation from loved ones, whether parents, wives, children, or siblings. Many of the young men drafted into the army over the last half of the war had never been away from home for any significant

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<sup>833</sup> Many have noted the ubiquity of complaint among soldiers. See for instance Richard Holmes, *Acts of War: The Behavior of Men in Battle* (New York: MacMillan, 1985), 125-26. And it is usually argued that complaint constitutes a kind of “safety valve” – a way in which the negative emotions produced by the hardships of military life can be harmlessly expressed. (For instance, Michael A.E. White, “The Psychology of the Soldier,” *Journal of the Military Service Institution of the United States* 60 (1917), 386. Micheal Roper, studying the letters of British officers, makes a similar point. He writes “traumatic experiences, illness, or generally low spirits intensified men’s desire for letters. The moment at which morale was lowest was that in which they most needed the image of home to be renewed.” “‘Maternal Relations:’ Moral Manlinenss and Emotional Survival in Letters Home During the First World War,” in *Masculinities in Politics and War: Rewritings of Modern History*, eds. Stefan Dudink, Karen Hagemann, and John Tosh (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 301.

<sup>834</sup> DTA, 1221, 26 May 1918.

period of time. And there were very few, even among the older men, who were accustomed to being away from home for years at a time. By 1918, some men had been in the army two or three years; a few unfortunate souls, men who were doing their military training when the war broke out, had been in the army since 1912.<sup>835</sup> Prolonged separation sometimes involved fears of abandonment or sexual infidelity. This was especially the case when circumstances required women to be in close contact with other men – for instance, when women worked in factories or firms outside the home, or on farms alongside male prisoners of war.<sup>836</sup> We see these feelings clearly in the letters of one soldier, who harbored strong reservations about his wife’s plan to seek employment as a housemaid. He wrote to her, “about your position as a housemaid, I have a definite aversion to your being alone. I don’t know this man, and you have not told me any details about him.”<sup>837</sup> In most cases, though, fears of infidelity do not appear to have been paramount. Soldiers simply missed their families terribly. And they sought some measure of relief by sharing their feelings with those that they missed.

Take the case of Jakob and Lina, who had been romantically involved for some time when Jakob was drafted in 1915. In the early days of their correspondence, Jakob is affectionate, often assuring Lina that “I am thinking of you”. But he generally assumes a cheerful tone, and rarely indicates that their separation causes him pain. Discussion of their separation is invariably coupled with optimistic estimates about his next home leave, and with gentle reminders against “unnecessary thoughts.” Slowly, however, his writing becomes more emotionally charged. The depth of his longings comes across more

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<sup>835</sup> For an example of this, see BfZ, Hübner correspondence.

<sup>836</sup> See BfZ, Ehlers, 18 Jan. 1918.

<sup>837</sup> BfZ, Wenzel, 13 May 1918.



clearly, and sexual overtones creep in. By 1917, he writes her, “I often dream of being able to pass the time of you... I think often of those sublime moments when it was sweet to live.”<sup>838</sup> By 1918, his missives have become almost desperate. He writes “I think about you every moment my love,” and “I simply can’t think about you enough in the field.”<sup>839</sup> When her letters fail to arrive on time, it is a “misery.” Darker subjects enter into his writing as well. He reveals that he carries her letters with him into battle (despite strict rules against this practice), and that he carries a letter addressed to her, to be sent in the event of his death. Recounting some terrifying hours spent under fire, he write “I thought only of you.”<sup>840</sup> More than once, he makes explicit pleas for them to share their feelings more openly. “You can express your sadness to me,” he assures her.<sup>841</sup>

Perhaps even more than the pangs of separation, soldiers leaned on their families to cope with their fear of death. Much of the preceding discussion has been concerned with soldiers’ concerns about the practical problems of the household. But for most soldiers, the central and inescapable feature of their wartime experience was combat, and the central feature of their emotional life was fear for their personal safety. Soldiers in every war no doubt experience such fears. Yet given the nature of the fighting on the Western Front, especially at the end of the war, these fears gripped German soldiers with a particular intensity. As we have seen already, the German army suffered very heavy casualties throughout the war. Combat units routinely lost up to half of their personnel in a single engagement. No comprehensive casualty statistics were published during the war, of course. But for soldiers in the front lines, it did not take long to realize that the

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<sup>838</sup> BfZ, Blecher, 17 Aug. 1917.

<sup>839</sup> BfZ, Blecher, 3 Nov. 1918; 9-10 Jun. 1918.

<sup>840</sup> BfZ, Blecher, 28 Sep. 1918.

<sup>841</sup> BfZ, Blecher, Sep. 1919.

costs of combat were inevitably severe. If most soldiers clung to the hope that they would somehow be spared,<sup>842</sup> the rational part of their mind acknowledged that the odds were squarely against them. Some soldiers openly discussed their prospects – men like Karl Stein, who wrote to his wife “it is terrible to think [of how many have died]... I no longer hope to return home safely.”<sup>843</sup> Other men, if they did not discuss the likelihood of death, nevertheless made active preparations for it. When headed into battle, they made sure to carry their army issue identity tags, and many also carried papers which listed the names and addresses of their close kin.<sup>844</sup> Often they inventoried their personal effects; particularly treasured items – a medal or a family photograph – might be sent home before a battle, or passed off to another for safe-keeping.<sup>845</sup> And in one way or another, most men said goodbye to friends and family. Many sent “farewell letters” before a battle, containing words of parting.<sup>846</sup> Others kept such letters on their person, to be sent in the event of their death. Some simply said a silent goodbye in the moments before action.<sup>847</sup>

In the earliest parts of their correspondences, many soldiers said nothing about these fears, or about the battlefield conditions that gave rise to them. They concealed these fears even more rigorously than they did other unpleasant topics. Many letters say literally nothing at all about the fighting; but for the date, one might read them and never suspect that they were written during a war. Soldiers, no doubt, were afraid of upsetting

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<sup>842</sup> Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, 100-106.

<sup>843</sup> MKB, Stein, 6 Jun. 1918.

<sup>844</sup> For a reference to this common practice, see Jünger, *Storm of Steel*, 185.

<sup>845</sup> BfZ, Ehlers, 14 Apr. 1918.

<sup>846</sup> DTA, Viktor, 19 Mar. 1916.

<sup>847</sup> BfZ, Blecher, 1 Jul. 1917.

their audience , especially female audience.<sup>848</sup> But here again, soldiers restraint could not be maintained. They felt an overpowering urge to talk about these dangers of the battlefield, even though they knew quite well that their readers would find such accounts disturbing. Paul Hanbrich, in the conclusion to a lengthy letter detailing the horrors of the trenches, provides a good illustration of this impulse. He writes, “if you, appalled, ask me ‘why do you tell me [these things]?’ I can only answer that, whatever is in the heart, so goes the pen.”<sup>849</sup> It seems likely that the simple act of describing these events provided them with some measure of relief, some level of control over their memories.<sup>850</sup>

The change in language tended to occur quite quickly, most often after a period of difficult fighting. Consider the correspondence of Hugo Frick, who was a second-semester law student at the University of Tübingen when he was drafted in 1914. Throughout the first years of the war, Frick’s letters say almost nothing about fighting. He spends most of his time complaining about his commanding officers, and the petty authoritarianism which prevails throughout military life. But then Frick is transferred from the artillery to the infantry, and is posted to the southern sector of the Western Front, where his unit sees extensive action. Almost overnight, the tone of his letters changes completely. The routine grousing of earlier days is replaced by extended meditations on danger and death. For long periods, in fact, his letters speak about little else. At one point, he speaks about his own death in a ten consecutive letters. He describes the “terrible strain and fear of death that we are undergoing.” Elsewhere he tells his wife not to cry if he should suffer the “damned heroes’ death,” and muses that “this

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<sup>848</sup> There are many cases in which a soldier will describe the same incident differently to male and female correspondents. See for instance BfZ, Hilpert, 25 Jul. 1917.

<sup>849</sup> BfZ, Hanbrich, 26 May 1918.

<sup>850</sup> M. Dobson, “Letters,” 62.

life cannot be held on to for long, and as for me – the good Lord alone knows.”<sup>851</sup> He later adds “whoever survives this war with unbroken bones is in God’s protection.”<sup>852</sup> His letters feature lengthy discussion on the nature of modern war, which he variously characterizes as “mutual destruction,” “human bestiality,” and a “war of technological force.”<sup>853</sup> He includes detailed discussions on modern weaponry and their effects, concluding that “frail human kind” is powerless against these devices.<sup>854</sup> Men of a less sensitive disposition would describe these subjects in even greater detail. It is not uncommon to find letters which give detailed descriptions of the most appalling incidents – burning airmen leaping from planes, dismembered animals, “cartloads of dead, all with their heads torn off.”<sup>855</sup>

While soldiers sought out the emotional support of civilians, civilians also sought out the support of soldiers. To some extent, these two processes were parallel. As time went on, civilians – like soldiers – were less able to bear their difficulties in silence, and spoke more openly about them. But these processes were also linked to each other. As soldiers talked more candidly about their battlefield experiences, civilians grew more worried about them. From the outbreak of war, of course, civilians had worried about the safety of their friends and family in the field.<sup>856</sup> These fears became more acute later on in the war. Civilians gradually became much more aware of the magnitude of the casualties being suffered on the battlefield. They read endless streams of obituaries

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<sup>851</sup> BfZ, Frick, 9 Oct 1916; 4 Apr. 1916.

<sup>852</sup> BfZ, Frick, 17 Jan. 1917.

<sup>853</sup> BfZ, Frick, Jun.-Jul 1916 entries.

<sup>854</sup> BfZ, Frick, Oct 3-4 1916.

<sup>855</sup> MKB, Stein, 9 Mar. 1918; BfZ, Maute, 8 Aug. 1916.

<sup>856</sup> See for instance Verhey, *Spirit of 1914*, 58-71.

published in local newspapers and church bulletins.<sup>857</sup> They began to notice the increasing number of war-invalids on the street, and the constant flow of wounded through local hospitals and train stations.<sup>858</sup> Through everyday talk and gossip, they could see the number of men that their own neighborhoods and communities had lost.<sup>859</sup> And when they began to realize what was really happening what was happening on the battlefield, it was too much for them to bear in silence. They began to open up about their fears and seek reassurance from soldiers.

This happened in the Reckart family, whose son Heinrich was drafted early in the war. In the summer 1916, Heinrich was involved in fighting on the Somme, and his once-boyish letters grew darker. He began to include graphic depictions of the carnage, punctuated by a particularly vivid account of wounded Germans left to die on the battlefield.<sup>860</sup> All this was too much for his mother and sister, especially after another boy from their neighborhood was killed. Shortly thereafter, Heinrich's sister wrote to him: "Dear Brother! Write us at once and tell us where you are, and how you are doing and how it is there. We are very worried about you, we have no peace day or night, and mother will not let herself be comforted."<sup>861</sup> The relentlessness of worry was a particularly common theme in civilian correspondences. There are many in which this point is endlessly reiterated, as in Gretchen Schmidt's letters to her brother. Hardly a

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<sup>857</sup> Churches and other organizations often published lists of their members who had fallen. So for instance HSA-St, M77/1, Bü 457, issues of "Warte vom Heuchelberg: Kirchliches Monatsblatt der Gemeinde Grossgartach;" When a loved one died, it was also standard practice to place in obituary in the local paper (for those who had the means), or to send notices to friends and family via the post. For an example, see BfZ, from May 1918. For a study of this phenomenon, see Chickering, *Great War and Urban Life*, 325-31.

<sup>858</sup> See comments by Swope, *Inside the German Empire*, 336; Many military wounded were transported to hospitals back in Germany, or to civilian buildings transformed into military wards. This was always marked by the local population. See Hoover, Hansen, *Fra Krigstiden*, 16 Apr. 1918.

<sup>859</sup> For instance BfZ, Pollet, 13 May 1917.

<sup>860</sup> BfZ, Reckart, Jul. 1916.

<sup>861</sup> BfZ, Reckart, 15. Dec. 1916.

week goes by that she does not remind her brother “but for you one has no peace by night or day.”<sup>862</sup> These fears did not fade over time. They became rather a permanent feature of these exchanges. Like the Reckarts, countless families kept constant tabs on the movement of their loved ones. They incessantly pressed them about their precise location, though they knew soldiers were prohibited from revealing such information, and even developed codes to sneak it past the censors.<sup>863</sup> They likewise pressed their loved ones for detailed information about their current assignments, distance to the front, time in the lines, and anticipated actions.<sup>864</sup>

The emotional connections between home and front became denser as soldiers came to play this double role. They were both seeking comfort and, as families became more worried about them, providing it. For many men, this was an unfamiliar and sometimes awkward role. It nevertheless was one which they did everything in their power to fulfill. Typical are the sentiments of one soldier, who reminded his sister “I do my utmost to put you at ease, which you already know, because I understand your situation only too well.”<sup>865</sup> Soldiers scrupulously answered their families’ questions about where they were and what they were doing. They regularly asked after their family’s emotional state – often taking the opportunity to caution against “brooding” or “pointless worry.”<sup>866</sup> They also took great pains to write home during or after combat, to let family members know that they had survived unharmed. Without these assurances, (“signs of life,” as they were called) civilians were left in a state of agonizing uncertainty. Soldiers

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<sup>862</sup> BfZ, Schmidt, 5 Aug. 1917.

<sup>863</sup> BfZ, Hübner, 7 Oct. 1918.

<sup>864</sup> See BfZ, Lips, end materials.

<sup>865</sup> BfZ, Hübner, 23 Oct. 1918.

<sup>866</sup> BfZ, Blecher, 18 May 1918.

knew this quite well; indeed they often referred to it explicitly. They would often begin their letters by noting “you are probably anxious to have any news,” or “now you will want to know how it is going with me.”<sup>867</sup> If they sensed that their families were on the edge of despair, they tried to provide them with some reason for optimism. This was difficult, given the circumstances, but soldiers did the best they could. They would point to the power of “God’s protection,” or remind their readers that “I have always been lucky in the past.”<sup>868</sup>

Many soldiers reached the point where their emotional relationships with family dominated their conscious thinking – they literally could not think of anything else. This is a very common theme in soldiers’ correspondences. They constantly assure their families that they think of them “day and night,” “every day,” “every hour,” “every moment,” and “always.”<sup>869</sup> “I simply can’t think of you enough,” another man writes to his young lover.<sup>870</sup> Many found that thoughts of family trouble them during the night. This includes men like Fritz Geidel, who confessed to his girlfriend “child, I sleep so poorly... every night I lay awake for hours, and my thoughts are with you.”<sup>871</sup> Those who could fall asleep often found that they dreamt of home. In waking hours, they found that almost everything reminded them of home. One man finds, for instance, that the birthday present sent by his sweetheart was “always a reminder of you.” A sunny day, or a beautiful scene, only made them wish that the moment could be shared with loved

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<sup>867</sup> BfZ, Lips, 6 Aug 1917; 9 Aug 1917.

<sup>868</sup> BfZ, Frick, 7 Jan 1917.

<sup>869</sup> BfZ, Geidel, 13 Apr 1918; BfZ, Herman, 7 Sep. 1914; BfZ, Geidel, 13 Nov. 1916; BfZ, Blecher, 2 Oct. 1917, 3 Nov. 1918.

<sup>870</sup> BfZ, Blecher, 9-10 Jun. 1917.

<sup>871</sup> BfZ, Geidel, 13 Oct. 1917.

ones.<sup>872</sup> Even a glance at the clock could draw their thoughts back home, as they imagined what their families might be doing at that moment.<sup>873</sup> Some men ceased even trying to keep their minds on the present, and retreated entirely into thoughts of home. They would read and reread old letters, taking note of the smallest detail, in an effort to feel closer to loved ones.<sup>874</sup> Or they would imaginatively reconstruct their homes, or some happy moment from their past. Often these reconstructions could be exceedingly elaborate, as in the case of one young soldier, who often returned in thought to his family's cottage. He recalled every familiar detail "the cellar door, the staircase, the dog roses, the edge of the forest, the Kuhberg."<sup>875</sup>

The emotional intensity of the home-front connection is perhaps most visible in the actual practice of correspondence – that is, the ways in which soldiers read and wrote letters. Soldiers constantly exhorted their families to write as often as possible (preferably every day), citing the extent to which their emotional well-being rested upon regular contact with home. "As I have often mentioned," one soldier writes, "it makes things much easier for me if I know things are going well at home."<sup>876</sup> Others put the matter more directly. "You can't imagine how anxiously I wait to see a few dear words from you," a young private writes.<sup>877</sup> The daily arrival of the postal wagon was awaited with an almost unbearable sense of longing. "It is the only friend one has," one man mused; "the whole day long one thinks of the post."<sup>878</sup> If an expected letter did not arrive,

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<sup>872</sup> See BfZ, Lips, 28 July 1917; BfZ, Wenzel, 4 May 1918.

<sup>873</sup> BfZ, Lips, 26 Aug. 1917.

<sup>874</sup> See for instance BfZ, Wenzel, 5 July 1917.

<sup>875</sup> BfZ, Geidel, 8 Feb. 1918.

<sup>876</sup> BfZ, Wenzel, 6 Apr. 1918.

<sup>877</sup> BfZ, Ehlers, 16 Feb. 1917.

<sup>878</sup> BfZ, Lips, 20 Apr. 1917.



soldiers became depressed and irritable. And if nothing arrived for a period of days, they could become severely depressed. Some composed angry rebukes to the (ostensibly) negligent party, like Karl Stein, who wrote to his family: “Do you have no time to write, or are the letters not arriving? I assume that it is the latter, otherwise I would be very angry, because the life here has come to despair and it is a miracle that one doesn’t go mad.”<sup>879</sup> Other men issued pathetic or hysterical pleas for mercy. Such pleas are rife in the correspondence of Willi and Eugenie, like the following, from a letter in February of 1918: “You have not answered my letters this month, or my birthday letter. Why you have done this Eugenie, is inexplicable to me. Your last letter is dated the 6<sup>th</sup> of February, today is the 23<sup>rd</sup>! Eugenie, it is heartless of you. I would not do it to you, since I love you so much...”<sup>880</sup>

Soldiers composed letters as fanatically as they consumed them. By all accounts, soldiers enjoyed writing letters. It allowed them to anticipate future replies, and (more importantly) to feel closer to their correspondents – for a few moments, to feel as if they were in conversation with them.<sup>881</sup> Soldiers used every opportunity to write, especially later in the war, when soldiers had less leisure time and had to work harder to find free moments. Soldiers could often be found composing letters while on watch (though this was strictly forbidden), or during rest hours, with the aid of a flashlight.<sup>882</sup> Soldiers found time to write even while in combat. Indeed, one often finds letters written by men in the most difficult and hopeless circumstances—men pinned down under enemy bombardment, or surrounded and unable to escape. Confronted with the likelihood of

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<sup>879</sup> MK-B, Stein, 15 Apr. 1918.

<sup>880</sup> BfZ, Ehlers, 23 Feb. 1918.

<sup>881</sup> See BfZ Lips, 13 Aug. 1917.

<sup>882</sup> BfZ, Geidel, 5 Aug. 1917; BfZ, Ehlers, end materials.

their own death, their thoughts are drawn above all to family and home. Most such letters make this point explicitly. They nearly always revolve around the message that, “my last thoughts are of you.”<sup>883</sup>

The dominance of the home-front connection shaped and colored the soldiers’ other social connections. We can see, for instance, that soldiers often avoided the company of their comrades in order to read and write letters to family.<sup>884</sup> For others, family occupied such a large part of their minds that they were simply uninterested in socializing with others. A particularly clear illustration of this emotional withdrawal can be found in the correspondence of two young lovers. The soldier writes to his love that “I am sitting here, after hard duty, at a shaky table in a steamy hall, surrounded by a lively group of ‘comrades.’ But nothing takes my interest, neither the empty conversation, nor the newest tune on the harmonica. Where my thoughts are, I do not need to tell you.”<sup>885</sup> As such feelings became more common, the social life of the unit could be affected. In some units, men did not speak to each other more than necessary, and even recreational activities became a kind of annoying obligation.<sup>886</sup> This is precisely what happened in one company, where according to the description offered by one of its members “the main question each day is what is for dinner and is there a letter for me. There is no longer interest in anything else.”<sup>887</sup> Where some level of normal social interaction persisted, that interaction often revolved around home and family. Soldiers would often sit together while they wrote letters of home. And when they talked with each other, their

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<sup>883</sup> BfZ, Hermann, Sep 7 1914.

<sup>884</sup> BfZ, Blecher, 25 Oct. 1917.

<sup>885</sup> BfZ, Geidel, 6 Dec. 1916.

<sup>886</sup> See DTA, 402.3, 20 Feb. [1918].

<sup>887</sup> BfZ, Wenzel, 5 Jul. 1917.

conversation focused on domestic topics – children, work, marriage.<sup>888</sup> Even discussions on unrelated topics were very often linked to domestic concerns. Debates about the end of the war, for instance, slid into discussions about career and family plans in the post-war world.<sup>889</sup>

From one angle, the persistence of familial ties can appear surprising. Soldiers and their families were separated by vast physical distances, for long periods of time. It was also true (as the war novelists argued) that their daily lives were vastly different from one another. But such a view tends to underestimate the broader social forces which knit the family together. Family ties were grounded in a lifetime of shared experiences and references. They served a variety of practical functions, both material and emotional – functions which only took on a greater importance during the difficult war years. The family, moreover, was embedded into a host of larger structures and networks, which served only to further cement ties among members. From this perspective, the persistence of family connections is not surprising at all. How these ties effected the larger functioning of the army is a more complex issue. In the years before the war, military authorities generally argued that the maintenance of a strong connection between home and front would sustain the army's will to fight. This prediction was partially borne out, but not for the reasons that military experts had assumed. On the whole, the flow of information between home and front *increased* opposition to the war; it gave soldiers a clearer view of the costs involved in waging the war, and how those costs were paid by those they held dear. At the same time, however, ties between soldiers and civilians

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<sup>888</sup> See for instance DTA 260, 4 Oct. 1918.

<sup>889</sup> BfZ, Lips, 13 Oct. 1918.

*decreased* the chances that opposition could be transformed into collective action against the war. Soldiers became absorbed in the problems of their household, and less able to see the war as a problem which soldiers had a common interest in solving. As we will see in the next chapter, some sense of common identity did develop among the rank and file. For many reasons, however, this was an identity which was not at all suited to collective action.

## Chapter 7: Communities of Suffering

On a hot day in June of 1918, a crowd of German soldiers began to assemble at a railway station behind the lines. These men were part of a contingent of replacement troops headed for the front lines in Champagne. There they were to be incorporated into the 242<sup>nd</sup> Division, which had suffered heavy losses during the last of the German offensives on the Western Front. Among the crowd were some new recruits – mostly men from the draft class of 1919, eighteen and nineteen year olds. Most of the others were men who were returning to service after having been wounded. A good many of these had been wounded during the *Michael* operation (in which the 242<sup>nd</sup> divisions was nearly wiped out), and who were being pressed back into service after only a few weeks of rest. The transports, as usual, were very late. As they waited, the men grew increasingly restless. There were loud calls for the unit to be granted home leave, followed by shouts of “revolution!” Some men took off their packs, and indicated that they did not intend to board the trains. As the unit’s officers attempted to restore order, men in the crowd brandished their rifles. Some began firing shots in the air.

The situation seemed set to explode. The local authorities had only a handful of men on hand to deal with any disorder – units embarked on troop transports travelled with only a fraction of their regular complement of officers. And the station was crowded that day. The railway lines were jammed with traffic as the action on the Western Front reached their climax. Dozens of different units were passing through, or waiting to board their trains. Like the *Ersatzmänner* of the 242<sup>nd</sup> division, most of these men were headed straight to the front, or belonged to units shattered in the recent fighting. They were in no

cheerful mood. There was every reason to believe that the emergent riot would spread to these men as well. This is more or less exactly what had happened, dozens of times over, in the French Army only months before. Minor disturbances at train stations and staging points behind the lines rapidly escalated into “mutinies” involving whole regiments or divisions.<sup>890</sup> In the event, of course, events took a different turn. Soldiers from nearby units made no effort to join the rioters. And with no support from the outside, the crowd’s energy waned within a few hours. After a brief period of negotiation, the men of the 242<sup>nd</sup> division were persuaded to board their trains and reached their destination without further incident.<sup>891</sup> A thorough search of the army’s record reveals a handful of other incidents of collective indiscipline in the ranks.<sup>892</sup> And every one ends the same way. The initial outburst of disobedience remains confined to a single unit, and after a short time discipline is restored.

Our discussion so far has focused largely on the conditions necessary for these initial acts of collective resistance to occur. It has focused particularly on links of trust and familiarity among soldiers, without which (as I argued in Chapter 3), men would not join together to challenge the authorities. But the initial act of resistance is only the first step on the road towards the formation of a broader resistance movement. So long as resistance remains confined to a single unit, as the example of the 242<sup>nd</sup> division shows, it can still be contained by authorities without much difficulty. Only if acts of resistance

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<sup>890</sup> See Smith, *Between Mutiny and Obedience*, 179-87.

<sup>891</sup> Account of this event is contained in the division’s court records. HSA-St, M1/7, Bü 307, June 1918. Details about the division’s movements are drawn partly from US War Dept. Intelligence Service, *Histories of the Two Hundred and Fifty-one Divisions of the German Army which Participated in the War (1914-1918)* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1920), 739-741.

<sup>892</sup> The number of incidents of which we have any record is quite small. For the most thorough consideration of this point, see Strachan, “The Morale of the German Army.”

spreads rapidly to other units, as in the French army, will it constitute a serious challenge to the system.

How and why resistance spreads is more than a question of interests. For the broader community of soldiers to join in these acts, it is not enough that they agree with its general goals. They must also believe that the act itself is legitimate, that it is directed at the proper targets, and that it is at least potentially efficacious. And consensus on these points can emerge only if the broader community shares certain basic assumptions about how the world works. Social scientists and labor historians sometimes describe this set of assumptions as a “mobilizing ideology” or “collective consciousness.”<sup>893</sup> A central element of this consciousness is a shared understanding about the way the social and political world is structured – how power is distributed, and what the relationship among different groups is like. It will also include understandings about the group’s identity and values. What does it mean to be a member of the group, what is the group’s position in the larger social order, and what are the expectations and opportunities that flow from that position? The specific contents of a group’s collective consciousness will define the possibilities for action – that is, it will define the range of actions of which the group’s members can conceive. The connection between collective action and collective consciousness is often illustrated with examples drawn from labor history. Suppose we

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<sup>893</sup> For a discussion of collective consciousness in historical context, see Roger Gould, *Insurgent Identities: Class, Community, and Protest in Paris from 1848 to the Commune* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), 14-15; Marc Steinberg, *Fighting Words: Working-class Formation, Collective Action, and Discourse in Early Nineteenth-century England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 15-16. For a modern social science perspective, see Alberto Melucci, *Nomads of the Present: Social Movements and Individual Needs in Contemporary Society* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), and idem. “The Symbolic Challenge of Contemporary Movements,” *Social Research* 52, no. 4 (Winter 1985). Some sociologists prefer the allied concepts of “frames.” William Gamson, *Talking Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); David Snow and Robert Benford, “Master Frames and Cycles of Protest,” in *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, eds. Aldon D. Morris and Carol McClurg Mueller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

compare two groups of workers. One believes that the social structure is subject to revision, and that they themselves are the fore-ordained instruments of that revision. The other sees the established powers as too powerful to displace, and therefore conceives of the social structure as largely static. Even if the two groups are identical with respect to every objective social and economic measurement, they will think very differently about the possibilities for responding to their situation.

This chapter will attempt to sketch out how this collective consciousness developed within the German army. What we shall see, in general terms, is that this consciousness assumed a particularly negative form. Soldiers conceived of themselves as powerless to change the circumstances in which they lived. Here and there, a different sort of consciousness could emerge; the ebb and flow of manpower within the army might by chance bring together a group of individuals who had a different understanding of the possibilities for action. But even where the circumstances allowed for acts of collective resistance to occur, these actions could never spread. The act of collective resistance remained beyond most soldiers' conception of what was possible.

### **Collective Consciousness and Shared Experience**

State and military authorities did everything they could to shape and control the development of soldiers' world view. The vision they sought to impose was conservative and highly traditional, drawing heavily on familial metaphors. The rank and file were a kind of brotherhood, whose relationships were defined by loyalty and *Kameradschaft* (a process described in Chapter 5). The relationships between officer and man, meanwhile,



were patriarchal in nature. Officers played the part of the father – indeed, sometimes they even were called “father” (as in the term *Kompagnievater*). They owed their men care and protection. In return, their men owed them unquestioning obedience. The arrangement was given legitimacy by pointing to social distance between officers and their subordinates. The officer corps was drawn from the wealthiest and most educated segments of society, and those which had traditionally exercised political authority. They therefore constituted a class of “natural rulers.” The social divide between ruler and ruled was enforced through a variety of formal and informal rules – the physical separation of officers and men, rules against fraternization, the special privileges granted to officers.<sup>894</sup>

This state-sanctioned worldview was never universally accepted, however, and it became subject to further doubts as the war went on. *Kameradschaft*, as we have seen, was put under pressure by high rates of turnover, and by the development of widespread social and material conflicts within the rank and file. At the same time, the idealized officer-man relationship was breaking down. The composition of the officer corps itself was changing. Heavy casualties forced the army to admit less-qualified candidates (many of them extremely young), and to men from outside the ranks of the social elite.<sup>895</sup> These men did not much resemble ‘natural leaders,’ much less father-figures. The special privileges of the officer corps also tended to undermine its authority, rather than strengthen it. Instead of caring for their men, officers were seen as exploiting their position for personal benefit.<sup>896</sup> Complaints about officers – abuses of power and general incompetence – became one of the most common themes in soldiers’ letters, as

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<sup>894</sup> Ute Frevert, *A Nation in Barracks: Modern Germany, Military Conscription, and Civil Society* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 183; Watson, “Junior Officers,” 433.

<sup>895</sup> See Chapter 3.

<sup>896</sup> See for instance, HSA-St, M 77/1, Bü 457, memo 22 Aug. 1917; memo 15 Oct. 1918.

ensorship officials grimly noted.<sup>897</sup> There were increasing reports of physical confrontations between officers and men, including numerous instances of ‘fragging.’<sup>898</sup> Anti-officer sentiment also began to appear in left-wing propaganda, most notably the inflammatory *Der Offizierhass im deutschen Heer*.<sup>899</sup> By 1916, it was clear that the patriarchal view of officer-man relations no longer had significant traction among the rank and file.

The failure of the state’s effort meant that soldiers’ collective identity was built at the grassroots level – hashed out in countless individual conversations and correspondences.<sup>900</sup> Soldiers discussed their lives, compared their circumstances, and gradually built some consensus about what it meant to be a soldier, and what kind of world they inhabited. This was a process in which some degree of choice and agency is involved. Individuals generally work to build understandings that meet their emotional and practical needs. When they talk with each other, they emphasize the aspects of their lives that fit with the identities that they are trying to construct.<sup>901</sup> These identities are not infinitely malleable however. The constructive process was shaped and bounded by the

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<sup>897</sup> BA-MA, RH/61 1035, Stimmungsbericht, 12 Jul. 1917.

<sup>898</sup> Herwig, *First World War*, 202. See also BA-MA, RH/61 1035, Stimmungsbericht, 23 Jun. 1918.

<sup>899</sup> Hermann Kantorowicz, *Der Offizierhass im deutschen Heer* (Freiburg, 1919); officially published in 1919, but originally penned in 1916.

<sup>900</sup> There is a significant literature on the production of collective identities through face-to-face interaction. See Melucci, *Nomads of the Present*; Carol McClurg Mueller, “Building Social Movement Theory,” in *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, eds. Aldon D Morris and Carol McClurg Mueller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); esp 7-11; Michael Schwalbe and Douglas Mason Schrock, “Identity Work as Group Process,” *Advances in Group Processes* 13 (1996). For studies that try to illustrate this process empirically, see for example David Snow and Leon Anderson, “Identity Work Among the Homeless: The Verbal Construction and Avowal of Personal Identities,” *American Journal of Sociology* 92, no. 6 (May 1987); Elijah Anderson, *A Place on the Corner* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); and Steinberg, *Fighting Words*.

<sup>901</sup> For a fuller discussion of this point, see Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock, “Identity Work.”

real experiences that soldiers shared with one another.<sup>902</sup> It is shared experiences which render certain groupings more plausible than others; the more experiences that members hold in common, the more it seems that their fate and their interests lie together. Shared experiences, moreover, provide the stock of images and references from which consciousness is built. They therefore exert a broad influence over how shared consciousness develops.

It is easy to think that German soldiers had much in common with each other. This is in keeping with popular conceptions of military life, which tend to emphasize homogeneity and uniformity.<sup>903</sup> This is perhaps most of all true for the Germany military, which is generally seen to have been particularly rigid and anti-individualist.<sup>904</sup> Such a view is misleading however. The day-to-day experiences of soldiers varied tremendously from unit to unit, and even within units. These differences, moreover, grew more pronounced and pervasive over time. By the last half of the war, it was very difficult to define any experience, even of the most basic nature, which all soldiers shared.<sup>905</sup> And this, as we shall see further below, limited the ways in which collective consciousness could develop.

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<sup>902</sup> There has been considerable debate on this point. Some argue that the construction of identity is primarily or solely a discursive process, since it is discursive structures which provide meaning to experiences in the first place. This view, in its extreme form, has not gained wide acceptance among historians however, most of whom have looked to combine the insights of discourse analysis with older materialist/structuralist perspectives. For a discussion of these debates, see Gould, *Insurgent Identities*, 23-30; and Marc Steinberg, "Tilting the Frame."

<sup>903</sup> There is a significant literature on practices of "deindividuation" in military settings – for instance, compelling new recruits to wear exactly the same clothes, the same hair style, even adopt the same physical posture and tone of voice. John Hockey, *Squaddies: Portrait of a Subculture* (Exeter: University of Exeter, 1986), 23-34

<sup>904</sup> In part, this derives from the efforts of other nations to create a more palatable perception of their own militaries – by contrasting themselves against the German other. See Benjamin L. Alpers, "This is the Army: Imagining a Democratic Military in World War II," *Journal of American History* 85, no. 1 (June 1998).

<sup>905</sup> Many students of the trench experiences have made this point. See for instance Ashworth, *Trench Warfare*, 21.

The lack of common experiences stemmed mainly from changes in the army's structure. It was becoming more "functionally differentiated," to borrow a term from classical sociology.<sup>906</sup> That is, the army was no longer composed of many generic "soldiers," who could perform a number of tasks. Rather, it was composed of many different specialists, each performing a single narrow function, and arranged into an array of systems and sub-systems. The army, like society more broadly, was becoming a vast, bureaucratized, and internally variegated organization. To some extent, this transition had been visible before 1914. Rapid advances in military technology over the last half of the nineteenth century had compelled the army to incorporate new weapons systems, and to train specialists in their use.<sup>907</sup> But the process had proceeded slowly, with many reverses along the way, because of the strongly conservative outlook of the officer corps and the military leadership. Technical innovations were greeted skeptically, and adopted only gradually, if at all. Machine guns, for instance, were initially regarded as something of a gimmick weapon, and regular units began to be equipped with them only in 1908.<sup>908</sup>

The army that marched to war in 1914, then, was still a relatively homogenous body. Nearly 70% of the field army's personnel were in the infantry. The three traditional branches – infantry, cavalry, and artillery – together accounted for almost 85% of the total force. (See Table 1). The technical specialist was as yet very rare. Many of the army's auxiliary tasks, such as construction of fieldworks, were generally performed by

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<sup>906</sup> Functional differentiation was a concept originally developed by Talcott Parsons and Herbert Spencer, and has since proved widely influential. See Herbert Spencer, *Principles of Sociology*, 3 vols. (London: Williams and Norgate: 1876-96).

<sup>907</sup> See Brose, *Kaiser's Army*.

<sup>908</sup> *Ibid.*, 93-94.

members from the fighting branches, assigned on an *ad hoc* basis.<sup>909</sup> This meant that most of the army's men shared a similar day to day life. They performed many of the same tasks, were exposed to the same kinds of dangers, lived by the same routines, and under the same conditions. There were differences among units to be sure, but rarely drastic ones. Many of the rules which regulated soldiers' lives were laid down at the highest levels, and so were applied throughout the army.<sup>910</sup> The daily ration for all soldiers, for instance, was fixed by regulations laid down by the military cabinet (measured down to the gram), and was uniform throughout the army.<sup>911</sup> This situation, however, could not long survive the outbreak of war. The army's existing structure, which was not much changed from Napoleonic times, was simply not suited to the tasks it would face during the world war. To win success on the battlefield, the army's commanders had to embrace rapid and wholesale changes in what the army did and how it was organized. From the very first days of the war, new units and branches began to be added, and existing units reconfigured. Many of these units would be highly technical; the experiences of the men in these units hardly resembled that of men in the more traditional branches.

One set of changes emerged from the burgeoning logistical demands of the army. The war confronted the pre-war supply apparatus with unforeseen problem. The sheer quantity of supplies consumed by armies in the field rapidly outpaced expectations. In

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<sup>909</sup> See *The Armed Strength of the German Empire*, 324.

<sup>910</sup> Many such rules were designed specifically to eliminate social and cultural differences within the army, and to mold soldiers into a specific type of individual. Things like religious instruction, political lectures, and agricultural training fell under this heading; they were initiated by order of the War Department, and instituted throughout the country. See Frevert, *Nation in Barracks*, 71-80; Kitchen, *German Officer Corps*, 168-78.

<sup>911</sup> Ralf Pröve, *Militär, Staat und Gesellschaft im 19. Jahrhundert* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 2006), 35.

1914, for instance, the German artillery expended about 650 tons of munitions per month. By the end of the war, the figure had reached 10,000 tons per month.<sup>912</sup> This required the continuous expansion of the transport services, especially the motor and field railway sections. Not only did the army require more supplies, but it required ever more *kinds* of supply and equipment. The need to construct and maintain the trench system fuelled the growth of the engineering branch, and the creation of dozens of specialist units – tunnelers, mechanical earthmovers, concrete masons, electricians, and so on.<sup>913</sup> The length of the war created further needs. The pre-war supply service was designed for a short campaign, and therefore oriented towards providing the bare necessities – food, ammunition, medical care. But the war lasted years rather than months, and soldiers could not live indefinitely on iron rations. They needed all the things that any large community needs. To maintain health and hygiene, units established field laundries, delousing stations, barber shops, and dental services.<sup>914</sup> Field kitchens were supplemented with corps bakeries, slaughterhouse units, and (in some cases) military-run farms and breweries.<sup>915</sup> Hundreds of field post offices were set up, along with telephone banks and telegraphy stations, to keep soldiers in touch with families back home. Equipment was supplied by field workshops, which produced everything from shoes and clothes to saddles and wheels.<sup>916</sup> Recreation was meanwhile provided by company

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<sup>912</sup> Herbert Jäger, *German Artillery of World War I* (Marlborough: Crowood Press, 2001), 218.

<sup>913</sup> *German Army Handbook*, 97-106.

<sup>914</sup> *Sanitätsbericht über das Deutsche Heer im Weltkrieg 1914-1918*, volume I: *Gliederung des Heeressanitätswesens im Weltkriege 1914-1918* (Berlin: E.S. Mittler, 1934).

<sup>915</sup> Wrisberg, *Heer und Heimat*, 69.

<sup>916</sup> *German Army Handbook*, 145. See also BfZ, Schulin.

libraries, filmhouses, and bands.<sup>917</sup> The whole apparatus, meanwhile, was operated by an archipelago of administrative offices.<sup>918</sup>

A second set of changes arose from the tactical dilemmas which the war presented. The most pressing tactical problems, of course, revolved around the trenches – how to penetrate an enemy’s trench line, and hold one’s own lines against – attack. One solution to these dilemmas was the simple expansion of firepower.<sup>919</sup> The heavy weapons branches – artillery, machine guns, air force – therefore increased rapidly over the course of the war. A second solution involved tactical innovation, which consequently required the constant refinement and specialization of existing weapon systems.<sup>920</sup> To offer one illustration, in 1914 the army possessed only a single type of aircraft, which performed multiple tasks. By the armistice, the army employed more than 200 different designs and models, many of which performed a specialized function.<sup>921</sup> The process of internal reconfiguration tended to be self-escalating, as changes in one area often drove complementary changes in others. The rapid growth of the artillery branch, for instance, generated a massive growth in the artillery’s technical support structures. Meteorological sections and sophisticated sound-ranging units were formed to improve the accuracy of long-range fire. Special air units, equipped with wireless radios, were formed to observe and correct the fall of artillery shot. Other air units were equipped with cameras. Together

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<sup>917</sup> For an overview of the range of activities offer, see Hoover, World War I. Collection, Box 8, Folder “Programme I.”

<sup>918</sup> For a discussion of the expansion of the army’s logistical and administrative services, see Wrisberg, *Heer und Heimat*, 23-30. Gerd Hardach, *The First World War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 63-64.

<sup>919</sup> Stevenson, *Cataclysm*, 195-96

<sup>920</sup> Tactical innovation in the German army is a well-phenomenon. For an overview, see Lupfer, *The Dynamics of Doctrine*. For commentary on the role of technology in German tactics, see Michael Geyer, “German Strategy in the Age of Machine Warfare, 1914-1945,” in *Makers of Modern Strategy: from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

<sup>921</sup> Lee Kennett, *The First Air War, 1914-1918* (New York: Free Press, 1991), 91.

with surveying and cartographic units on the ground, they created detailed maps of enemy positions, so that fire could be precisely plotted.<sup>922</sup>

After four years of continuous change, the army's composition had diversified tremendously. To get some sense of the scale of this change, it is useful to consider some aggregate figures (see Table 1). If we compare the structure of the army in 1914 and 1918, we see that every branch had increased in terms of absolute size, but their growth had been very uneven. The expansion of heavy weapons branches had far outstripped that of the more traditional branches. While the number of infantrymen increased by a modest 20%, the number of men in the machine gun arm grew six-fold, and the heavy artillery grew ten-fold. The growth in the technical and support branches had been even more spectacular. The signals corps, labor branch, and transportation services had all increased by more than 1000%. Many completely new branches (such as the anti-aircraft arm) had also been added. Formerly "top heavy," with most of its strength concentrated in a few branches (and above all the infantry), it was now divided into a dozen intermediate sized branches. The infantry's share of the army had fallen from three-quarters to a third, and no other branch accounted for more than 13% of the army's strength.

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<sup>922</sup> Jäger, *German Artillery*, 200-216. Stevenson, *Backs to the Wall*, 207-208.



**Table 3 -- Breakdown of the German Field Army by Service Branch, 1914 and 1918**

Branch	August 1914		1918	
	Number	% Total	Number	% Total
Infantry	1,452,852	69.8%	1,753,090	34.2%
Cavalry	100,440	4.8%	132,120	2.6%
Field Artillery	147,033	7.1%	428,400	8.3%
Heavy Artillery	33,250	1.6%	400,917	7.8%
Engineers	59,926	2.9%	473,757	9.2%
Machine Guns	31,977	1.5%	231,363	4.5%
Air Defense	300	0.0%	57,800	1.1%
Air Force	10,000	0.5%	90,000	1.8%
Military Train	132,272	6.4%	679,007	13.2%
Labor Units	--	0.0%	235,000	4.6%
Railway Units	5,592	0.3%	81,213	1.6%
Motor Transport	7,600	0.4%	63,572	1.2%
Signal Service	6,300	0.3%	190,000	3.7%
Medical Service	33,660	1.6%	126,000	2.5%
Headquarter Staffs	55,743	2.7%	124,345	2.4%
Field Police	5,940	0.3%	21,260	0.4%

Source: See Appendix IV

Structural changes flowed down to the smallest units – regiments, companies, even platoons. These units continually took on more functions. And as they did so they became more complex, incorporating scores of different sub-units and specialist soldiers. By way of illustration, let’s consider the infantry regiment, widely considered the “building block” of the field army, and its most common type of formation. In 1914, 93% of the regiment’s personnel were riflemen. Over the next four years, the infantry component was continually reduced, while machine gun and mortar units were added. At the same time, the regiment’s logistical and administrative components more than

quadrupled in size.<sup>923</sup> By 1918, these support formations employed more than thirty different kinds of specialist – including musketry master, saddler, surveyor, telefonist, cattleman, war diarist, and laundryman.<sup>924</sup> By this time, the regiment’s fighting personnel was often outnumbered by members of the support staff.<sup>925</sup> The regiment would also include a large number of men who technically belonged to other units, but who were attached to it on a more or less permanent basis: medical staff, policemen, transport and supply personnel, artillery and air force liaisons, morale and intelligence officers, laborers, men from anti-aircraft and anti-tank units.

A man’s experience of the war was heavily influenced by the particular function he was assigned to perform. Men with different jobs found that their day to day experiences differed sharply from one another. For the purposes of illustration, let us compare the lives of two individuals: Hans, a rifleman, and August, an artilleryman. Both entered service in the middle of the war, and both served with various units on the Western Front. One might suspect that the day-to-day experiences of these two men would not be altogether different. Both, after all, served in combat units, and both spent much of their time in forward areas. As we shall see, however, this was not the case at all. Hans’s job was extraordinarily dangerous.<sup>926</sup> Over the last two years of the war (during which his regiment was in combat for very long stretches), his platoon was repeatedly decimated and rebuilt, and Hans himself was wounded several times.<sup>927</sup> The continuous

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<sup>923</sup> See Appendix III, “Organization of a German Infantry Regiment, 1914 and 1918”

<sup>924</sup> Summary of Information, 6 November 1918

<sup>925</sup> This situation arose because the fighting formations of many regiments were chronically understrength, because of battle casualties, while their support formations were less affected. See BA-MA, PH5 I/40, “Bericht über Besuch bei der 6. Und 241 Inf Div. ...”

<sup>926</sup> Description drawn from Hoover, Schetter diary.

<sup>927</sup> *Ibid.*, 10, 24.

threat to which the unit was exposed also disrupted the normal rhythms and routines of life. During the daylight hours, any movement was liable to draw the attention of the enemy forces – especially aircraft, which patrolled the skies in increasingly large numbers.<sup>928</sup> The platoon was therefore reduced to state of almost total inactivity. The men huddled in shell holes or thickets, and tried to make as little noise as possible.<sup>929</sup> Hans used this time to catch a few hours of sleep, smoke cigarettes, or perhaps play a silent game of cards. Essential tasks – eating, preparing defensive positions, marching – were performed during the hours of darkness. But social interaction remained at a minimum. The continuing threat posed by enemy snipers and aircraft made it unwise to make cooking fires, speak audibly, or even smoke cigarettes. There was little in the way of material comforts to compensate for these hardships. Hans went weeks without sleeping under a roof, much less in a bed.<sup>930</sup> The best he could hope for was a makeshift shelter – grass or corrugated iron placed over a shallow hole in the ground. The supply of food was irregular. There were long stretches in which he is forced to subsist on items captured from the Allies, or taken from abandoned farms.<sup>931</sup>

All of this stands in marked contrast to August's experiences.<sup>932</sup> His battery was often in combat, but it was sufficiently far behind the lines that the risk of injury was much less than in Hans' platoon. August sometimes refers to casualties in the regiment, but his own battery seems to have gone relatively unscathed. The distance to the front lines also meant that August could carry on some kind of normal existence. Between

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<sup>928</sup> Ibid. esp. 33.

<sup>929</sup> Ibid., 32. For a more thorough account of this kind of inactivity, see *War Diaries* III, 109<sup>th</sup> Body Grenadier Regiment, doc #110.

<sup>930</sup> Especially in the campaign of 1918. See 28-36.

<sup>931</sup> Ibid., esp 35.

<sup>932</sup> BfZ, Bader correspondence.

shifts at the gun, he had considerable leisure time. Much of this was spent in a spacious shelter, which had been elaborately furnished and outfitted by Bader and the other members of his gun crew. Here he wrote long letters home, read Kant, listened to music, or rested in bed.<sup>933</sup> None of this is to say that August's job was easy. But the day-to-day hardships were of a different character from those which Hans faced. August's primary complaints dealt mostly with the tedium the job involved, and the terrible hard labor and bad conditions.<sup>934</sup>

The differences become even starker if we extend the comparison to include men in the support branches. Take a man like Jakob, who served in a clothing supply unit.<sup>935</sup> He spent most of his time at corps headquarters, some miles behind the front. Jakob took no active part in combat at all; he did not regularly carry a weapon or wear a helmet. And he had easy access to all the amenities of the *Etappengebiet*. All things considered, his life more resembled that of a white-collar worker than an infantryman like Hans. He worked more or less regular hours. During his time off he visited canteens and movie houses, or dined with friends.<sup>936</sup> For him, the battlefield was so distant (both physically and psychologically) that he regarded it with more curiosity than horror. On a few occasions, in fact, he arranged visits out to the battle zones, simply to witness the carnage. He wandered about like a tourist, snapping photographs and recording his impressions in his journal.<sup>937</sup>

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<sup>933</sup> Ibid., for instance 19 Nov. 1916; 19 Mar. 1918; 4 Apr. 1918.

<sup>934</sup> Ibid., esp. 20 May 1915.

<sup>935</sup> BfZ, Röder correspondence.

<sup>936</sup> Ibid., 28 Mar 1918.

<sup>937</sup> Ibid., 16 Apr. 1918.

If we peer in closer, still more differences emerge. In the discussion above, we took Jakob to represent the “typical” rear-area soldier. In fact, though, there really was no such thing. Within the same service branch, even within the same unit or job, there were many different specializations and gradations. “Headquarters” jobs, like Jakob’s, were generally taken to be safe and comfortable. But it made a great deal of difference what exactly a man did. A job at corps headquarters, miles from the front, was indeed a fortunate posting. A telephone operator in battalion headquarters, perhaps 500 yards behind the main lines, was a considerably riskier assignment.<sup>938</sup> And some headquarters jobs were positively dangerous – for instance, the men who delivered written orders to the front lines (“runners”). The same kind of distinctions and gradations existed in every branch. An engineer could find himself supervising the construction of roads 50 miles in the rear, or laying explosives under enemy lines, or operating a flamethrower alongside assault detachments.<sup>939</sup> Men in the supply train might work unloading stores back in Germany, or transporting ammunition to front line units under enemy fire.<sup>940</sup> Where a man was stationed also made a crucial difference, especially considering the scope of the German war effort. By 1918, German units were deployed in a dozen different countries, on three different continents. To be an infantryman at Arras was one of the most difficult and dangerous jobs a man could have. But if you were an infantryman posted to an inactive theater, then you did very little. Men in particularly desirable sectors – guarding

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<sup>938</sup> See for instance the account in BfZ, Blecher, 28 Sep. 1918.

<sup>939</sup> On the various employments in the engineering branch, see *German Army Handbook*, 97-106.

<sup>940</sup> For the dangers in front-line supply units, see for instance, BfZ, Maute correspondence.

the Belgian coastline, or the Swiss border – sometimes described their life as a kind of permanent “vacation.”<sup>941</sup>

It is difficult to fully capture the effect of the structural changes that the army experienced over the course of the war, because this kind of mass conscript army was an organization with no real analogue in contemporary life. The most illustrative comparison, perhaps, is to a large corporation. Like the employees of such a corporation, German soldiers had some nominal connection to one another, in that they all belonged to the same organization, which employed them all for some unified (albeit vaguely understood) purpose. But that organization was so vast and complex, with so many functions and so many specialized divisions, that any given soldier had little in common with most of his colleagues. And to some extent this was true even within his own particular unit. Each division, like the larger organization, performed many different tasks, and operated according to a complex division of labor. Different members performed different tasks, with different challenges and different privileges. If their duties left them a few spare moments to converse with each other, they would have had little to talk about, beyond the odd complaint about the work load or an incompetent superior.

### **Community of Suffering**

In many modern armies, a sense of collective consciousness develops out of some powerful experience that all soldiers share. During the Second World War, collective

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<sup>941</sup> For an illustration of the contrasts, see Diary of Wolfgang Bohm, entries from 1 Nov 1918.

consciousness in the American army grew out of the conflict between individually-minded citizen soldiers and the reality of military discipline.<sup>942</sup> In the German army, this could not happen. As we have seen, there was no specific experience that was common to all soldiers. The individual was a tiny cog in a vast and internally complex war-machine, and the contours of his daily life increasingly differed from those around him. Collective consciousness could therefore develop only on the basis of a more general category of experience. In the event, soldiers' collective consciousness crystalized around the experience of suffering and hardship. This was a kind of experience which – because it was so broad – all soldiers shared, regardless of where they were or what they did. Any two soldiers, in any unit and of any rank, could agree that there was too much work and not enough food. Any two soldiers, no matter what their background or job, could complain about loneliness and separation. Suffering, moreover, was an experience that naturally assumed an important place in soldiers' everyday discourses. Discussing it with others provided some measure of relief. It assured them that they did not suffer alone.<sup>943</sup> When soldiers conversed with each other then, suffering quite readily became a point of comparison.

The groundwork for this consciousness was laid around the war's midpoint. It was in this period that older identities became less compelling. It was at this time too that the hardships imposed by the war became dramatically worse. The prolonged fighting around Verdun, together with Allied offensives on the Somme and in Galicia, generated enormous casualties and shattered any remaining hopes of a speedy victory. The first

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<sup>942</sup> Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>943</sup> See Chapter Six.

really serious material shortages were also beginning to set in. The winter of 1916/1917 – the famous “turnip winter” – saw consumption decline to near-famine levels. Under pressure from multiple angles at once, soldiers began to speak more often and more freely about their troubles. The files of state and military authorities began to bulge with angry letters from soldiers.<sup>944</sup> Other letters found their way to, church officials, newspaper editors, local and Reichstag delegates. Erhard Auer, head of the Bavarian branch of the SPD, received up to 2,500 letters a week from soldiers in the field.<sup>945</sup> Mail censors were overwhelmed with the volume of complaints in private correspondences. They were soon forced to admit that it was simply not “practical” to confiscate every letter which contained “general complaints about the lack of food, clothing, holidays, or general statements of dissatisfaction.”<sup>946</sup> A look at soldiers’ correspondences only confirms these impressions. Complaints became both a much a larger theme in their writing, and become much more prominent in the letters’ structure. Indeed, many letters are really nothing more than a series of complaints – a *Jammerbriefe*, in popular parlance.<sup>947</sup> Complaint letters were so common that they themselves became an object of criticism. Many expressed amazement at their comrades’ abilities to “go on complaining.”<sup>948</sup> Some others felt frustration that they simply could find nothing positive to say. “What should I write you?” one man begins a letter, “I really don’t know. It is always the same, what one thinks... I must be patient, and wait for better fortunes.”<sup>949</sup>

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<sup>944</sup> See HSA-St, M77/1, Bü 457.

<sup>945</sup> Ay, *Entstehung einer Revolution*, 25.

<sup>946</sup> BA-MA, RH/61 1035, “Zweck der Ueberwachung”

<sup>947</sup> For a particularly vivid examples, see BfZ, Ehlers, 7 Jan. 1918; Hanbrich, 17 Jul. 1918; BfZ, Geidel, 13 Nov. 1916.

<sup>948</sup> BfZ, Wenzel, 22 Mar. 1918.

<sup>949</sup> BfZ, Hübner, 5 Nov. 1918.



Friedrich Altrichter, wartime colonel and post-war commentator on military affairs, described the spirit of those days thus: “The front soldier complained about everything, about every order, about superiors, the food and his own struggle for existence.”<sup>950</sup>

As soldiers complained to each other more and more, they began to draw connections between their circumstances. They would begin, often, by noting minor coincidences. They would observe, for instance, that both of their fathers-in-law had fallen, or that flu had broken out in both their units, or that they were both suffering from headaches.<sup>951</sup> But soon they began to formulate more general kinds of comparisons. They would say things like, “I have had to live through difficult days, and you as well,”<sup>952</sup> or “out here, the morale situation is just the same as with you, [we] are likewise war-weary.”<sup>953</sup> They also widened the scope of their comparisons. Instead of comparing only a few individuals, they began to compare larger groups. “here it is the same with one as with the other,” they might write, or “the longing for home unites us all.”<sup>954</sup>

Out of this comparative discourse, a sense of collective identity was emerging. The formation of a collective identity consists, in the most basic terms, of associating a group of people with a particular label or a particular set of qualities.<sup>955</sup> The classical case is the construction of a working-class identity. A collection of workers becomes capable of collective action only when they come to associate themselves with a particular label, and a particular set of qualities. It begins as a class “in itself” – that is, a set of individuals who objectively share a common social position and common set of interests. When it

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<sup>950</sup> Altrichter, *Seelischen Kräfte*, 118.

<sup>951</sup> BfZ, Schmidt, 11 Aug. 1917; BfZ, Ehlers, 30 Oct 1918; BfZ, Lips, 10 Jul. 1917.

<sup>952</sup> BfZ, Lips, 20 Apr. 1917.

<sup>953</sup> BfZ, Lips, 30 Aug. 1918.

<sup>954</sup> BfZ, Wenzel, 6 Feb. 1918; BfZ, W. Vogt, 31 Jun. 1915.

<sup>955</sup> Schwalbe and Mason Schrock, “Identity Work,” 122-24.

becomes aware of these shared interests, and when it begins to identify itself as a group, it becomes a class “for itself.”<sup>956</sup> We see this kind of awareness beginning to develop in the German army over the last half of the war. After months and years of complaining to each other, of comparing their respective hardships, they began to identify suffering as a property of the group rather than the individual. Suffering, in other words, was not the fate of the unlucky men here and there; they saw suffering as a central part of what it meant to be a soldier.<sup>957</sup>

This association is visible in different ways. Probably the most common form of association involves the ways soldiers use the singular and plural. Early on in the war, soldiers tended to write almost exclusively from an individual perspective – that is, using the first person singular, “I” and “me.” This is not as all surprising, as it is in keeping with literary and epistolary conventions. Slowly, however, their perspective begins to change. When soldiers describe instances of hardship, they begin to refer to these experiences using the plural – “we are headed into hard times” or “we see a violent future ahead” or “now is the worst time for us.”<sup>958</sup> In individual correspondences, of course, this shift happens at different times and to different degrees. In some cases it happens quite early on. But is a recognizable feature of correspondences by 1916, and is quite common by 1917-1918. By that time, many authors habitually resort to the plural to discuss instances of suffering.

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<sup>956</sup> These concepts and language come from Marx, especially *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847), and *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852).

<sup>957</sup> Eric Leed makes a similar point. He argues that the front community was not built upon idealistic notions of self-sacrifice, but only on “the base level of common, physical deprivation and hardship.” Leed, *No Man’s Land*, 88.

<sup>958</sup> Emphasis added. BfZ, Ehlers, 1 Nov 1918; BfZ, Lips, 2 Apr 1917; BfZ, Klimamel, 15 Nov 1917.

To illustrate this point in more detail, let us examine the correspondence of one young soldier, an infantryman in the 214<sup>th</sup> Regiment. His earliest correspondence is written almost entirely in the singular. Indeed the writing has a kind of solitary quality to it. He spends much of his time meditating on abstract and highly personal topics. For instance, he often dwells on fate and the likelihood of his own personal survival. Very few people besides himself – his immediate comrades or anyone else – appear in his letters. He writes in the singular even when he is obviously describing things he did with others, like his occasional references to combat.<sup>959</sup> For instance, he describes the fighting on the Yser thus: “The time of waiting for the attack was the hardest on me – in those moments, one thinks of all that he loves and treasures, and in his thoughts says farewell to them.” By 1917, however, his perspective has noticeably shifted. He increasingly complains in collective terms. At first, this happens mostly when he refers to combat or military maneuvers. He would write, for instance, “we get hell every day” or “we are taking part in a great retreat.”<sup>960</sup> Soon, though, he uses the plural to refer to difficulties of every kind: the weather (“we were in a storm”), lack of leave (“hopefully we will get some luck”), living conditions (“it is a real gypsy life we live here”), food shortages (“if we at least get something for lunch, we are satisfied”), and postal breakdowns (“we have received hardly any news, since no newspapers have come”).<sup>961</sup> It is important to note that the author’s voice is not entirely submerged in the collective. When he discusses neutral subjects – his relationship with family, for instance, or general items of news – he reverts to the singular “I”. This becomes more noticeable in the last year of the

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<sup>959</sup> BfZ, Ehlers, 9 May 1916.

<sup>960</sup> BfZ, Ehlers, 20 Apr 1917; 27 March 1917.

<sup>961</sup> BfZ, Ehlers, 19 July 1918; 28 July 1917; 14 June 1918; 12 May 1918; 19 March 1917.

correspondence, as he more frequently switches between the singular and plural.

Sometimes this happens in the same breath, as when he writes “I am truly in love with you and my thoughts are always with you. But in these last days we have had to bear so much toil.”<sup>962</sup> He clearly reserves the plural for negative subjects.

The association between soldiering and suffering also occurred in more explicit ways. Soldiers habitually referred to themselves in humiliating and self-deprecating terms – terms that emphasized the difficulty of their lives. Many men drew upon established vocabularies of degradation, referring to themselves as “grunt”, “poor lads,” “poor fellows,” or “suckers.”<sup>963</sup> Also in wide circulation was the term “field gray,” a term with many connotations (some positive and nostalgic), but used in this period primarily to suggest the soldiers low and down-trodden conditions. They would say, for instance, “once again we field grays much endure everything,” or “we field grays must hold out again.”<sup>964</sup> Others men preferred to use more vivid terminology. Images of bondage or servitude were popular. They described themselves as living the “Prussian slave life” or being treated “worse than slaves.”<sup>965</sup> Along similar lines, they might also call themselves “mercenaries,” “pawns,” or “penitentiary inmates.”<sup>966</sup> Most common of all were labels that referred to animals. References to farm animals (as with bondage-related terms) were used to suggest powerlessness and vulnerability. This comes across clearly in phrases like “cattle,” “sheep,” “slaughter animals,” or (continuing the slaughter metaphor) “pieces of

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<sup>962</sup> BfZ, Ehlers, 31 Jul. 1918.

<sup>963</sup> BfZ, Reitz, 7 May 1917; DTA, 1083, 94; Jünger, *Storm of Steel*, 56.

<sup>964</sup> BfZ, Blecher, [n.d.]

<sup>965</sup> BA-MA, RH/61 1035, 12 Jul. 1917; 24 Feb 1918.

<sup>966</sup> BfZ, Hanbrich, 6 Jun. 6 1918; BA-MA, RH/61 1035, 12 Jul. 1917; 24 Feb 1918.

meat.”<sup>967</sup> References to lower forms of life were used to suggest filth and general degradation – “dogs”, “rats”, “lice-boys.”<sup>968</sup> The two most commonly used terms for soldiers both referred to pigs: “front-pig” [*Frontschwein*] and “rear-area pig” [*Etappenschwein*], although the simple *Schwein* was also popular.<sup>969</sup>

To see soldiers as sufferers was to see them not as active agents, but as objects, acted upon by powerful outside forces. And this very easily slid into a sense of complete powerlessness – a sense that soldiers were caught up in events over which they had no control whatever. This was no doubt reinforced, in part, by German political culture. In Western Europe, citizens conceived of political power as ultimately emanating from the people, and exercised by the government on only a temporary and qualified basis. They recognized that, in emergency situations (such as wartime), the ordinary mechanisms of democracy might need to be suspended or modified. But this did not mean that the fundamental relationship of power had changed; they still believed that the government ultimately answered to the people, and that the people retained the right to make their voices heard. According to Leonard Smith, it was the fundamentally democratic ethos of the French soldier that made the 1917 mutinies possible.<sup>970</sup> In Germany, of course, political power was conceived in very different terms. The people were accorded a limited role in government, principally through the popularly-elected Reichstag. But that role was not considered to be an inherent right – indeed the German constitution contained no explicit enumeration of rights – nor was the relationship between subject

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<sup>967</sup> BfZ, Frick, 24 Oct. 1915; BA-MA, RH/61 1035, 12 Jul. 1917.

<sup>968</sup> BfZ, Ehlers, 9 Oct. 1917; BfZ, Hermann, 15 Dec. 1914.

<sup>969</sup> See for instance BfZ, Frisch, 4 May 1918.

<sup>970</sup> Smith, *Between Mutiny and Obedience*, esp. 175-214.

and state imagined as reciprocal.<sup>971</sup> Political participation was a privilege granted by the sovereign and held as “a public office.”<sup>972</sup> The Reichstag was designed to be the Emperor’s subordinate, not his equal, and the monarch retained the power to dissolve it.<sup>973</sup> Indeed, he occasionally entertained the idea of suspending it permanently. Of course, German political culture was not homogenous; many different currents existed within it, some of them progressive and democratic, or at least potentially so. But we can clearly say that the general thrust of German political culture was to cast the ordinary individual as the object of state power, rather than an independent actor; a German who contemplated direct action against the state certainly could not draw on the same kind of political repertoires as a Frenchmen.

Soldiers’ sense of powerlessness was more directly reinforced by the general conditions of military life. The nature of the fighting was such that the part of the individual was very difficult to discern. In “battles” which involved millions of men, and which were contested over hundreds of square miles, soldiers knew that the efforts of any single man, no matter how skilled or brave, had no significant impact on the overall outcome.<sup>974</sup> Their sense of powerlessness was further reinforced by the regime of discipline under which they lived. This was not so much because soldiers lived in fear of the punishments meted out by the authorities, which were relatively limited. It was rather a product of the scale of the army’s claims to authority. The army reserved the right to supervise and control *everything* the soldier did – from how he walked and held his body,

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<sup>971</sup> For the full text of the constitution, including various amendments, see Edwin Zeydel, ed., *Constitutions of the German Empire and the German States* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1919).

<sup>972</sup> Quotes in Anderson, *Practicing Democracy*, 7.

<sup>973</sup> Ulrich-Wehler, *The German Empire*, 53-54.

<sup>974</sup> Leed, *No Man’s Land*, 111-112.

to his physical appearance, to the things he wrote in private correspondences. Such powers were not always made use of, of course, but the claim alone was sufficient to impress upon the soldier that “one is not master over himself.”<sup>975</sup> Indeed, that was the explicit purpose of such rules.<sup>976</sup> The point was made with special force during the basic training. One man recalled that, as his cohort arrived at its training camp, “it was still not clearly realized that, as an involuntary recruit, you had to surrender yourself to the whim of the chief.”<sup>977</sup> They were quickly rid of their misconceptions. If the recruits attempted to speak or even to move without permission, their training officer hysterically berated them. “The voice of this omnipotent being,” he remembers “almost took my breath away.”<sup>978</sup>

We have seen evidence for this sense of powerlessness already, in the terms that soldiers used to refer to themselves – slaves, cattle, and so on. But it is apparent everywhere in their language, in the way that they talk about their problems and prospects. This is in fact one of the most striking features of their correspondence. It was extremely common, for instance, for soldiers to attribute events to vast and inscrutable forces. Many men, particularly of working class origin, talked in terms of “luck.” In the face of the many uncertainties they face – draft, leave, survival – they told themselves “hopefully we will get some luck this time.”<sup>979</sup> And when things went badly, it was not as the result of conscious decisions made by actual persons, but because “our luck will

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<sup>975</sup> BA-MA, RH/61 1035, 12 Jul. 1917; Ziemann takes a similar view of the “disciplinary straightjacket.” (*War Experiences*, 64). In my view, however, he draws too direct a connection between discipline and obedience. As I elaborate here, discipline creates obedience as much through the ways it influences identity as through its inherently deterrent properties.

<sup>976</sup> Altrichter, *seelische Kräfte*, 29.

<sup>977</sup> Alfred Lempelius, “Erster Weltkrieg: Tagebuchaufzeichnungen eines jungen Soldaten,” 9-10.

<sup>978</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>979</sup> MKB, Winstek, 15 Feb. 1917.

never turn.”<sup>980</sup> Soldiers avidly collected good luck charms, and there was a thriving trade in such items behind the lines.<sup>981</sup> Men of a more philosophical bent invoked “fate” or “destiny” – weightier concepts which drove home the absolute inevitability of events. The point was often reinforced by combining such references with the imagery of natural forces, for instance, “the fate that has broken over humanity demands tribute,” or “who knows where fate will cast me next.”<sup>982</sup> Most common of all was to attribute events to God. Some saw events as a punishment or “judgment from God.” Others saw suffering as a test of faith. Some even compared themselves to the characters in the great biblical tests of faith: Job, Jesus in the desert. But most soldiers did not even attempt to guess God’s intentions. They simply believed that everything transpired “as God wills.”<sup>983</sup> We see these sentiments, for example, when soldiers consider their own survival. They assured each other that “whom God wishes to preserve stays alive.”<sup>984</sup> And when they came through a battle, they rejoiced that God “has treated me mercifully so far,” or that “God willed that I should come through it.”<sup>985</sup> It was easy to see God’s intervention everywhere, in every near miss and lucky break. As one soldier wrote in his journal “I obviously cannot even list all of the hidden dangers from which God protects us.”<sup>986</sup>

From this perspective, circumstances could not be changed by human action. Improvement, if it were possible at all, could be effected only through the operation of the impersonal forces that determined events. This is particularly visible in discussions

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<sup>980</sup> BfZ, Geidel, Apr. 1918.

<sup>981</sup> Fussell, *Great War and Modern War*, 124-25.

<sup>982</sup> BfZ, Geidel, 6 Aug. 1918; BfZ, Ternies, 28 Jan. 1918.

<sup>983</sup> BfZ, Schulin, 10 Nov. 1918.

<sup>984</sup> BfZ, Hilpert, 25 Jul. 1917.

<sup>985</sup> BfZ, Ehlers, 3 Aug. 1917; BfZ, Blecher, 25 Sep. 1918.

<sup>986</sup> BfZ, Schulin, 48.



about the end of the war. Nearly all soldiers desired a speedy end to hostilities. But soldiers rarely imagined the war as being the result of any concrete action or policy. They did not say things like “the war will be over when Ludendorff resigns” or “when the Emperor is overthrown.” They imagined the end of the war as an event outside human agency. Men of faith believed that the end of the war depended solely on the will of God, and they spilled vast quantities of ink in seeking his mercy. They implored God to “guide us once again to peace,” or to “grant the bloodshed...should come to an end.”<sup>987</sup> And because of the Christian God’s combination of omnipotence and inscrutability, most were able to persist in these views even when the divine showed not the least sign of obliging their requests. “There does not seem to be any end to all this horror, but we must still hope for it,” one man writes, reminding his reader that “God can do anything, so he can put an end to all the hatred and murder between nations.”<sup>988</sup>

Less religious men imagined the end of the war as something that would just “happen.” They spoke about “the war” as if it were an independent force. “The war” is often the subject of their sentences – as in “this war is far from its end.”<sup>989</sup> They said things like “when this war had ended,” rather than “when we have put an end to this war.”<sup>990</sup> It was common to imagine the war as a kind of natural phenomenon – weather and storm imagery was particularly common -- which operated according to some unknowable inner logic.<sup>991</sup> In this view (to quote one soldier) “nothing can be done” to hasten the end of hostilities. At most, they could keep alive some optimism that the end

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<sup>987</sup> DTA 260, 28 Aug, 1918; BfZ, Hecker, 16 Dec. 1915.

<sup>988</sup> BfZ, Pollet, [n.d.]

<sup>989</sup> BfZ, Lips, 22 Oct. 1918.

<sup>990</sup> BfZ, Blecher, 12 Sep. 1918.

<sup>991</sup> BfZ, Hermann, 5 Dec. 1914.

was in sight. “Hope” became their watchword. While the word has positive connotations – it signifies a refusal to capitulate to doubt or despair – it simultaneously indicates a passivity born of impotence. To hope for a turn of events, generally suggests that you can do little to actually bring such a turn about, at least for the moment. One finds “hope” everywhere in their letters and writings, in many different forms and contexts. “Hopefully this terrible war is over soon,” they told each other, or “we can hope for the best,” or “I have not yet given up hope.”<sup>992</sup>

Soldiers tended to react skeptically to any concrete efforts to end the struggle. This was much in evidence during January of 1918, when a wave of strikes broke out among German workers. Many soldiers expressed at least a qualified sympathy with the strikes. Indeed the principal demands of the strikers – peace and bread – were no different than the demands which appeared in soldiers’ correspondences.<sup>993</sup> Yet hardly any soldiers expressed optimism that the strikes would succeed in ending the war, or even shortening it. As one soldier put it “I have no hope that the war will be shortened [by the strikes], because militarism in Prussia is too great.”<sup>994</sup> Some endorsed the strikes in principle, but (recalling the SPD’s official views towards revolution) believed the moment was not yet ripe. Only at some hazy point in the distant future, they argued, would popular discontent have achieved the necessary pitch – “things are going bad in Berlin, but worse must still come.”<sup>995</sup> Others believed that, on their own, the strikes could never directly challenge the state and the army. At best, they could only convince the state that the people were

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<sup>992</sup> BfZ, Ehlers, 11 Feb. 1917; BfZ, Blecher, 22 Jun. 1918; BfZ, Ehlers, 5 Oct. 1917.

<sup>993</sup> BA-MA, RH/61 1035, Stimmungsbericht, 24 Feb. 1918.

<sup>994</sup> BA-MA, RH/61 1035, Stimmungsbericht, 24 Feb. 1918, 49.

<sup>995</sup> BA-MA, RH/61 1035, Stimmungsbericht, 24 Feb. 1918, 53.

“finished with war.”<sup>996</sup> Probably most soldiers were of the opinion was that the strikes would lengthen the war, both because they would embolden Germany’s enemies, and because the reactionary parties would be strengthened, making any compromise peace less likely.<sup>997</sup>

In their more candid moments, soldiers would speak explicitly about their feelings of powerlessness. These reflections could take on an angry tone. Discussing the widespread hunger, one soldier wrote “but what can you do? Nothing, absolutely nothing, and one is powerless against everything.”<sup>998</sup> Mostly, though, soldiers sounded more despairing than anything else. Constantly repeated, and in endless variation, are sentiments like “nothing can be done about it,” “what’s done is done,” “it makes no difference, one must be content,” “it may go as it will,” “it can’t be otherwise,” “what can’t be done, can’t be done,” and “one must submit.”<sup>999</sup> Here again, soldiers often drew upon the imagery of slavery and imprisonment. Reflecting on the many difficulties of his life, Arnold Metzger wrote “I feel powerless and shackled by the regime.”<sup>1000</sup>

It is not difficult to see how this kind of identity was poorly suited to resistance, or indeed to action of any sort. It led soldiers to see themselves as beings utterly devoid of agency, as caught up in events beyond their control, and even their understanding. In this way of thinking, it made little sense to try and alter the course of events. The logic of this view, if anything, pointed in the opposite direction. If circumstances could not be changed, and if suffering were inevitable, the best option seemed to be a manly

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<sup>996</sup> BA-MA, RH/61 1035, Stimmungsbericht, 24 Feb. 1918, 53-54.

<sup>997</sup> BA-MA, RH/61 1035, Stimmungsbericht, 24 Feb. 1918, 50

<sup>998</sup> BA-MA, RH/61 1035, Stimmungsbericht, 31 Aug. 1918.

<sup>999</sup> BfZ, Heinz, 31 Dec 1917; BfZ, Lehfeldt, 86; BfZ, Lips, June 7 1917; BfZ, Lips 1 Oct 1918; BfZ, Huebner, Oct 22 1918; Ehlers May 11 1918; Ehlers, May 5 1918.

<sup>1000</sup> Metzger, June 8 1915

*endurance* of suffering. To bear hardship, with dignity and composure, came to be seen as a virtue rather than a weakness. When soldiers discussed their problems, they rarely advised one another to “do something about it.” Instead, they urged each other to “have patience,” to “hold on,” and not to “abandon yourself to depressed moods.”<sup>1001</sup> In particular, they encouraged each other not to dwell on misfortune. One man exhorts his reader “be content with what cannot be changed. If you have too many thoughts about the future, you wear yourself out, damage your health, and accomplish nothing by it.”<sup>1002</sup> Or as another put it “if you run your head against the wall you can’t change anything. That’s war.”<sup>1003</sup> These sentiments often drew upon Christian values, in which the virtues of suffering are a central theme. But they also represent an attempt to salvage something of the soldier’s masculinity. In the pre-war world, masculinity had been associated with a variety of qualities: aggression and courage, but also with “hardness” – the ability to endure pain and deprivation.<sup>1004</sup> Aggression did not have much meaning on the modern battlefield.<sup>1005</sup> But soldiers could still emphasize their toughness. This allowed them to reconcile a collective identity based on suffering with individual identities as men.

If the logic of a suffering-based identity did not lend itself to resistance, the kinds of social connections it fostered did not provide a very firm basis for collective action. An identity based on suffering drew a specific kind of connection between soldiers. It united them on the basis of shared negative experiences. The social and functional divisions in

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<sup>1001</sup> BfZ, Huebner, Oct 30 1918 and Nov 5 1918. To “hold on” [durchhalten] was a major theme of German propaganda. In its official usage, it usually refers to the endurance of material hardship, until a military victory is won. Soldiers often used the term in a somewhat different sense, however. To them, “hold on” meant to resist despair or psychological collapse. Its point of reference was personal, rather than political.

<sup>1002</sup> BfZ, Lips, May 28 1917

<sup>1003</sup> BfZ, Wenzel, Sep 18 1917

<sup>1004</sup> See Joachim Radkau, *Das Zeitalter der Nervosität: Deutschland zwischen Bismarck und Hitler* (Munich: Hanser, 1998), 422-42.

<sup>1005</sup> Leed, *No Man’s Land*, 110-111, 104-105.

the army were not thereby eliminated, however. They were, at best, papered over, and in some respects they were made worse. For while all soldiers suffered, no one pretended that all suffered equally. Certain groups clearly fared worse than others. But actually sorting out questions about relative hardship – that is, how the sufferings of any one group or individual compared to others – was a difficult and conflicted process. Some points were relatively uncontroversial. There was wide agreement, for example, that front soldiers suffered worse than rear area soldiers.<sup>1006</sup> In many cases, though, there was no obvious answer to these kinds of questions. Was the life of an artilleryman worse than that of a fighter pilot, or a field medic, or a message runner? Did the privileges of the officer corps outweigh the extra dangers and responsibilities they faced? Did a civilian coal miner work harder than military engineer? Questions about relative suffering helped establish one's "hardness," as discussed above. They were also bound up with all manner of social and economic issues. Those who suffered more could lay a stronger claim to privileges and scarce resources of every kind. This was true of conflicts waged at the national level – for instance, debates over military compensation in the Reichstag.<sup>1007</sup> It was also true at lower levels. Within the military, soldiers could use suffering to lay claim to valuable privileges.<sup>1008</sup> Front line soldiers, for instance, often demanded preference over men the rear with respect to pay and home leave, implicitly invoking their greater

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<sup>1006</sup> Though of course, there was no simple boundary between front and rear. As Richard Holmes has pointed out, few soldiers enthusiastically identify as rear-area soldiers. The rear area is always the next level back. Holmes, *Acts of War*, 76. For sentiments on the front/rear divide, see BfZ, Ehlers, 4 May 1918.

<sup>1007</sup> This is a point made repeatedly by Cohen, *War Come Home*.

<sup>1008</sup> Such arguments had long been used to justify the privileges of the officer corps. See Marcus Funck, "Ready for War? Conceptions of Military Manliness in the Prusso-German Officer Corps before the First World War," in *Home/Front: The Military, War, and Gender in Twentieth-Century Germany*, eds. Karen Hagemann and Stefanie Schüler-Springorum (Oxford: Berg, 2002), 52-53.

sacrifices.<sup>1009</sup> Within the soldier's family circle, suffering provided claims to a greater share of the household resources. If soldiers desired food or other items from home, they usually only had to invoke the hardships of their life.<sup>1010</sup>

This meant that the community of suffering was not only unequal and hierarchical, but that there was continuous conflict over how this hierarchy should be arranged. Individuals emphasized the particular difficulties of their own position. At the same time, they policed the boundaries they had established, and resisted the efforts of others to join their company. This was a common feature of the relationship between veterans and new recruits. After new soldiers had gotten a taste of action, and had begun to speak of themselves as battle hardened, the veterans would dismiss such claims. They would insist that things had been much worse in previous battles, and that the recruits had not yet experienced "real war."<sup>1011</sup> We see the same kind of policing in the relationship between front and rear soldiers. Front line troops were usually willing to acknowledge that they both suffered, but only if it was recognized that their own sufferings were far worse. They might underline this distinction by exercising care in the way they defined the boundaries of the group when they talked to other soldiers. Instead of referring to all soldiers, they would talk about "the poor infantry" or the "poor fieldgrays."<sup>1012</sup> If they wished to make the point more forcefully, they might add an unsubtle reference to the comforts of the rear – something along the lines of "how lucky are the men who do not have to go through such a miserable life!"<sup>1013</sup> Or they might refer to the rear soldiers by

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<sup>1009</sup> For example BfZ, Wenzel, 4 Oct. 1917.

<sup>1010</sup> For instance BfZ, Klimamel, esp. 15 Nov. 1917.

<sup>1011</sup> See BfZ, Lips, 11 Aug 1917; Schetter

<sup>1012</sup> BfZ, Blecher, [n.d.]

<sup>1013</sup> Lips, BfZ, 28 Oct. 1918.

one of the many pejoratives in wide circulation – “shirker,” or “rear-area pig.”<sup>1014</sup>

Sometimes there was pushback. Rear area troops might suggest that the complaints of the *Frontschweine* were exaggerated for effect.<sup>1015</sup> Or they might try to align themselves with front-soldiers by complaining about soldiers even further to the rear. These kinds of challenges often provoked harsh responses. Their troubles were dismissed as “mere trifles” or “inconsequential details.”<sup>1016</sup>

By way of conclusion, let us return to the platform where the *Ersatzmänner* of the 242<sup>nd</sup> were assembling. We began this chapter by trying to understand the motives of their peers. These men were tired, angry veterans, headed back into the crucible of combat. Surely they longed for an end to the war as much as anybody. So when their compatriots began demanding peace, why had they not responded? Why did they not join in? In light of the material presented in this chapter, perhaps we can venture a fuller explanation of their behavior. Surely they sympathized with the rioters’ demands. And they no doubt understood the anger and exhaustion which gave rise to them. But collective protest did not fit with their understanding of the world. For these men, to be a soldier was to suffer; it was to be subject to forces outside of one’s control. It was therefore impossible to exert any significant influence on the larger course of events. Acts of protest were well-intentioned but pointless – perhaps even childish, more about blowing off steam than about achieving any concrete goal. This was not a conclusion that they reached as a result of rational deliberation. It was built into their view of their world; it was part of their perception. It seems likely that the events on the platform did not

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<sup>1014</sup> BfZ, Wenzel, 4 Oct. 1917; BfZ Ehlers, 25. Feb 1917.

<sup>1015</sup> See BA-MA, RH/61 1035, Stimmungsbericht, 23 Jun. 1918.

<sup>1016</sup> BfZ, Ehlers, 25 Feb. 1917.

make any particular impression on their conscious thinking. They never seriously contemplate joining the riot, any more than a pedestrian seriously contemplated joining a street protest that they happen past.



## Conclusion: Revolutions

At the end of October 1918, scarcely a week before the signing of the armistice, heavy fighting still raged all along the Western Front. In the German navy, events were beginning to take a different turn. On October 28<sup>th</sup>, the main German battle fleet received orders to put to sea, for what amounted to a suicide mission. The purpose of the operation, ostensibly to cover the retreat of the army in Belgium, was to provoke a clash with the Allied fleet, which outnumbered its German counterpart by a margin of three-to-one. Realizing now that the war was lost, the navy's leadership intended to see the fleet destroyed in battle, rather than be ignominiously handed over to the Allies as part of a peace settlement. The sailors of the fleet quickly grasped what was happening and acted quickly to stop it. Some crews refused to board their ships; others shut down their ship's engines. With disorders spreading from ship to ship, the mission had to be called off. On November 2<sup>nd</sup>, naval officers in Kiel arrested some of the mutiny's ringleaders. But these men were promptly freed when the fleet's sailors left their ships and took over the entire port.<sup>1</sup>

After the mutiny had spread from ship to shore, the government attempted to gather units from the field army in order to suppress it. The high command, however, had no uncommitted reserves to send. And even if some could be found, they would not be of any use; according to a snap poll of several dozen battlefield commanders, the men would never consent to fight in a counter-revolutionary capacity.<sup>2</sup> Still, the situation

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<sup>1</sup> The classic and still authoritative narrative of the naval mutinies is supplied by Daniel Horn, *The German Naval Mutinies of World War I* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1969).

<sup>2</sup> For an account of the government's initial reactions to the mutinies, and the Armeeparlament, see Stephenson, *The Final Battle*, esp. 76-96.

did not yet appear hopeless. The government still had at its disposal the units of the home army – that is, the network of town garrisons and training units stationed inside Germany. While much of its manpower had been siphoned off to the front in recent months, it still numbered more than a million men. In what proved to be one of the decisive factors in the November revolution, however, the soldiers of the home army supported the mutineers. This began to become clear on November 4th, when several nearby units were sent to suppress the swelling insurrection and to regain control of the port. Most of the men declared their support for the rebellion; the rest allowed themselves to be disarmed or simply melted away.<sup>1019</sup> This scene was to be repeated countless times in the following weeks. Conscious of their vulnerable position, the sailors looked to expand their movement. Moving by truck and train, bands of sailors and soldiers fanned out across the country. Everywhere they went, they won over the local garrison, usually within a matter of hours, along with worker’s organizations and trade unions. They would then proceed to dispose of the military government, erecting elected “soldiers and workers councils” in their place.<sup>1020</sup> With the home army going over to the side of rebellion – or what was now more properly called a revolution – it was able to spread with astonishing rapidity. By November 8th<sup>th</sup>, it has spread as far as Cologne, Frankfurt, and Leipzig. Inspired by these events, independent uprisings were taking shape elsewhere in the country, especially in Bavaria. Here mass demonstrations by workers, joined by

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<sup>1019</sup> Horn, *German Naval Mutinies*, 243.

<sup>1020</sup> The course of events in these early days of the revolution is fairly well established. Classic accounts are offered in Rudin, *Armistice*, 244-65; Ralph Lutz, *The German Revolution 1918-1919* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1922). A more contemporary account is offered by Ulrich Kluge, *Die Deutsche Revolution 1918/19: Staat, Politik und Gesellschaft zwischen Weltkrieg und Kapp-Putsch* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985). Many local case studies also confirm this basic course of events, for instance Klaus-Dieter Schwarz, *Weltkrieg und Revolution in Nürnberg* (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett Verlag, 1971).

most of the local garrison, overthrew the Wittelsbach dynasty and declared a socialist republic.<sup>1021</sup> The Hohenzollerns and the rest of Germany's royal houses soon followed the Wittelsbachs. On November 10<sup>th</sup>, Wilhelm II, already under pressure from the Allied to abdicate, fled to Holland. The German revolution is often referred to as a lost or "failed" revolution, because it neither dismantled the foundations of authoritarianism nor enacted lasting social reforms.<sup>1022</sup> But this first phase of the revolution could only be judged an astonishing success. In the span of about a week, revolutionaries had gained control of almost the entire country, and driven the monarch from his throne.

The course of the November revolution raises difficult questions about morale and collective action. Why had the revolution broken out in the home army, which had taken no part in the fighting, and which had been shielded from the horrors of the trenches? Why had it not emerged in the long-suffering field army? Historians have usually tried to answer this question by arguing that the home army and the field army had very different attitudes towards the war. In the front army, it is often argued, soldiers maintained some sense of patriotism and duty – sustained, partly, by the camaraderie and esprit de corps which combat fostered. The soldiers in the home army, by contrast, became cynical and pessimistic about the war. This was partly due to the influence of the civilians. Soldiers stationed within Germany were more directly exposed to the hardship of civilian life, and to their ceaseless complaints. They were also more susceptible to the propaganda and proselytizing of communist agents. Indeed, some have argued that the revolution was planned and executed by the independent socialists after "long, systematic

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<sup>1021</sup> Karl Bosl, *Bayern im Umbruch* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1969).

<sup>1022</sup> For instance, Sebastian Haffner, *Failure of a Revolution, Germany 1918-19* (London: Deutsch, 1973).

underground work.”<sup>1023</sup> This general line of argument was most popular in conservative circles.<sup>1024</sup> But it is also accepted by many mainstream historians.<sup>1025</sup>

In light of the evidence presented in the preceding chapters, however, these kinds of explanations cannot stand. There was no sharp contrast between the views of the field army and the home army. If morale in the rear was low, morale at the front was no better – as we saw at length in Chapter 3. The lifestyles of these two groups were obviously different; they faced very different routines, different challenges, and different hardships. But with regards to their general views of the war, there was broad agreement – most soldiers, in the field and at home, wanted to see an immediate end to the war. The continuity of opinion is often clear in soldiers’ correspondences. Many men transferred between home and front, and the transfer rarely occasioned any significant change in their attitude. If anything, soldiers’ moods tended to be a bit brighter when they were transferred to some garrison in the rear. Their longing for peace remained, but it carries perhaps somewhat less urgency – a fact that seems completely commonsensical.<sup>1026</sup> Their experience points to another important fact. There was a great deal of personnel overlap between the field army and the home army, which seems to cast further doubt on any effort to paint them as drastically different in outlook.<sup>1027</sup>

The critical difference between the home army and the field army was not their attitude towards the war but their opportunities for organization. As I have tried to make

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<sup>1023</sup> Ludendorff, *Ludendorff's Own Story*, 429.

<sup>1024</sup> This line of argument is virtually ubiquitous in conservative accounts, as in Ludendorff’s memoirs cited above. See Also Lutz, *German Revolution*, esp. 29; Ritter, *Sword and Scepter IV*, esp. 369; Erich Otto Volkman, *Der Marxismus und das deutsche Heer im Weltkriege* (Berlin, 1925).

<sup>1025</sup> Stephenson, *The Final Battle*; Ulrich Kluge, *Soldatenräte und Revolution: Studien zur Militärpolitik in Deutschland, 1918-1919* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1975), esp. 104-05.

<sup>1026</sup> For a vivid example, see BfZ, Schulin, compare entries before and after 1917.

<sup>1027</sup> See also Chapter 4, on the sharing of soldiers between front and rear tasks.

clear, it was very difficult for men in the field army to speak or act collectively. Many factors played a role in this – high turnover, heterogeneity and internal conflict, a passive world view, and the demands of managing a family *in absentia*. The men in the home forces did not operate under these constraints. The composition of garrison units was typically much more stable than combat units. They did not lose men to casualties, obviously. And they only rarely lost men to internal transfers. They were largely composed of men who had been declared unfit for other kinds of duties, on account of age or injury, and so they could usually not be transferred into combat units or other assignments.<sup>1028</sup> They formed a relatively stable social unit, whose members had served together for months or years, and who knew each other well. The demands placed on these men were comparatively light. They generally performed minor tasks, such as guard duty or light manufacturing. And they worked a fixed number of hours, with days off and frequent leave.<sup>1029</sup> This meant that they had more time and energy to devote to political matters. This meant also that there was more space in which such discussions could occur. During their off hours, soldiers could move about the town as they pleased. They were free to congregate in beer halls and other public spaces, to air their grievances, and to express their views on the war – outside the eye of superiors.<sup>1030</sup> In the first phase of the revolution, the decision for action was often taken in some local tavern or town square.

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<sup>1028</sup> Donald Stephenson, *Frontschweine and Revolution: The Role of Front-line Soldiers in the German Revolution of 1918* (Dissertation: University of Kansas, 2007) 149-50.

<sup>1029</sup> Many of these structural factors are described in Ernst-Heinrich Schmidt, *Heimatheer und Revolution 1918: Die militärischen Gewalten in Heimatgebiet zwischen Oktoberreform und Novemberrevolution* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1981)

<sup>1030</sup> See for instance the accounts in DTA 1613; BfZ Schulin.

Such decisions were also shaped by the proximity of other political forces. Out in the field, the army itself was the only source of political power. If resistance were to be mounted against the war, it would have to emerge from within the ranks, with no hope of immediate support from the outside. Back in Germany, however, the constellation of political forces was different. In any given locale, power resided not just with the garrison, but with a collection of local political organizations, especially workers' organizations and trade unions. In most respects, these organizations were far better equipped to undertake collective action than the garrison. They possessed some formal organization and leadership structure, a defined agenda, and wide experience with strikes, walkouts, and other forms of collective resistance.<sup>1031</sup> When events began to move, it was often workers who took a leading role.<sup>1032</sup> This put the men of the town garrison in a different position than their counterparts in the field. Rather than having to *make* a rebellion, they only had to decide whether to join one in progress – and one which already enjoyed broad popular support. And in most cases, of course, soldiers could hardly remain neutral; they were compelled to make a choice. When revolutionaries took to the street, the garrison was usually instructed to restore order. This presented them with two clear alternatives: remain loyal to the authorities and assist in suppressing the revolution, or support the revolutionaries. For most men, the choice was an obvious one.

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<sup>1031</sup> For useful remarks, see Gerald Feldman, "Die Massenbewegungen der Arbeiterschaft in Deutschland am Ende des Ersten Weltkrieges (1917-1920)" *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 13 (1972).

<sup>1032</sup> The unfolding of events, of course, differed from place to place. In many places, the revolution emerged out of a series of strikes and workers' demonstrations, which often began weeks before the armistice. This was the case in much of South Germany, especially Bavaria (see Bosl, *Bayern im Umbruch*). In other cases, as in Berlin, events were triggered by the arrival of mutinous soldiers or sailors from elsewhere, but workers' movements were the first to join them (Stephenson, *Final Battle*, esp. 90-92). Elsewhere, workers and soldiers coordinated from the beginning. See Mario Hesselbarth, "Zur Novemberrevolution in Thüringen" in *Die Novemberrevolution 1918/1919 in Deutschland: Für bürgerliche und sozialistische Demokratie: allgemeine, regionale und biographische Aspekte*, ed. Ulla Plener (Berlin: Karl Dietz Verlag, 2009).

And it was facilitated further by the personal ties between the garrison and the worker's movement. A town's garrison was usually composed of local men. Many of its members, then, would have ties to the local trade unions. These men often played a critical role in coordinating the actions of the trade unions and the men of the garrison.<sup>1033</sup>

The final chapter of the Imperial German army, then, only confirmed what had been true throughout the conflict – that there was no straightforward connection between soldiers' behaviors and their attitude towards the conflict. What was critical, rather, were the social processes through which oppositional attitudes were translated into collective action. Soldiers in the field did not fight because they supported the larger aims of the war. Soldiers in the home army, likewise, did not revolt because they had come to the simultaneous realization that the war no longer served their interest. Soldiers' attitudes towards the war were the constant in these equations; since at least 1917, most soldiers had ceased to believe that the war served a legitimate purpose, and only wanted the war to end as quickly as possible. The critical variable here is the possibility for organization. The soldiers of the home army lived in an environment in where their discontent could be converted into action. The soldiers of the field did not.

The possibilities for organization were governed by a wide set of variables – the conditions of the battlefield, the army's internal structure, class and ethnic configurations, political culture, national identities. We cannot, then, express the likelihood of resistance in terms of a simple formula. We cannot agree, for instance, with Jay Winter's suggestion

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<sup>1033</sup> See for instance Silvio Reisinger, "Die Novemberrevolution 1918/19 in Leipzig" in *Die Novemberrevolution 1918/1919 in Deutschland: Für bürgerliche und sozialistische Demokratie: allgemeine, regionale und biographische Aspekte*, ed. Ulla Plener (Berlin: Karl Dietz Verlag, 2009); Hesselbarth, "Novembinerrevolution in Thüringen"

that resistance became more likely as the number of peasants in the army increased.<sup>1034</sup>

We can nevertheless offer some thoughts about the general conditions that create the prerequisites for collective action. The lack of resistance in the German army, it seems to me, was tied to two larger processes. The first of these relates to the structure of the army. During the war, the army was changing from a small pre-modern organization to a modern, internally complex, mass organization. This growth was made possible largely by economic modernization, which provided the economic means to arm and equip a mass army, and laid the foundation for demographic growth.<sup>1035</sup> But this increase in power came at a cost to internal cohesion. Growing size and technical sophistication required massive functional differentiation; specialized units and branches were added continually throughout the war. This diminished the stock of experiences and references that soldiers held in common, and from which they could fashion a useful collective identity. This also generated human flux, as individuals were shifted to meet new needs, and existing units were continually reorganized and restructured. Further disruption was caused by heavy casualties, which were also tied to expansion. With access to a virtually inexhaustible supply of men, the army's leaders had the means to pursue strategies which would be enormously costly, even if successful – the offensives of 1918 are case in point. And this was not only a matter of rational calculation. The cultural logic of mass organizations played a role as well – the more members the army had, the less value it assigned to any individual member. These twin pressures – rapid expansion and high casualties – produced a third disruptive force, social heterogeneity. In the 19<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>1034</sup> Jay Winter, *The Experience of World War I* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>1035</sup> See John Keegan, *The Second World War* (New York: Penguin, 1989), 12-17.



century, armies were small enough to draw their manpower from a single social class.

But by 1914, this was no longer thinkable; to maintain the volume of manpower that the army required, it was necessary to draw on every class and age-group.

Of course, the demographic composition of the army was not simply a product of changes in military policy. It was ultimately rooted to the social composition of the nation. And this points us towards the second general explanation for the tranquility of the German army, social complexity and social conflict. Within the span of a few generations, Germany had been transformed from a predominantly agrarian society into a mature industrial society, with a complex division of labor, and an increasingly tense class structure. This made it inevitable that a mass conscript army would be a socially heterogeneous body. It was likewise inevitable that all the social-political conflict present in normal society would be reproduced in the army. In many respects they would be worse, since the German army (like all armies) was decidedly hierarchical and non-equalitarian. Pre-existing social inequalities were magnified through the army's systems for distributing power and privileges. They were also made more complex and less predictable. Since the army's internal hierarchy did not perfectly replicate the larger social hierarchy, conflicts among its members could not be understood solely in terms of conventional categories, like class or religion. Existing social divisions became tangled up with military divisions. For the individual, social complexity and division of labor meant that his social world was expanding; the fulfillment of his basic needs required him to interact with an ever rising numbers of individuals, while new technologies in

communication and transportation gave him the ability to do so.<sup>1036</sup> But this left his social energies stretched increasingly thin. He was pulled between many different commitments, leaving him with less energy to devote to any single group or task. For a while, soldiers had been shielded from this development, since the nature of their duties had left them largely severed from their peacetime existence. But when modern communications finally succeeded in connecting home and front, this was no longer the case. Tied to his family and friends via the post, the conscript soldier now had to attend *both* to the affairs of the household and to the demands of military life.

These observations can provide at least a starting point for re-evaluating other national cases. Consider the British army, the only other major army to emerge from the war without a major disciplinary breakdown. Most explanations for the resilience of the British soldier have focused on consent-side theories. The British army, it is often claimed, was particularly good at securing the loyalty of its men, through a combination of paternalist support and regimental tradition.<sup>1037</sup> This was facilitated by British political culture, which cultivated a deferential, disciplined and impassive underclass.<sup>1038</sup> Without dismissing this body work, it seems like the kinds of structural-organizational explanation advanced in this study might add to the discussion. Britain, like Germany, was an advanced industrial economy with a complex division of labor. Indeed, these were

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<sup>1036</sup> The classic version of this argument is advanced by Norbert Elias, *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation. Soziogenetische und psychogenetische Untersuchungen* (Bern: Franke, 1969).

<sup>1037</sup> John Baynes, *Morale: A Study of Men and Courage: The Second Scottish Rifles at the Battle of Neuve Chapelle 1915* (London: Leo Cooper, 1967); Timothy Bowman, *The Irish Regiments in the Great War: Discipline and Morale* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

<sup>1038</sup> For instance, Gary Sheffield, *Leadership in the Trenches*; Winter, *The Experience of World War I*; John Bourne, "The British Working Man in Arms," in *Facing Armageddon*, Cecil and Liddle, eds.

arguably the only two genuine “class societies” in Europe at the time.<sup>1039</sup> Both experienced severe social conflict before the war, including massive labor unrest, and such conflicts spilled over into the army during the war itself.<sup>1040</sup> Both constructed large armies that were functionally diverse and internally complex, and which experienced high rates of personnel turnover.<sup>1041</sup> It seems not unreasonable to suggest, then, that similar kinds of explanation might apply in both cases – that is, the stability of the British army might have been at least partly related to the inability of British soldiers to organize collective action.

We might extend corollary logic to the Russian army, where soldiers *did* eventually refuse to fight, and where many of them turned against the regime itself. Explanations for the Russian collapse generally focus on the heavy casualties suffered by the Russian army, thanks to its ineffective leadership and inadequate industrial base.<sup>1042</sup> At same point, so the standard narrative goes, Russian soldiers had simply had enough. But perhaps the Russian soldier was no more discontent than his counterparts in other armies – all of whom faced great dangers and miserable conditions. Perhaps he was simply more able to turn that resistance into action. There is certainly evidence to give substance to the suggestion. The Russian army was less complex and far more socially

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<sup>1039</sup> Bernard Waites, *A Class Society at War, England, 1914-1918* (Leamington Spa: Berg, 1987); Ian Beckett and Keith Simpson, eds., *A Nation in Arms: A Social Study of the British Army in the First World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985).

<sup>1040</sup> See Friedhelm Boll, “Reformist and Revolutionary Strike Practice in Germany, Labor Disputes in Germany: Labor Disputes in Hanover and Braunschweig 1906-1919,” in *Strikes, Social Conflict, and the First World War: An International Perspective*, eds. Leopold Haimson and Giulio Sapelli (Milan: Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, 1002); Andrew Rothstein, *The Soldiers’ Strikes of 1919* (London: Macmillan, 1980); Gill, *Unknown Army*.

<sup>1041</sup> See Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front*.

<sup>1042</sup> See for instance W.H. Chamberlain, *The Russian Revolution of 1917-21* (New York: 1935); Marc Ferro, “The Russian Soldier in 1917,” *Slavic Review* 30 (1971); Oliver Radkey, *The Agrarian Foes of Bolshevism: Promise and Default of the Russian Socialist Revolutionaries, February to October, 1917* (New York: Columbia University, 1958).

homogenous than its western European counterparts. The rank and file was almost entirely drawn from the country's enormous peasantry. The officer corps, meanwhile, was almost entirely aristocratic/bourgeois, meaning that peasant conscripts could easily draw upon established populist and anti-elitist ideologies in organizing collective action.<sup>1043</sup> They could further draw on a communitarian political culture, an established history of direct action, and (to some extent) on traditional civilian structures. In the Russian army, peasant soldiers often recreated such structures within their military units, at least in some fashion, and these could potentially be used more organization and mobilization.<sup>1044</sup>

Confirmation of these hypotheses must wait for additional research. Whatever it may show, however, I think that this study has at least made clear that we cannot draw direct connections between what soldiers do and what their motives are. Such inferences are made all the time, and not only with reference to the First World War. When soldiers fight hard, we are prepared to reach conclusions about their political or ideological convictions. The resistance of the Wehrmacht in 1942-45, for instance, is often taken to suggest the deep-rootedness of Nazi convictions.<sup>1045</sup> By the same token, military collapse is often taken to indicate some massive failure in the nation's basic political or social structures. The French collapse in 1940 comes to mind, as does the American experience

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<sup>1043</sup> This line of argument is partially suggested by Wildman, *End of the Russian Imperial Army*, vol. I.

<sup>1044</sup> John Bushnell "Peasants in Uniform: The Tsarist Army as a Peasant Society" *Journal of Social History* 13, no. 4 (Summer 1980).

<sup>1045</sup> For instance Stephen Fritz, *Frontsoldaten: The German Soldier of World War II* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1995). Fritz makes a nuanced argument about how ideology and personal circumstances intersect; nevertheless, he believes there is a fairly evident connection between combat cohesion and ideology.

in Vietnam.<sup>1046</sup> There is something to such arguments; the collapse of military institutions probably does point to other underlying problems. But the matter is not so simple as such arguments would have it. We must account for the social factors that govern whether men can refuse to fight. And we must likewise acknowledge the broader processes to which these factors are connected. It is often argued that modernity had made it easier to transform men into soldiers, because the modern state has been able to concentrate enormous powers in its hands, especially the instruments of socialization. From the time they are born, men are immersed in ideologies and cultures that support the states need for military power.<sup>1047</sup> But modernization works in other ways as well. It makes the soldier less able to resist the state's efforts to mobilize him. It renders them unable to speak with one voice, and diminishes the power inherent in their numbers.

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<sup>1046</sup> Marc Bloc, *L'Etrange defaite* (Paris: Societe des ed Franc-tireur, 1940); Mary Kathryn Barbier, "Vietnam in History and Memory," in *America and the Vietnam War: Re-Examining the Culture and History of a Generation*, ed. Andrew Weist (Taylor & Francis, 2009). Russia in World War I offers another good example (see note 25 above).

<sup>1047</sup> This argument has been made in many different ways, with different points of emphasis. One classical formulation in Zygmunt Bowman, *Modernity and Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989). See also *The Nation-State and Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth-century Warfare* (New York: Basic Book, 1999); Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*.

## Appendix I: German Casualties on the Western Front, 1914-1918

	Year				
	1914	1915	1916	1917	1918
January		62,452	36,146	36,094	33,885
February		61,980	64,257	43,708	33,233
March		65,478	94,896	46,458	232,007
April		83,376	78,626	164,545	244,332
May		120,187	90,678	127,371	138,574
June		90,418	98,672	91,964	163,348
July		68,044	182,217	85,384	165,099
August	136,417	46,512	134,157	129,628	221,158
September	201,911	114,305	161,228	88,348	230,172
October	146,314	86,039	119,495	120,797	310,144
November	93,387	37,840	79,116	73,904	64,526
December	60,208	36,594	52,660	50,266	

### Sources and Notes:

All figures are total casualties: killed, wounded, and missing in action.

Figures for August 1914 to July of 1918 are from *Sanitätsbericht über das Deutsche Heer im Weltkriege 1914/1918*, vol. 3 (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1934), Tafel 147-50. The figures for August 1918 are on page 60, übersicht 53.

German casualties for September through November 1918 are not listed in the *Sanitätsbericht*, or in any other source of which I am aware. My figures here are based on the estimates made by James McRandle and James Quirk in "The Blood Test Revisited: A New Look at German Casualty Counts in World War I," *The Journal of Military History* 70, no. 3 (Jul. 2006). McRandle and Quirk base their estimates off of a comparison of different data sets.

McRandle and Quark estimate that the total number of casualties for the period August through November are 826,000. If we take that figure, and subtract the number of casualties suffered during the month of August (221,158), we arrive at an approximate figure for the casualties suffered during the period September through November (604,842).

It is clear that those casualties were not distributed evenly over this ten week period. I have estimated the distribution of these casualties, based on the distribution of Allied casualties on the Western Front over the same period. Between September and November, the Allies suffered 628,489 casualties. 38.05% of these were suffered in September, 51.28% were suffered during October, and 10.67% were suffered in November. I have distributed the German casualties for the Sep-Nov period based on these percentages.

## Appendix II: Demographic Change in the 1<sup>st</sup> Company

	#1: Outbreak	#2: 1 Nov 1914	#3 1 Sep. 1915	#4 1 Feb. 1917	#5 1 Mar. 1918	#6 1 Nov. 1918
<b>Total Men</b>	130	275	272	279	231	188

<b>Religious Breakdown</b>						
Protestant	83.08%	80.00%	68.75%	73.12%	76.62%	76.60%
Catholic	16.92%	19.27%	30.15%	26.52%	22.51%	22.34%
Other	0.00%	0.73%	1.10%	0.36%	0.87%	1.06%

<b>Regional Breakdown</b>						
from Württemberg	80.77%	83.27%	77.57%	82.44%	76.62%	74.47%
non-Württemberg	18.46%	16.00%	20.22%	15.77%	20.78%	23.40%

<b>Age Breakdown</b>						
Median Age	22.0		23	25	26	23.5
17-19	6.15%	7.27%	2.57%	0.36%	5.19%	21.81%
21-26	91.54%	79.64%	78.31%	62.72%	48.48%	42.55%
27-30	1.54%	11.64%	13.97%	16.13%	21.21%	17.55%
31-39	0.77%	1.45%	4.78%	20.07%	20.78%	15.96%
40+	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.72%	3.90%	2.66%

<b>Family Breakdown</b>						
Married/Widower	3.08%	14.55%	17.65%	25.09%	23.81%	16.49%
average children		0.40%				0.67%
Single	96.92%	85.45%	82.35%	74.91%	76.19%	83.51%

<b>Professional Breakdown</b>						
Agriculture	18.46%	18.18%	18.75%	25.45%	22.08%	25.53%
Industrial	19.23%	18.91%	16.18%	16.85%	11.69%	19.15%
Artisan	15.38%	12.36%	18.75%	16.49%	16.88%	13.83%
Petty Bourgeois	23.85%	30.18%	29.41%	27.96%	32.03%	26.06%
Student	13.85%	10.18%	5.15%	3.23%	2.16%	2.13%
Unskilled Laborer	6.92%	5.45%	7.72%	4.66%	6.93%	6.38%
White Collar	2.31%	4.73%	3.68%	4.66%	6.93%	5.32%
Military	0.00%	0.00%	0.37%	0.36%	0.87%	1.06%

<b>Service Breakdown</b>						
With Pre-War Service	100.00%	90.91%	58.46%	31.54%	24.68%	20.21%
Volunteers	0.00%	5.82%	7.72%	1.79%	1.30%	0.53%
Average Transfers						

<b>Continuity</b>						
Enrolled as of #1		39.27%	22.79%	9.32%	6.93%	4.26%
Enrolled as of #2			50.37%	15.77%	10.82%	5.32%
Enrolled as of #3				25.81%	14.72%	8.51%
Enrolled as of #4					46.32%	20.74%
Enrolled as of #5						40.96%

Source: HSA-St, M468, Bd 1-2.



## Appendix III: Organization of a German Infantry Regiment in 1914 and 1918

1914			Per Unit						Total	
	Per Regiment		Fighting Men			Support Staff			Fighting Men	Support Staff
		N		S	N		S	N		
Infantry Companies	12	<sup>3</sup>	259 <sup>3</sup>						3108	0
Machine Gun Companies	1	<sup>3</sup>	95 <sup>3</sup>						95	0
Battalion Staff	3	<sup>3</sup>				33 <sup>3</sup>			0	99
Regimental Staff	1	<sup>3</sup>				49 <sup>3</sup>			0	49
Total									3203	148
Grand Total										3351
Percent Total									95.58%	4.42%

1918			Per Unit						Total	
	Per Regiment		Fighting Men			Support Staff			Fighting Men	Support Staff
		N		S	N		S	N		
Infantry Companies	12	<sup>a</sup>	163 <sup>b</sup>			24 <sup>1</sup>			1956	288
Machine Gun Companies	3		84 <sup>1</sup>			30 <sup>1,2</sup>			252	90
Mortar Company	1		50 <sup>c</sup>			36 <sup>2</sup>			50	36
Battalion Staff	3		0			37 <sup>2</sup>			0	111
Regimental Staff	1		0			66 <sup>2</sup>			0	66
Totals									2258	591
Grand Totals										2849
Percent Total									79.3%	20.7%

### Sources:

1. *German Army Handbook of 1918*
2. *Summary of Information*, no. 219 (Nov. 6 1918), "Special Duty Men in a German Infantry Regiment"
3. Nash, *Imperial German Army Handbook*

### Notes:

a. Most sources confirm that, by 1918, most battalions still consisted of 4 infantry companies. See Cron 40, *German Army Handbook* 34. A reduction of the number of companies from 4 to 3, instituted in October 1918, was not widely put into effect. See Haythornethwaite 195.

b. Sources disagree. Most sources talk in terms of battalion strength, which was reduced during the war. Cron says strength was reduced to 750 men, while Thomas says 650. The *German Army Handbook*, citing an order from 12 March 1917, says strength was reduced to 750, of which 100 would be a.v. or g.v. The most reasonable explanation was that battalion strength was about 650 rifles, with 100 support staff. This fits almost exactly with source 2, which states that each company had a support staff of 24. That would mean a four company battalion would have a support staff of 96. If the battalion contained 650 rifles, that means each company would contain about 163 rifles.

c. Estimate. Sources disagree on whether this unit was a company or platoon. A platoon had four guns. Figure assumes a crew of roughly ten.

## Appendix IV: Breakdown of the German Field Army, by Service Branch

The German army kept no comprehensive statistics on the size of each service branch. The precise size of each branch is therefore very difficult to know with any precision, especially because their size and composition was constantly being changed – both during the war and during it. To arrive at these figures, I have used a simple multiplicative method. I have taken the number of units of any given type, and multiplied that by the number of men (of all ranks) which that unit was supposed to contain. These figures are not contained in any one source, but were drawn from a wide range of secondary material, as indicated. Such figures, of course, are intended only as estimates. In some cases, reorganizations were decreed but never carried out (or only partially carried out), meaning that the army's tables of organization did not fully correspond to reality. The actual strength of each branch, moreover, fluctuated considerably over time, as each branch lost men from battle casualties and other causes. Nevertheless, they suffice to show the massive internal reorganization which occurred during the war.

### 1.) Breakdown by Service Branch, 1914

	Number of Units	Source	Notes	Men Per Unit (all ranks)	Source	Notes	Total	Source	Notes	Branch Total	Notes
<b>Infantry</b>											
Infantry Battalions	1305	2		1,080	1		1,409,400			1,452,852	
Light Infantry Battalions	36	2		1,080	2		38,880				
Cyclist Companies	36	2		127	2		4,572				
<b>Cavalry</b>											
Cavalry Squadrons	558	2	a	180	2		100,440			100,440	
<b>Artillery</b>											
Field Artillery Batteries	961	2		153	2		147,033			180,283	
Foot Artillery Batteries	140	2					33,250		4		
<b>Air Defense Units</b>											
							300	2	f	300	
<b>Machine Guns</b>											
Machine Gun Companies	323	2		99	2		31,977			31,977	
<b>Engineers</b>											



<b>Medical Service</b>									
Field Hospitals	300		c	51	1		15,300		33,660
Sanitäts Companies	85	2	g	216	1		18,360		
<b>Headquarter Staffs</b>									
Infantry Regiment Staff	435	2		53	1		23,055		55,743
Field Artillery Regiment Staff	131	2		22	2		2,882		
Artillery Abteilung Staff	313	2		34	2		10,642		
Divisional Staffs	86	2	b	108	9		9,288		
Corps Staffs	26	2		301	1 2		7,826		
Army Staffs	8	2		225	7		1,800		
GHQ Staff	1	2		250			250		
<b>Field Police</b>									
Field Police Battalions	33	16		180	1		5,940		5,940

**Notes:**

- a. 110 5-squadron regiments, and 36 3-squadron regiments.
- b. Not counting the Ersatz divisions, which were in the process of formation
- c. Assumed to be similar to a balloon section, into which many of the airship units were converted.
- d. There was one train battalion for each corps (25 total). In wartime, each provided 4 infantry, 8 artillery, and 8 heavy artillery munitions columns, 6 provisions columns, 6 fuhrpark columns, 2 horse depots and 12 field hospitals. See sources 2 and 12. Some slight variation among different sources.
- e. Conservative estimate, based on the size of army and corps staffs.
- f. Estimates. Nash speaks of 'a few platoons' of AA units formed at the outbreak. Company sized units would not be formed until later.
- g. One veterinary officer assigned per cavalry squadron, 4 per artillery regiment, 1 per horse depot, and 1 per signals battalion.
- h. Sources differ on this point. Thomas says 1-3 per corps (75 max). German Army Handbook and Nash state 1 per division, which yields about 85.
- i. The mathematical figure is just over 11,000. I have added an additional 1,000 support troops. This seems plausible, given the peacetime establishment was under 5,000.

**Source:**

1. Thomas, *The German Army in World War I, 1917-1918* and *The German Army in World War I, 1914-1915*
2. Nash, *Imperial German Army Handbook, 1914-1918*
3. *Notes on the German Army in the War*
4. Wrisber, *Heer und Heimat*
6. <http://www.kaiserscross.com>. Author refers to Cron but gives no definite citations.
7. *The Armed Strength of the German Empire*
8. According to the "Organization of German Divisions, 1918" order of battle, at <http://carl.army.mil/nafziger>. It cites *Histories of the Two Hundred and Fifty One Divisions*.
9. HSA-St M1/4 242. Infanterie Division / Oktober 1916 - Oktober 1918
10. Sanitätsbericht III

11. McDill, *Lessons from the Enemy*

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13. *Statistisches Jahrbuch fuer das Deutsche Reich 1921/22*

14. *The German Army Handbook of 1918*

15. Westerman, *Flak: German Anti-Aircraft Defenses 1914-1945*

16. Watson, *Enduring the Great War*

2.) Breakdown by Service Branch, 1918

## 2.) Breakdown by Service Branch, 1918

	Number of Units	Source	Notes	Men Per Unit (all ranks)	Source	Notes	Men Total	Source	Notes	Branch Total	Source
<b>Infantry</b>											
Infantry Battalions	2252	2	i	770			1,734,040			1,753,090	
Cyclist Companies	150	14		127	2		19,050				
<b>Cavalry</b>											
Cavalry Squadrons	734	2	j	180	2	i	132,120		k	132,120	
<b>Artillery</b>											
Field Artillery Batteries	2,800	2	h	153	2		428,400			829,317	
Foot Artillery Batteries	1,660	4		225	2		400,917	4	g		
<b>Air Defense Units</b>											
Flak MG Abteilungen	23	1		300	1	n	6,900			57,800	15
Flak MG Platoons	1,086	2	o								
<b>Machine Guns</b>											
Machine Gun Companies	2,337	13	m	99	2		231,363			231,363	
<b>Engineers</b>											
Pioneer Companies	876	1	a	270	2		236,520			473,757	
Gas Companies	14	2	b	92	2		1,288				
Res. Engineer Companies	92	1		270		c	24,840				
Mining Companies	54	1		270		c	14,580				
Searchlight Sections	238	1	a	41	2		9,758				

Mortar Companies	754	1	d	224	2		168,896				
Divisional Bridgng Train	121	4	gg	61	14		7,381				
Corps Bridging Train	53	4	gg	198	14		10,494				
<b>Military Train</b>											
Mixed Munitions Columns	507	6		180	12	y	91,260			679,007	
Field Artillery Mun. Columns	785	6		193	12		151,505				
Foot Artillery Mun. Columns	1671	6	aa	105	12		175,455				
Provisions Columns	472	1		129	12		60,888				
Wagon Parks	775	1		102	12		79,050				
Horse Depots	140	1		115	7	p	16,100				
Bakery Columns	148	1		193	12		28,564				
Field Butcheries	267	1		150		ee	40,050				
Supply Column Commands	33	1		20	14		660				
Veterinary Hospitals	473	1		75	14		35,475				
<b>Labour Units</b>											
Armierungs Battalions	190	3		800	3	e	152,000			235,700	
Strassenbau Companies	56	1		200	3	f	11,200				
Etappen-Hilfs Companies	50	14		200		f	10,000				
Etappens-Sammel Companies	30	14		200		f	6,000				
Wirtschaft Companies	150	14		200		f	30,000				
Harvesting Companies	20	14		200		f	4,000				
POW labour battalions	150	14		150	14	cc	22,500				
<b>Railway Units</b>											
RR Construction Companies	121	1		233	7	p	28,193			81,213	
RR Traffic Companies	127	1		212	7	p	26,924				
Cable Car Companies	28	1		212		q	5,936				
Field Traffic Batallions	48	1		420		r	20,160				
<b>Motor Transport</b>											
Divisional Motor Columns	251	1		100	14		25,100			63,572	
Rear Area Motor Columns	319	1		100		bb	31,900				
Rear Area Motor	26	1		100		bb	2,600				

Companies										
Motorcycle Abteilungen	20	6		100		bb	2,000			
Tracked-Vehicle Columns	10	6		100		bb	1,000			
Panzer Abteilungen	9	2		108			972			
<b>Signals Service</b>							190,000	2		190,000
<b>Air Force</b>										
Fighter Squadrons	90	1		132	2	x	11,880			90,000
Bomber Squadrons	27	1		132	2	x	3,564			
Giant Aircraft Detachments	4	1		132	2	x	528			
Reconnaissance Detachments	53	1		132	2	x	6,996			
Artillery Spotter Detachments	101	1		132	2	x	13,332			
Protection Detachments	38	1		132	2	x	5,016			
Balloon Platoons	158	1		113	14		17,854			
<b>Medical Service</b>										
Field Hospitals	558	10		122	1		68,706			126,000 <sup>11</sup>
Sanitäts Companies	313	10		216	2		67,608			
<b>Headquarter Staffs</b>										
Infantry Regiment Staff	745		s	53	2		39,485			124,345
Field Artillery Regiment Staff	320	8	t	90	2		28,800			
Artillery Command Staff	205	8		25	14		5,125			
Divisional Staffs	240	2		108	9	u	25,920			
Corps Staffs	65	2		301	12		19,565			
Army Staffs	14	2		225	7	p	3,150			
Army Group Staffs	8	2		225		dd	1,800			
GHQ Staff	1			500		dd	500			
<b>Field Police</b>										
Field Police Batallions	115	1		180	1		20,700			21,260
Secret Field Police Groups	14	1	v	40	1	w	560			

Notes:

- a. 400 Independent Companies, and 238 Divisional Engineering Batallions, each consisting of two companies (with one Minenwerfer Company and one Searchlight Detachment)
- b. Seven gas batallions raised, each of two companies.

- c. It's assumed that the establishment of these units was similar to that of the regular companies.
- d. 708 companies (most eventually attached to divisions), and 23 mortar battalions attached to army commands. It's assumed that each battalion contains two companies
- e. Strength listed at 4 to 5 companies, each of about 200 men. 900 represents an average.
- f. It is assumed that each labour company is about the same strength as an *Armierungs* company.
- g. If one takes the number of batteries, and multiplies them by the men per battery, one gets a somewhat smaller figure (375,000). I go with *Wrisbergs*, which presumably includes command and supporting formations.
- h. Including 22 batteries of mountain guns, and six batteries armed with experimental weapons.
- i. Nash gives the establishment of a 4 squadron regiment as 36 officers and 688 other ranks. A three squadron regiment is 27 officers and 511 other ranks.
- j. The 110 prewar regiments were 5 squadrons each. The 36 raised during wartime consisted of 3 squadrons each. In addition, there were 38 independent *Landwehr* squadrons, and 38 *Ersatz Abteilung* (assumed to be 2 squadrons each)
- k. According to Nash, only about half of this force remained mounted by the war's end. 250 squadrons were attached to the infantry, and only 20% of the remainder (about 100 squadrons) were mounted.
- l. Nash states that there are 700 infantry regiments by 1918, along with 36 light infantry regiments, and 9 naval infantry regiments. There are also 17 Storm Battalions (Thomas). Assuming the standard 3 battalions per gives 2252. This is not too distant from British estimates, of 2,300. See *German Army Handbook of 1918*. The *Statistisches Jahrbuch fuer das Deutsche Reich 1921/22* states that there are 2221 infantry battalions in March (1749 in the west). A few additional battalions were subsequently created/
- m. *Statistisches Jahrbuch* states that there were over 2,337 machine gun companies at war's end. This seems plausible. There was one company per infantry battalion (about 2250), there were 83 sharpshooter *abteilungen* (about equivalent to a regular company) and some other miscellaneous formations.
- n. Three companies, each of about 100 men.
- o. There were a great variety of flak units. This counts together all platoon and battery sized units (which we numbered in common sequence).
- p. These establishment strengths are from the 1890s. They provide at least a rough guide to those in the world war.
- q. Assumed to be similar to that of a railway company.
- r. Assuming that a field traffic battalion is roughly the size of two companies.
- s. See note 'l'.
- t. This figure seems plausible. If all the 2800 field batteries were grouped into 9 battery regiments (which later became the norm), it would form some 310 regiments.
- u. The *Armed Strength of the German Empire* gives a number of 97, in the 1890s. A late war figure of 108 therefore seems plausible.
- v. One group per field army.
- w. 1 officers, with 6-80 men. 40 represents a reasonable average.
- x. Nash gives the establishment for a *Feldflieger Abteilung* as 132. It's assumed that other formations share a similar organization. Lee Kennet (*The First Air War*) suggests that there is no substantive difference between *Detachments* and *Wings*
- y. These columns were an amalgamation of infantry munitions columns (175) and artillery munitions columns (193). 180 represents an average.
- z. Multiplying out the orders of battle gives a slightly higher figure (133,000). I'm going with McGill's more precise figure here, which is nevertheless close.
- aa. One per battery, plus 11 held at army level.
- bb. It is assumed to be similar to that of a regular motor transport column.
- cc. There were about 150 men serving as guards, to the 2,000 or so POWs.
- dd. I can find no reliable figures for these formations, and they very likely fluctuated significantly in strength. These are conservative guesses, based on the size of other HQ units.
- ee. Conservative estimate, based on the strength of a field bakery column.

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M1/4 Bü 1622 – Spionage, Passpflicht – Allgemeines, August 1918 – Juli 1919  
 M1/4 Bü 1625 – Eisenbahnspionage, Oktober 1918

- M1/7 Bü 60 – Disziplinarstrafangelegenheiten: Allgemeines 1918-1919  
 M1/7 Bü 257 – [files concerning justice and discipline]  
 M1/7 Bü 273 – Kriminalstatistik  
 M1/7 Bü 274 – Kriminalstatistik des Württembergischen Heeres: Allgemeines und Einzelfälle  
 M1/7 Bü 274 – Kriminalstatistik  
 M1/7 Bü 303-316 Nachweisung der Feld-Gerichtlichen Untersuchungen  
 M30/1 Bü 77 – Listen und Übersichten über Fahnenflüchtige Angehörige der Heeresgruppe Herzog Albrecht  
 M30/1 Bü 77 – Stimmungsberichte und Meldungen der Geheimen Feldpolizeistelle (Okt – Nov 1918)  
 M30/1 Bü 261 – Wöchentliche Mitteilungen für die Geheime Feldpolizei / Juli 1917 – Nov. 1918  
 M77/1 Bü 457 – Beschwerden, Gerüchte, und Verleumdungen, April 1917-April 1918  
 M77/1 Bü 588 – Allgemeine Abwehrmassnahmen Juli 1917 – Sep 1918  
 M77/1 Bü 598 – Akten betr. Bahnschutz, Sep. 1917 – Nov. 1918  
 M77/1 Bü 716 – Überwachung des Briefverkehrs durch die Postüberwachungsstellen / Juni – November 1918  
 M77/1 Bü 982 – Massnahmen gegen Diebstähle, Beraubung und Unterschlagung im Bereich Heeresverwaltung, Nov. 1917 – Jan. 1919  
 M77/1 Bü 1014 – Aufrechterhaltung der Disziplin bei Einzeltruppenteile / Nov. 1916-Okt 1918  
 M77/1 Bü 1039 – Behandlung Fahnenflüchtiger  
 M77/1 Bü 1044 -- Massnahmen gegen Misshandlungen Untergebener / Aug. 1914 – Okt. 1918  
 M77/1 Bü 1085 – Fahnenflüchtige, Sep. 1915 – Februar 1919  
 M100 Bü 25 – Kriegstagebuch des 1. Bataillon (Inf. Reg. 413) 7. Juni 1918 – 1. Sept. 1918  
 M468 – Kriegsstammrolle der 1. Kompagnie (180<sup>th</sup> Inf. Reg.), Bd. 1-3

*Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University (Hoover)*

H.P. Hanssen, "Fra Krigstiden"  
 Schetter, "War Memories of a German Soldier"

WWI Subject Collection

- Box 8
- Box 9
- Box 10
- Box 13
- Box 14
- Box 19

Theodore Abel Collection

Essay 68  
 Essay 199  
 Essay 200  
 Essay 210  
 Essay 213  
 Essay 221  
 Essay 226  
 Essay 229  
 Essay 237  
 Essay 240

*Museum für Kommunikation Berlin (MKB)*

AK 217 – Kordus correspondence  
 AK 221 – Lantau correspondence  
 AK 218 – Pfeffer correspondence  
 AK 219 – Schütz correspondence  
 AK 225 – Stein correspondence  
 AK 223 – Winstek correspondence  
 A06 – Pötting correspondence

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Diary of Allen C. Huber

<http://www.usgennet.org/usa/mo/county/stlouis/missourians/john-huskey.htm>

Diary of Kratz Kindig

<http://www.worldwaronediary.com>

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[http://www.archiv-der-](http://www.archiv-der-zeitzeugen.com/Files/files/PDFLempelius_ErsterWeltkrieg_22.pdf)

[zeitzeugen.com/Files/files/PDFLempelius\\_ErsterWeltkrieg\\_22.pdf](http://www.archiv-der-zeitzeugen.com/Files/files/PDFLempelius_ErsterWeltkrieg_22.pdf)

Diary of Thomas Frederick Littler

<http://www.firstworldwar.com/diaries/littlerdiary1.htm>

Diary of William A. Livergood

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Memoirs of Archibald Gordon Macgregor

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Diary of A.W. Miller

[udel.edu/~mm/wwi/](http://udel.edu/~mm/wwi/)

Diary of George A. Morrice

[www.oryansroughnecks.org/diary.html](http://www.oryansroughnecks.org/diary.html)

War Diary of Clarence Richmond

[my.en.com/~robinr/wardiary/diary.htm](http://my.en.com/~robinr/wardiary/diary.htm)

Diary of Charles Rooke

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Diary of Arthur W. Scherr  
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