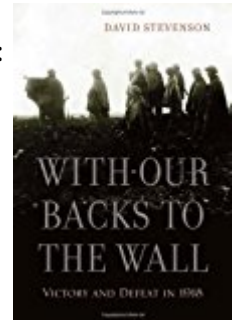


David Stevenson. *With Our Backs to the Wall: Victory and Defeat in 1918.* Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2011. Maps, tables. 752 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-06226-9.



Reviewed by Edmund Potter

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

As the Great War often has been overlooked in favor of World War II, its larger offspring, so too David Stevenson asserts that 1918 has not rightly received the attention that it demands in order to understand World War I. Beginning in late 1914, Allied leaders started to assert that one more big push and the war would be over. Three and a half years later, the Germans, who were supposedly all but defeated, launched a series of five spring offensives, which came closer to military victory than anything the Allies had produced to that date. In the end, the Allies won, but Stevenson demonstrates that their defeat was closer than they wanted to admit. After the armistice and the Treaty of Versailles, the French and British chose to focus not on the end of the conflict but on its origins, while the Americans simply assumed that without them the Allies would have lost and the United States withdrew into isolation. Only the Germans became obsessed with what had gone wrong in 1918.

With Our Backs to the Wall is a well-written and researched text. Stevenson draws on re-

sources from all the major powers to construct his narrative. He spends roughly 140 pages on the various battles that took place in this pivotal year, but this work is much more than just a military history. For Stevenson everything is linked. There is something here for everyone. As an example, he has a section on issues of gender, which is both thorough and concise. He addresses not only the impact of the suffrage movement in Britain but also the growing female workforce's effect on Austria's ability to stay in the conflict.

This is the sixth work that Stevenson has published on World War I since he started his teaching career at the London School of Economics in 1982, and his vast knowledge base is in full effect in *With Our Backs to the Wall*. In the first thirty pages, he concisely explains the first three years of the war with just the right amount of detail to prepare his reader for the challenges of 1918. Stevenson has an interest in supply and logistics, which becomes very clear in the last sections dealing with war economics and the home front. He covers each major belligerent power in turn

and shows the similarities that they share with one another. The United States often perceives itself as the savior of the Allied cause, and yet Stevenson shows that the American railways at times suffered greater breakdowns than the Germans who were truly stretched to the breaking point. Where the United States is concerned, Stevenson gives appropriate credit to Woodrow Wilson in resolving the conflict in 1918. He pushed for a declaration of war, which helped give the Allied breathing room, and then he successfully created a framework for the armistice against the wishes of many of his own people and his military partners. Stevenson also demonstrates that for all the successes on the western front, the surrender of Bulgaria in September 1918 was the moment when the fissures within the Central powers ruptured. At this point, *With Our Backs to the Wall* reenters the common narrative of World War I and the not so lasting peace at Versailles.

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