
Reviewed by John Nelzén (Florida State University)
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Sharing the War Experience: An English Translation of the Official German History of World War I

The official history of Germany’s wartime experiences, assembled by Reichsarchiv scholars, appeared as a fourteen-volume study entitled Der Weltkrieg, 1914 bis 1918 that was published from 1925 to 1944. By translating a portion of the original, the editors of Germany’s Western Front, 1915, Mark Osborne Humphries and John Makers, seek to make a strategic view of Germany’s war effort in France and Belgium accessible to English-language readers.[1] Succinct commentaries place in context the maps, sketches, figures, and written selections drawn primarily from volumes 7, 8, and 9 of Der Weltkrieg. Additionally, appendices reproduced from the German edition list figures for Germany’s military strength and munitions production. Der Weltkrieg has served as a resource for scholars since its publication in German. Humphries and Maker provide a broader scholarly audience a foundation for additional study of the Great War. Germany’s Western Front, 1915, itself one book in a multivolume translation of Der Weltkrieg, offers perspective on three periods in 1915: winter and spring, spring and summer, and summer and autumn.

Humphries and Maker preface “Winter and Spring,” part 1 of Germany’s Western Front, 1915, with their own commentary on problems faced by the Central Powers. Drawing from Norman Stone’s work on the eastern front, the editors touch on the losses sustained by Austria-Hungary during the siege of Przemyśl, as well as the overall weaknesses of Germany’s partner. In the west, Germany failed to achieve a quick victory. The editors share Holger Herwig’s observation that the western front had settled into “deadly regularity” by 1915.[2] Humphries and Makers note that, despite challenges, the western front began to stabilize by 1915, though Austria-Hungary’s struggles in the east were one factor that threatened Germany’s war effort. Humphries and Makers remark that while Erich von Falkenhayn, the German Chief of General Staff of the Field Armies, remained “a Westerner at heart,” believing in the importance of victory in the west, the need to support Austria-Hungary and to impress neutral powers shifted Germany’s focus eastward (pp. 3-4; 133-134). After providing this context, the editors translate material from volume 7 of the original history that assesses the actions of military units in battles from January to mid-April, the debates among German leaders about whether to focus on the western or eastern front, and the impact of Austria-Hungary’s situation on the decision to employ German reserves in the east.

Part 2 of Germany’s Western Front, 1915 presents text from volume 8 of the original that considers war developments from the middle of April to the beginning of August 1915. The economic impact of Italy’s declaration of war, the spring battle in Artois, and Central Power plans for the Serbian Campaign receive attention.

Finally, in part 3, Humphries and Maker include material from volume 9 of Der Weltkrieg that examines Germany’s situation from mid-August through December
1915. The text focuses on topics such as the offensive in Artois and Champagne, and the reorganization of German armies in the west. Humphries and Maker caution that pages from volume 9 of the original that look at Germany’s war economy from 1914 to 1915 appear in Germany’s Western Front, 1914. While part 3 of Germany’s Western Front, 1915 lacks the introductory context of parts 1 and 2, the editors briefly review military successes to suggest that the Central Powers ended the year in a relatively stronger position than they had begun in 1915.

Overall, Germany’s Western Front, 1915, produced with the assistance of both native English- and German-speakers, is a valuable resource that adds context to the official history, explanatory footnotes, and a selected bibliography of relevant German and English works published from the 1920s to the 2000s. Germany’s Western Front, 1915, is not a translated collection of original documents from the war. Unfortunately, the editors note, a number of the original source materials for Der Weltkrieg were destroyed in 1945, though the original scholars’ working files still survive. Nor was Der Weltkrieg focused on the social and cultural questions that have received greater attention in recent decades. Nonetheless, such recent studies as Roger Chickering’s Imperial Germany and the Great War (1999), Richard Hamilton and Holger Herwig’s The Origins of World War I (2003), and Isabel Hull’s Absolute Destruction (2005) have drawn from Der Weltkrieg. The efforts of Humphries and Maker allow a broader range of educators and non-German specialists to evaluate the perspectives of Der Weltkrieg in their own learning, instruction, and research.

Notes

[1]. Mark Osborne Humphries is also the author of the forthcoming publication, The Last Plague: Spanish Influenza and the Politics of Public Health in Canada (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013).


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