

Between Acceptance and Refusal - Soldiers' Attitudes Towards War (Germany)

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Summary

German soldiers' attitudes toward the war neither were static nor did they develop in a linear fashion. They were as complex as they were contradictory, differing according to front, deployment and the status of the war. The conviction of leading a war of defense was constant as was - in view of growing war-fatigue - the rather paradoxical rise in motivation before the start of each new offensive. Resignation and refusal to act did not necessarily indicate a rejection of the war as such, but arose mostly from an individual urge to survive. Since manifestations of dissolution on a large scale only began in autumn 1918, it is evident that hope for victory and confidence in one's own strength had particular staying power.

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Introduction

At the start of the war, [Germany](#) recruited 3.8 million soldiers. Most of them served in the forty army corps at the front lines. Thus began a comprehensive mobilization of personal resources and, over the course of the war, about 13 million men served.¹ What motivated the soldiers to bear four long years of cruel, technologized “[total war](#)” which made all traditional models of heroic struggle and individual heroism absurd? This important question has been discussed intensively by scholars in recent years.

For a long time, soldiers' individual and collective attitudes, especially in relation to the so-called initial war-enthusiasm as well as the myth of the “[stab in the back](#)” at the war's end were the main research focus.² The longstanding interpretation of a collective August-

experience conceived as an enthusiasm permeating all strata, confessions and regions has given way to a more differentiated view. Today there is consensus that the mobilization of 2 August 1914, in conjunction with patriotic rallies in the cities and press reports about initial victories, led to a collective excitement which in the countryside, in border areas and among the workers stimulated much less enthusiasm than among the metropolitan middle class and the intellectual elite. Accordingly, the willingness to volunteer for war service also varied considerably. Those who did volunteer – in Prussia in the first ten days of mobilization this amounted to around 260,000 men, of whom however only just under 144,000 were recruited – were, however, frequently full of confidence in victory and an urge to act. In this they did not differ from those who had been conscripted. This euphoria increasingly gave way to disillusion, the longer the reality of the front was experienced and the more clear it became that this would not be a short war.³

When considering the last year of the war, scholars have typically underscored soldiers' stupefaction, the decline of morale and the desire for freedom. This has been done frequently in an attempt to refute post hoc the contemporary myth of the "stab in the back": that an exhausted homeland had forced the bravely fighting army to give up. The German military historian, Wilhelm Deist, spoke with some exaggeration of a "hidden military strike" in 1918 which crippled more and more of the army. Refusal to serve and desertion, he claims, became a mass movement through which, during the last months of the war, according to his estimates, a total of about 1 million soldiers withdrew from the army. The German Army in the end was, he asserts, not much more than an "officers' corps without troops."⁴ This interpretation today appears much too extreme, since the German front, despite the Allied breach in August 1918 and all manifestations of dissolution, ultimately held and was at least able to make a partially ordered retreat.

Currently, scholarship concentrates on the exciting question of why, despite all the [atrocities](#), deprivation and disillusionment, German soldiers held out for four years. Until the German defeat – which only really became obvious after the failure of the German offensives in the summer of 1918 and especially in October when the new imperial government under Prince [Maximilian von Baden \(1867-1929\)](#) sought a cease-fire – soldiers' willingness to persevere had not by any stretch decreased linearly. On the whole, even desertion remained an irrelevant phenomenon. To answer this question, attention has to be directed toward the complex and ambivalent connections between ideas and real experiences. Indeed it is important to focus on "the majority of men who successfully coped with the conditions at the front" and went on fighting. Was their motivation primarily intrinsic (patriotism, self-defense) or was it intensified by [propaganda](#)? What role did military discipline, which did not allow orders to be questioned, play? Furthermore, recent research has been investigating soldiers'

opportunities for independent ideas and actions within the military machine which tied them into a net of diverse compulsions. Finally, it has to be noted that acts of refusal do not necessarily indicate a lack of consent to the larger whole: in this case, the war (of defense) of one's own nation.⁵

The sources for most studies investigating soldiers' attitudes are testimonies in the form of diary entries and [letters](#). About 13 billion letters have been sent home from the field of action and vice versa. They are supplemented by reports from superiors and records from the mail-surveillance offices that were set up in 1916.⁶ In the following sections, soldiers' attitudes towards the advance to the west and the occupation of the east will be reconstructed. Then, those factors which led to (de-)motivation and finally to the last hopes for victory as well as ultimate disappointment in 1918 will be considered. Throughout, attention will be given to differentiating between soldiers' experiences in various war theatres.

Self-Defense and Restrictive Occupation Regime

Soldiers' attitudes on all of the German fronts had a common starting-point: the conviction of going to war to defend the fatherland. This subjective certainty was not to be questioned throughout the entire war period. In the east, the defensive position was initially obvious because Russian troops had invaded East Prussia and the task was to liberate German territory from the invaders. On the [Western front](#), German soldiers did not view their advance as an attack, but as pre-emptive defense. After trench warfare had begun, they imagined they were in an advanced defense position. Their experiences with the hostile civil populations in Belgium and France may have contributed to this attitude, for the German troops believed they were being attacked by Belgian and French guerrillas. They exercised brutal and often disproportionate retaliation to a "war of the people" which, in truth, was not one at all.⁷

Documents written by German soldiers show that the killing of Belgian and French civilians almost always had a connection with imagined guerrilla attacks. Indeed, there had been acts of sabotage and ambushes of German soldiers but there was no organized popular resistance. The soldiers' obsession with guerrillas was based on the collective German memory of French *franc-tireur* (free-shooter) ambushes in the 1870/71 war. The image of the enemy formed during these earlier attacks was updated in 1914, blurring the perception of real incidents. Thus, unintentional shots by undisciplined soldiers or friendly fire were interpreted as insidious ambushes which confirmed the image of the enemy and magnified the diffuse anxiety in the German Army. In clashes with the Belgian *Garde Civique*, which due to its rudimentary uniforms was not recognized as a regular force, the soldiers imagined

themselves to be exposed to guerrillas. After all, because of the aims of the [Schlieffen Plan](#), the German Army was under considerable time pressure to achieve success. Not only the exhaustion of German troops due to the quick advance, but also the unexpectedly robust Belgian resistance endangered the chances of a necessarily quick victory. It was thus a fatal mixture of anxiety, over-exertion and rage that led to disproportionate reaction when retaliating against supposed attacks with sometimes draconian measures that nevertheless seemed legitimate to the German soldiers.⁸

War experiences on the [Eastern front](#), which only came into historians' focus again at the turn of the millennium, were completely different. Initially, the victory over the Russian Army in autumn 1914 meant the liberation of East Prussia and boosted soldiers' motivation. After the Germans had moved to attack in 1915, they began to conquer a land unknown to them. As has been reconstructed on the basis of official documents and private records, even the differences in flora and fauna and, in particular, the sheer endless expanses of the Russian landscape impressed the Germans. Furthermore they were confounded by the inhabitants who belonged to completely different peoples, cultures and religions. Finally, the "passivity" of the indigenous population was inconceivable to the German [occupiers](#); that is, the fact that they did not cultivate the inhospitable land. The filth, but also the suffering of the many people living in poverty, elicited not only pity but also abhorrence. The principle of scorched earth employed by the retreating tsarist troops reinforced the impression of general backwardness and a lack of culture, strengthening the conviction among the German soldiers of a decline in culture toward the east and thus intensifying their prejudice against the Russians.⁹

If already in [school and university](#) it had been taught that the Germans had been called on since the "Eastern colonization" by the German Order of Knights to raise the land in the east to a higher cultural level, conquering Russian territories felt like a repetition of history. Accordingly, the naming of the first great victory on the Eastern front after [Tannenberg](#) had great symbolic significance. Not only did it manifest restitution for the defeat suffered by the German Order in 1410 at the hands of Polish-Lithuanian troops but also, in a certain way, the historic mission of continuing its work. Viewed in this way, the wasteland in the east promised the Germans unlimited opportunities. As they opened up the occupied territory economically as well as with regard to transportation and administration, they simultaneously laid claim to the land and began drawing up settlement plans. At the orders of General [Erich Ludendorff \(1865-1937\)](#), in the conquered territory of Lithuania and Courland from autumn 1915 on, a tightly organized military administration – called Supreme East ([Ober Ost](#)) after the [Supreme Command East](#) – was set up to disseminate order and culture. The aim was to improve the supply situation for the Germans through efficient administration and

comprehensive economic exploitation of the land and its people in addition to establishing a permanent order even before peace was concluded.¹⁰

That this aim was not realized was due to the German [occupying regime](#) which did not concern itself with indigenous affairs. For the local population, liberation from tsarism did not mean freedom but rather new German domination. The German administration's austere way of proceeding vis-à-vis local peoples contributed to the brutalization of German soldiers so that excesses of violence and disproportionate requisitions took place. The worse the supply situation became on the Eastern front, the more discipline decayed as was manifested in stealing from army stocks and a growing black-market trade. The deployment of members of national minorities of the German Empire such as Prussian Poles, German Lithuanians and Alsations - the latter were regarded by the army's supreme command as too unreliable for deployment on the Western front - generated tensions among German soldiers. Finally, soldiers so far away from home increasingly lost their spiritual and emotional connection with Germany. To a certain degree, they set themselves up to defend above all their privileges and their fairly comfortable situation compared to that on the Western front. This was manifest in the fact that when troops from the Eastern front were redeployed to the Western front beginning in the summer of 1917 there were difficulties with discipline and refusals to obey orders.¹¹

On the Western front, completely different boundary conditions influenced soldiers' attitudes toward the war. These attitudes were not static, but changed depending upon the general status of the war as well as each individual's circumstances. The static warfare in the west eroded the common soldier's motivation markedly more than the mobile warfare in the east. The overblown expectations of August 1914 were first disappointed by the [Marne](#) disaster which led to a German retreat behind the Aisne. Naïve ideas about war as a chivalrous fight evaporated after these initial experiences at the front. When trench warfare made it clear that the war would not be short, a yearning for peace started to spread by mid-1915. At the same time, first-person testimonies from German soldiers show that they expected every offensive to achieve a breakthrough and thus end the war. Attack released the soldiers from their unendurable inactivity and, paradoxically, strengthened their motivation to fight, although their real wish was for peace. The battles of [Verdun](#) and the [Somme](#) in 1916 as well as the three battles in Flanders (1914, 1915 and 1917), all of which brought heavy losses, made apparent the senselessness of the large numbers sacrificed for marginal gains in territory. Even though the first three months of the war saw the heaviest losses, the battles of Verdun and of the Somme stand for mass mortality at the Western front, symbolizing [attrition warfare](#). They bundled extreme experiences - frequently accompanied by psychic breakdowns, constant barrage, [machine gun](#) fire and [artillery](#) attack - and tied them to a

specific place. Eventually they proved to be more destructive to morale. Despite this, the conviction that Germany was defending itself persisted. Even during the retreat behind the Siegfried Line in autumn 1917 when they actively destroyed occupied territory, soldiers stuck fast to this conviction and passed blame for the extensive damages they had perpetrated to the attacking Allied troops, as evidenced by innumerable letters from the front. This perception was ultimately decisive for German soldiers' self-confidence and their steadfastness up until summer 1918.¹²

To return to an earlier phase of the war to close this section, the soldiers on the Western front faced a unique scene at Christmas 1914: on 24 December British and French troops suddenly heard the classic German Christmas carol "*Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht.*" The British soldiers knew the melody for it was also their song "Silent Night." Carefully looking out of their trenches they saw hundreds of lights. The Germans had put up numerous small Christmas trees decorated with candles. The Supreme High Command had ordered the trees to be brought to the front. Christmas trees were well known to the British since [Albert, Prince Consort, Duke of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha \(1819-1861\)](#) had brought this tradition to Britain when he married [Victoria, Queen of Great Britain \(1819-1901\)](#). Tentatively at first then more fervently the British soldiers started to sing as well. The joint singing of Christmas carols and the lights emanated an unforeseen, almost subversive power. It resulted in an [unofficial cease-fire](#) which was used to exchange presents, to bury the fallen and to play football.¹³ What happened on Christmas 1914 along the 600 kilometers of the Western front between the channel and the alps - which was partly repeated in 1915 - has been passed on in numerous stories about the "small peace in the Great War." However, reunions mainly took place between soldiers of the same rank. The superiors on both sides disapproved of any sort of fraternization. Furthermore, these improvised Christmas celebrations of people who had shot at one another just days before did not lead to disobedience or to questioning the war. They simply represented a wink of humanity in an inhumane fight.¹⁴ There is evidence that on several occasions throughout the war truces had been negotiated according to an understanding termed the "live and let live" principle: informal agreements stopped fighting for a period of time. Mutually restricting aggressive activity diminished the risk of death, injury and discomfort for both sides.¹⁵

Resignation and Refusal

As the duration of the war increased, an attitude of resignation emerged. This was not an expression of war-weariness and led to continued fighting in the hope of soon ending the war. Soldiers fought to survive or, perhaps, to get wounded so that they would be dismissed as unfit to serve on the front. It was a fatalistic arrangement which, nevertheless, strengthened

the will to hold out. Among the important factors boosting mood were not so much propaganda announcements like the “fatherland education” (“*Vaterländischer Unterricht*”) – lectures and films presented to the troops since September 1917 to convince them of continuing to fight – nor even hatred of the enemy, but rather ties to one’s own family, reinforced by mail to and from the front and by home [furloughs](#), which greatly motivated endurance. The military social system was also of great importance. Those from different generations and from various regional, social and confessional origins lived together very closely which led to strong group pressure and made necessary high degrees of individual adaptation. Both of these had a stabilizing effect because nobody wanted to be exposed to accusations of cowardice or shirking. Comradeship and especially solidarity and friendship within small fighting groups and units as a result of mutual dependency, stabilized fighting morale. Here the role of junior officers proved to be of utmost importance because they shared danger and deprivation with the common combat soldier. Troop resilience thus largely depended on the men’s attitude toward their officers.¹⁶

Whereas the junior officers’ leadership was decisive for the common soldiers’ engagement on the battlefield, their everyday living conditions were demotivating. The monotony of service between battle actions wore the troops down and the irregular, both quantitatively and qualitatively insufficient food led to widespread dissatisfaction. Sources written by common soldiers illustrate that this was strengthened by the difference between the front and base where, outside the range of enemy artillery fire, almost peaceful circumstances prevailed. Dissatisfaction was further strengthened by antagonism with officers, who were better looked after, and those in the ranks. Injustices of this kind endangered motivation, but did not necessarily challenge the war’s purpose. However, they did delegitimize the military hierarchy and, abstracting from that, the class society at home.¹⁷ Furthermore, the soldiers’ regional identity, i.e. urban or rural backgrounds as well as regional antagonisms – such as between Prussia and Bavaria – often influenced their motivation to fight. Those soldiers with the least personal interest in a German victory were members of national minorities. Polish Prussians and Alsace-Lorrainers who felt affiliated with France had been alienated from the German cause already in 1917.¹⁸

As the war continued, soldiers developed various forms of refusal to fight. These included intentional self-maiming or simulated illnesses through which they could escape deployment temporarily or permanently. Even infringements of regulations punished by arrest or prison were an opportunity to evade deployment on the front, though this option became unattractive when companies of military prisoners began to be deployed close to the front. “Disallowed absence” from the troop was a temporary withdrawal of one’s own fighting power, desertion by defecting to the enemy or fleeing to neutral territory was a permanent

one. Interestingly, German military justice reacted with comparative mildness and death sentences were hardly carried out. Reports by neurologists often formed the basis for the reprimand of attempted desertion, self-maiming or refusal to obey orders.¹⁹

For the German front-line forces, it has been calculated that there was a maximum of 2,000 sentences and referring to the whole army a maximum —including the unrecorded and borderline cases - of roughly 100,000 cases of desertion.²⁰ Even though workers deserted more frequently than farmers and more than three-quarters of the deserters were without family ties, deserters did not differ significantly from other ranks in their attitudes toward the war; for even desertion did not necessarily imply a rejection of the war as such, but initially expressed a desire to withdraw from danger to life and limb. Proportionately, the most deserters came from among the members of national minorities obliged to serve. Collective refusal to obey commands remained very rare throughout the war. Even revolts and mutinies - in contrast to the French Army - took place only sparsely in the great battles of the attrition warfare in 1916/17. Individual strategies for coping with the war such as the preservation of a feeling of duty, elevated religiosity or extreme swearing as a release valve ameliorated the effects of the pressures on the soldiers and prevented the formation of a shared interpretation that the crisis necessitated insubordination.²¹

Socialist thought, which had been disseminated on the Eastern front since the Russian [October Revolution in 1917](#), did become problematic for the German military system. Deeply felt injustices, such as the better treatment of officers, paved the way for adopting radical ideas about equality put forth in meetings with Russian soldiers or confrontations with Russian socialist activism such as leaflets which were spread among German soldiers. After the Russian February Revolution, there were numerous cases of fraternization between Russian and German troops on calmer sections of the front. Some German units even adopted the Bolshevik institution of the soldiers' council and, although the soldiers looked down upon Eastern European peoples, a certain assimilation of perceptions took place, such as the shared refusal of the German-Baltic baronage. Developments such as these were viewed with concern by the army's supreme command and occasioned them to subject troops sent to the Western front to special military schooling. At the same time it must be noted that there was no talk of a revolutionary process among the front-line forces. Units from the Eastern front were regarded as ideologically "infected" but, once they arrived at the Western front, their actions did not differ from those of Western front troops. Socialist ideas played a greater role in the navy where class differences between officers and other ranks were more pronounced and where, due to a lack of military engagements, there was no escape valve for aggression. The beginnings of a mutiny on several ships were suppressed in the summer of 1917 by radical measures.²²

Last Hope for Victory and Final Disappointment

At the beginning of 1918, the German Army was still “in a remarkably good condition for a force which had held off four major powers, as well as numerous minor ones, for three and a half years.”²³ After the Russian delegation left Brest-Litovsk in February 1918 in protest of the separate peace with [Ukraine](#), the subsequent German advance again brought movement to the front. Meeting scarcely any resistance, German troops pushed further forward and conquered the remainder of Ukraine, Belarus and the entire Baltic. The approaching victory uplifted the soldiers. At the end of February, the Russian delegation was forced to return to the negotiating table and signed on 3 March 1918 a [peace treaty](#) with Germany. With the additional closing of the Treaty of Bucharest with Romania on 7 May, Germany enjoyed hegemony in Eastern Central Europe and could supply itself with oil and food. Ludendorff then staked everything on one card, aiming to achieve a breakthrough in the West, and thus victory, by means of large [offensives in the spring and summer of 1918](#). To do this, he had to draw on the divisions stationed in the East and transport them to the Western front. This action depressed the mood of soldiers coming from the East because nobody wanted to become “cattle for slaughter in Flanders.” Incidents resembling mutiny and retreats during troop movements underscore that, above all, soldiers wanted to survive the war.²⁴

Despite widespread yearning for peace, the January strikes in the Empire, in which up to 1 million workers took part, were rejected by a majority of the soldiers at the front even though they were in agreement with some of the workers' demands. The main reason for decided rejection of the strikes was the certainty that they would not shorten, but rather prolong the war. Strikes would only confirm the Allies in their belief that they could force Germany down. In many personal testimonies there were formulations and images which — very similar to the later myth of the stab in the back — expressed the conviction that with the strike the homeland would be stabbing the front in the back. The homeland and the front became antagonistic opposites in many letters from the front.²⁵ Especially on the Western front, soldiers banked on new offensives which were announced by troop movements, bans on leave and similar measures. The beginning of the Michael Offensive on 21 March 1918 mobilized the soldiers considerably. Many comparisons with the beginning of the war were drawn in the first days and weeks and references were made to the “spirit of 1914.” Numerous first-person documents show that the renewed “war-enthusiasm” was not by any means a result of mere propaganda but the expression of hope of finally being able to come back home to their families after the last battle.²⁶

Among the soldiers engaged in these offensives, the paradox was repeated once more of bringing all forces to bear, despite the war-fatigue, to attain peace by victory. All the greater

was the dismay and the subsequent demotivation when this advance, too, bogged down and the Allies proceeded to mount successful counter-attacks. Particularly heavy losses quickly weakened the German attacking force. The drained and poorly equipped soldiers were not only additionally weakened by the [influenza](#) which had been on a rampage since the summer, but were also psychically worn-out. When full Allied supply camps fell into their hands, German material inferiority became clear. The soldiers' priority thus became their own well-being and survival. On 8 August 1918 alone, the "German Army's black day," 16,000 soldiers surrendered to the enemy during the battle of Amiens. By late summer, up to one million German soldiers had effectively ended the war by themselves by retreating to the back-lines and making their way home. It was only the knowledge of the inevitable German defeat that shook the general fighting morale; resignation now predominated. These events catalyzed the mood of war-weariness rather than being a turning point in troop morale. In particular, the officer corps' will to keep on fighting was shattered during the Allied counteroffensives. By autumn 1918 most German soldiers had reconciled themselves to defeat. The precise modalities of the cease-fire for which the imperial government asked in October did not interest them; returning home intact was now all important.²⁷

The refusal of risk, more than an open refusal to obey orders, characterized what Wilhelm Deist has termed the "hidden military strike" in the second half of 1918. While a strike is intentional and usually follows political convictions, "apathy and indifference may have inhibited any form of protest" or action. Furthermore a close analysis of the figures shows that most of the missing German soldiers between July and November 1918 were [prisoners](#) of the Allies. Hence, it was not a "covert strike" that took place in 1918. "Until the October Peace Note, discipline, exhaustion and apathy combined to ensure that the German army maintained its cohesion."²⁸ The complete swing in attitude can only be understood against the background of expectations that had been all the more bitterly disappointed in view of the enormous hardships. According to Benjamin Ziemann, the "motive of immediately securing life" was far more important in the war's final weeks than ideas about a socialist revolution. This was all the more true for the navy soldiers. The command to undertake a final strike against the enemy, which would have been a senseless suicide commando in view of the approaching cease-fire and Allied superiority, triggered a mutiny on 29 October 1918 in [Wilhelmshaven](#).²⁹

In addition to the various emotional factors, the war can be understood as a form of "imposed violence." Soldiers bore up for as long as they were tied into a network of compulsions and possessed only a few freedoms.³⁰ Compulsions could be of a legal or psychological nature, but also of a social kind. Once this network had been destroyed or weakened, as was the case with the German army in mid-1918, the will to hold out slackened and soldiers sought

alternatives. At the same time it must be emphasized that after August 1918, the Allies did not again succeed in breaking through the German front which now was finally on the defensive. This change in circumstances reinforced soldiers' notions of self-defense which also justified considerable destruction to slow down the enemy advance. To this was added the authority of Paul von Hindenburg (1847-1934) and the justified expectation that an orderly retreat would bring troops home more quickly. Only beginning in October was a comprehensive dissolution of the German command authority apparent when the approaching cease-fire seemed to make final defensive actions superfluous. This correlates with a total devaluation of all values and convictions of the pre-war period.³¹ The complete collapse was to be as formative as the experience of the violence during war. To what extent this can be interpreted as a central element in the emergence of political violence in the post-war period, with the brutalization of political culture deriving from the coarsening of front-line soldiers, is still controversially discussed.³²

Conclusion

Despite the interplay between soldiers' attitudes and the mood in the homeland, it must be noted that soldiers' experience of the war was subject to its own laws. By virtue of the fact that the soldiers experienced alternately actual events that either confirmed or refuted their expectations, they adopted a characteristically short-term horizon. Their attitudes changed accordingly and were as ambivalent as they were contradictory. Concrete survival had priority and demanded adaptations to present circumstances. Hence war-fatigue and a yearning for peace could be transformed into a willingness to fight when they saw a chance of victory. Soldiers' attitudes toward the war cannot be adequately described with totalizing concepts such as war-enthusiasm, disillusionment, exhaustion or a desire for [revolution](#). Their motivation was complex and had paradoxical traits. Personal networks in small fighting units and the system of compulsion of military organizations consolidated their willingness to hold out as did emotional factors such as family ties and cognitive aspects including, on the one hand, a feeling of duty and the will to survive as well as, on the other, the conviction of fighting a defensive war and the idea that victory was possible. It was finally the collective realization of military defeat in autumn 1918 that led to disintegration. In view of this, it is astounding that the "stab in the back" legend was to become so powerful after the war.

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