

Germany

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Summary

When war broke out, in light of increasingly inflexible constellations and alliances among European powers, Germany was initially hoping to keep the war limited to Austria-Hungary and Serbia. Soon the conflict involved Russia, Germany, France, and Great Britain, and early war enthusiasm soon declined. In 1915, German armies in the west faced a series of major enemy offensives, which they would repel. 1916 saw military defeats and crises, with supplies deteriorating due to the British naval blockade and severe losses suffered by the German forces. German operational and strategic concepts changed in 1917. Ground forces successfully went on the defensive, while unrestricted submarine war was unsuccessful. When armistice in the east ended the two-front war in late 1917, Germany focused on the spring offensive of 1918. It was a failure, not least due to American forces. At home, military defeat in 1918 allowed for revolutionary constitutional reforms.

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Introduction: Germany before 1914

When the young [Wilhelm II, German Emperor \(1859-1941\)](#) dismissed the first Chancellor of the German Empire, [Otto von Bismarck \(1815-1898\)](#), in 1890, the basis of German foreign policy changed and with it, political relations between the major European powers. Bismarck had declared that Germany was territorially “satisfied”, but now the German Empire entered the imperial race for colonies together with [France](#) and [Great Britain](#) and, in addition, built a strong battle fleet in the pursuit of “world politics” (*Weltpolitik*). The German naval program, which Admiral [Alfred von Tirpitz \(1849-1930\)](#) introduced in 1898, challenged Great Britain as the foremost world and naval power. Consequently, military and economic competition between these two great European powers increased and the [arms race](#) grew alarmingly, although by 1910 it became clear that Germany had already lost the battle for naval supremacy.

The extraordinary economic upswing, which by 1913 had made Germany the leading export nation in the world, led the German bourgeois classes to believe that the [Empire](#) was more than entitled to an international political standing in line with its economic power and performance. The much acclaimed and publicly celebrated building of the naval battle fleet – in spite of its questionable military value – as well as the costly armament programs for the land armies were consistent with this attitude. Some conservative politicians and military men were even convinced that only a European war would cut the Gordian knot of German “world politics” and thus help to fulfil their ambitions for colonies and for political prestige in the world.

Notable tension existed between Germany and France, not least because of the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine following the Franco-German war of 1870-71. Considerable tension also occurred between Germany and Tsarist [Russia](#), which had established a military treaty with France in 1892-4, presenting Germany with the potential threat of a war on two fronts. Bismarck’s Dual-Alliance (*Zweibund*) between the central powers of [Austria-Hungary](#) and Germany, originally intended as a defensive alliance, had in the meantime, following [Italy](#)’s entry, become an alliance “for the protection and support of imperial ambitions”¹ – not least those of Italy and its aspirations in North Africa. However, in tandem with the increasingly aggressive nature of the Triple-Alliance (*Dreibund*), the ties of the Entente between France and Britain were considerably strengthened by military agreements. Altogether, this inflexible constellation of powers left European [governments](#) with few options for fear of losing honour and prestige. Furthermore, failure to support their allies would seriously question the continued existence of their respective alliances, which neither side was prepared to risk. The existing international tensions led to an increasingly unstable international system, reduced politicians’ room for manoeuvre, and, at large, had

considerable influence on the situation in the summer of 1914.

The July Crisis

In response to the assassination of the heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914, the [German government](#) had assured Vienna of its unconditional support for action designed to overthrow [Serbia](#). As *Kaiser* Wilhelm II later scribbled in the margin of a telegram: "Now or never: the Serbs must be done with, and right speedily." Vienna was given the desired "[Blankoscheck](#)" (*carte blanche*) to do away with the Serbian "rabble- and robber-state"², as Wilhelm II had named it publicly. Berlin politicians led by the Reich Chancellor [Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg \(1856-1921\)](#) as well as the military men around the Chief of the German General Staff [Helmuth von Moltke \(1848-1916\)](#) had already taken the position that this was the appropriate moment to discipline Serbia. At the same time, they wanted to determine whether Russia, Serbia's foremost ally, would accept this humiliation. In the eyes of the German political and military elites the opportunity had arrived to test the endurance and firmness of the opposing (still informal Triple) Entente between France, Russia, and Britain. If the outcome was favourable, this diplomatic initiative could result in the break-up of the alliance between Russia and France. If a worst-case scenario should come to pass, resulting in a European war, the German military leadership was convinced that this war could still be decided in favour of the Central Powers. With the on-going naval discussions between Britain and Russia, of which Berlin had been informed at the end of May (by way of a German spy inside the Russian Embassy in London), the much-feared encircling ring (what the Germans then called "*Einkreisung*") around the German Empire appeared to be tightening ominously. Convinced that a war against Russia should be waged sooner, rather than later (owing to Russia's increasing demographic as well as armaments advantage), the military in particular brushed aside all arguments against such a risky strategy. The key word of Germany's policies towards the Serbian conflict during the entire [July crisis](#) was "localisation" (*Lokalisierung*). The phrase "localising the conflict" seemed to imply that the German government had set on a course of conciliation, but the opposite was true: Germany demanded, or at least gave the impression of demanding, that the greater European nations France, Britain, and Russia, should idly stand by while Austria-Hungary punished and subdued Serbia.

The German government had by no means decided on an all-out European war. For this, Germany's leading statesmen acted far too confusedly, inconsistently, and ambiguously, as if they were in a prolonged state of panic. Wilhelm II lived up to his international nickname "William, the tame, the courageous coward" ("*Guillaume le timide, le valeureux poltron*"). The same *Kaiser*, who initially wanted to do away with the Serbs once and for all, now saw no reason to go to war at all: "There is no need to go to war" ("*[D]amit fällt jeder Kriegsgrund*").

fort”)³, as he wrote emphatically on the margin of the Serbian answering note. Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg also began to urge Austrian restraint – although unenthusiastically, almost feebly. His reaction and temper during the later stage of the July crisis could be – according to his personal secretary and advisor [Kurt Riezler \(1882-1955\)](#) – best be described as manic-depressive.

The German government was at first troubled by what it thought was Austria’s lack of determination. It was further irritated by the fact that the deliberately harsh terms of the ultimatum sent to Serbia on 23 July now made Austria-Hungary, not Serbia, appear the aggressor in the eyes of world opinion. Serbia’s conciliatory response two days later threatened to undermine the entire Austro-German ploy to destroy it as an independent state, with the *Kaiser* vacillating in particular. Such attempts to calm the situation were half-hearted and finally thwarted by the German military, which by now had taken control of the situation. On 28 July, Austria-Hungary opened hostilities against Serbia. As Russia predictably began to mobilize first against Austria alone, and then, when the German government declared this a threat to its own security, against Germany, both the head of the German General Staff, von Moltke, and Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg seized the opportunity to present Germany as the victim of aggression and launch a war that would maximize domestic support, notably that of the [Social Democratic Party \(SPD\)](#). When Russia failed to respond to the German ultimatum of 31 July by suspending its general mobilization (30 July), Germany mobilized and on 1 August, declared war against Russia. Since Germany faced a two-front war against France as well as Russia, the General Staff’s war plan (defined in 1905 by Count [Alfred von Schlieffen \(1833-1913\)](#) and later modified by Moltke) determined that France would be invaded and defeated first, leaving a more sluggish Russian mobilization to be met subsequently by the combined forces of the Central Powers. In order to safeguard and execute this by now almost “sacrosanct” plan, Germany declared war against France on 3 August. The next day, the German army stormed across the border of neutral [Belgium](#) on its way to Paris, making a British declaration of war against Germany inevitable – to the outrage of Bethmann Hollweg and much of German opinion.

The “August Experience”

The response of the German population to the events surrounding the outbreak of war has been shown by recent research to be more complex than the portrayal of national unity and patriotic euphoria conventionally summed up by the notion of the “August experience”. The latter is largely a myth constructed at the time by the conservative [press](#) and perpetuated long afterwards (including by the National Socialists after 1933) for political reasons. It is true that the national-liberal and conservative bourgeoisie responded to the ultimatum to Serbia with a good deal of enthusiasm. However, this quickly gave way to nervous tension at the

news of the Russian mobilization. Historians now agree, however, that “Germans experienced the outbreak of war differently according to their class, gender, age, location, and disposition [with feelings of] pride, enthusiasm, panic, disgust, curiosity, exuberance, confidence, anger, bluff, fear, laughter, and desperation”⁴. One can speak as little about a general [war enthusiasm](#) as of a refusal of peasants and workers to support the war.

As in other belligerent countries, a united political front formed, including the SPD, which up to that moment had been in opposition, organizing demonstrations against the prospect of war as late as 29 July. “We will not desert the Fatherland in the hour of danger” was now the credo of the SPD, all of whose deputies approved war credits and emergency wartime legislation with the rest of the *Reichstag* on 4 August 1914. A “fortress truce” ([Burgfrieden](#)) was declared (in reference to the unity that traditionally reigned in a besieged city) and the *Kaiser* proclaimed: “I no longer recognize parties, only Germans!”⁵ There appeared to be no limit to consensus and the attainment of social harmony.

In the first months of the war, German intellectuals and artists propagated a new national spirit that met with considerable approval not only amongst the bourgeoisie but also across society. Some saw the outbreak of the war as the dawn of a new era. Many artists volunteered – such as the painters [August Macke \(1887-1914\)](#), [Franz Marc \(1880-1916\)](#), [Otto Dix \(1891-1969\)](#), and [Max Beckmann \(1884-1950\)](#) – because they expected new artistic impulses to come from the war. Even after the war, Otto Dix confirmed that the experience of war at the front had a radical aesthetic quality that had been previously unknown: “The war was a terrible thing, but nevertheless it was something powerful. I cannot in any way deny that. One has to have seen humans in this unleashed condition, to really know something about humanity.”⁶ The famous Heidelberg sociologist [Max Weber \(1864-1920\)](#), who would later become an opponent of the German war leadership, responded to the outbreak of the war in August 1914 by exclaiming: “Whether or not it is successful, this war is truly great and wonderful.”⁷

War enthusiasm intensified following the apparently successful advances of the German armies and their first victories in Alsace and Belgium. Even in some of the *red* working class districts of Berlin and Hamburg, the national flag occasionally appeared. Above all, it was widely believed that Germany was fighting a “just war” in self-defence. In 1914, a sizeable number of men who had not been conscripted before the war now volunteered, along with others who were still below the call-up age. The latter became the object of a patriotic cult, which echoed the myth of the volunteers who had rallied to the Prussian monarchy during the Napoleonic Wars in 1813. Some 260,000 men volunteered in Prussia alone in the first ten days of the war, of whom 143,000 were then officially drafted. But the upper and middle

classes were over-represented and the numbers were far lower than the impression given by newspaper [propaganda](#), which portrayed German youth as overwhelmed by the spirit of sacrifice. The great majority of the 13 million Germans who fought in the war between 1914 and 1918 did so as conscripts, the bulk of them as reservists who had already performed their military service before the war.

War of Words

From the beginning, there was a “war of words” as well as deeds. Newspapers were filled with patriotic declarations and lyrical outpourings. It was not only the Prussian state religion, Protestantism, which gave the war its theological legitimacy as “the will of God”. Catholic and Jewish associations and organisations placed themselves entirely at the service of the national cause. While Jews hoped to reject all signs of anti-Semitic and anti-Jewish polemics, most Catholics saw support of the war as an opportunity to prove their unwavering loyalty to the German Empire, after decades of alienation from the Prussian-German state during Bismarck’s religious campaign against Catholicism. In numerous sermons clergy of both major confessions portrayed the death of the soldier for the nation and the sacrificial death of Christ as having a remarkable similarity.

Chauvinistic voices and statements arose from a variety of other sources. At the beginning of October, ninety-three renowned scholars, writers, and artists signed a declaration entitled the “Appeal to the World of Culture”. They sought to both influence public opinion in Germany and in [neutral](#) countries and refute the accusations of enemy [propaganda](#): “Against the lies and slander with which our enemies seek to blacken the pure cause of Germany in this terrible struggle for our existence which has been forced upon us.”⁸ But the breaches of [international law](#) committed by German soldiers as they advanced into Belgium and the north of France could not be denied. These included the shooting of hostages and the destruction of the famous university library of Louvain. In the academic world outside of Germany, especially in neutral countries, the “Appeal of the 93” was seen in a very negative light. International scholars were particularly outraged by the claim that militarism and culture were closely connected: “Without German [militarism](#), German culture would have long ago been wiped from the face of the earth.”

The manifesto of German scholars, writers, and artists was to have considerable consequences for the ensuing “war of the minds”, which divided intellectuals and academics internationally and which would still be felt long after hostilities were over. For many German intellectuals, the “good of the nation” had to take priority over all other interests in order to create a “national war society”.⁹ The result of this intellectual discourse was the romantic construction of “German culture” (*Kultur*) characterized by inner contemplation

(*Innerlichkeit*), spirit (*Geist*), and morality. Western “civilization” was its crassly constructed opposite. The intellectuals especially rejected ideas of democracy, materialism, and commercialism, which they attributed to the western nations. These so-called “ideas of 1914” won considerable approval from the educated bourgeoisie.

The nature of the First World War demanded that meaning was constantly attributed to events and that the [origins of the war](#) and national [war aims](#) were continuously reinterpreted. Controlling this process was the most important task of propaganda, which was quickly used by all sides and became extremely effective. In Germany the highest military organisation in the homeland, the Deputy Commands of Army Corps Districts (*Stellvertretende Generalkommando*), ordered constant surveillance and control of the press. Additionally, at the beginning of 1915 in Berlin, the [Supreme Command of the Army \(OHL\)](#) established a General Censorship Office, which eventually became the newly created War Press Office. However, [censorship](#) had clear limits. These limits applied to the field post delivered daily between the home and fighting fronts (of which German military censors could only examine a fraction) as well as to the press from neutral countries, which remained available. The ability to control information brought back from the war by soldiers on leave was also limited. The longer the war lasted, the less state propaganda could convince the population that their sacrifices were worthwhile. After three years of war and with millions dead, even [Walter Rathenau \(1867-1922\)](#), the outstanding organizer of the German [war economy](#), observed: “We still don’t know today, why we are fighting.”¹⁰

The War in 1914

Initially, the war in the west went more or less in accord with the Schlieffen plan. Despite unexpected resistance by the Belgian regular army and civilian militias, Belgium was finally defeated and most of the country [occupied](#), though in the process numerous towns and villages were destroyed and thousands of civilians were executed; as a result, hundreds of thousand Belgians fled the country. However, insufficient reserves and over-stretched supply lines meant that the German war plan failed at the [Battle of the Marne](#) in early September. The ensuing stabilization of the [Western Front](#) represented a major setback since the Germans now faced precisely the two-front war that they had sought to avoid.

In the east, underestimation of the speed of Russian mobilization resulted in the invasion, however brief, of national territory, as two Russian armies occupied a large part of East Prussia. Moltke the Younger, now chief of the Supreme Army Command (OHL), summoned [Paul von Hindenburg \(1847-1934\)](#) out of retirement and placed [Erich Ludendorff \(1865-1937\)](#) alongside him as his chief of staff to command German forces in the east. The First (East Prussian) Army Corps under Hindenburg succeeded in encircling and subsequently destroying

the Second Russian Army between 26 and 30 August 1914, with 140,000 Russian soldiers either killed or taken prisoner.

The “[Battle of Tannenberg](#)” was the most spectacular German victory of the entire war and was rapidly mythologized as it contrasted with the battles on the Western Front where heavy [losses](#) were incurred. The name was taken from the spot some miles away, where in the late middle ages the Teutonic Knights had been defeated by “pagan” Poles and Lithuanians, with the implication that, this time, history had been reversed and the barbarians thrown back by modern Germany. Hindenburg gained an almost legendary reputation as the “Saviour of the Nation”. When General Headquarters announced the expulsion of the last Russian soldiers from East Prussia on 12 September, Tannenberg also served as a counter-weight to the sobering defeat on the Marne. Over the course of the war both Hindenburg and Ludendorff gained increasingly more political power and influence. Still, there were no grounds for thinking that there would be a quick victory neither in the west nor in the east.

War Aims

In all belligerent countries after the war’s outbreak, the public began to debate the political and territorial [aims](#) that would follow victory. The debate in Germany was initiated by a radical memorandum from the leader of the nationalist [Pan-German League](#), [Heinrich Class \(1868-1953\)](#), which demanded far-reaching annexations in Belgium and northern France as well as other territorial gains in western and eastern Europe. Numerous further “programmes” and “peace-plans” were added, culminating in spring 1915 with the memorandum from five (later six) large German economic associations. Parallel to the industrialists’ demands, nationalist professors drew up the so-called “intellectuals’ petition” (*Intellektuelleneingabe*), the war aims of which were also marked by sweeping and aggressive demands.

The secret “September Programme” of the German government, first discovered in the 1960s and passionately discussed by German historians at the time, also belongs to these catalogues of German war aims.¹¹ It comprised the “provisional guidelines for German policy at the peace treaty” that the German Chancellor signed on 9 September 1914 before he knew of the outcome of the Battle of the Marne. Among other aims, Bethmann Hollweg demanded the downgrading of Belgium to the status of a German “vassal state”, the reduction of France to a middle-ranking power, the establishment of a mid-European economic association under German leadership, and a territorially integrated colonial empire in Africa. Historians have debated whether this programme was a key document in the history of German [imperialism](#) or merely a “formal compromise” between several different opinions at government level.¹² Whatever the answer, explaining why, even in the last year of

the war, a “victorious peace” (*Siegfrieden*) based on German hegemony in Europe was demanded at any cost by those in power remains a fundamental question about German policy.

The debate on war aims became increasingly radical during the period of the Third Supreme Army Command (Third OHL), which was directed by Hindenburg and Ludendorff from August 1916. By this stage hardly a government politician risked opposing the uninhibited longing for annexations that drove the OHL, especially in the east. The demands, which were also shared by wide sections of the national-conservative bourgeoisie, aimed at the extensive “ethnic reallocation of land”, meaning amongst other things the establishment of an area of a German settlement, free of Poles, either side of the provinces of Posen and West Prussia. There was also a range of liberal varieties of war aims, notably the concept of *Mitteleuropa* as economic bloc advocated by the liberal politician [Friedrich Naumann \(1860-1919\)](#), none of which however could be realized as a result of the war’s outcome. The underlying “philosophy” regarding German rule in Central Eastern Europe during the First World War was based upon a policy of enlargement through “ethnic cleansing”. This would later become a key component of some radical racist programmes and, infused with a biological determinism, would prepare the way for Nazi ideas on “living space” and settlement in the east.

The War in 1915

Following the failure in the west, [Erich von Falkenhayn \(1861-1922\)](#) replaced a badly shaken Helmuth von Moltke as head of the OHL, and redefined the German war plan. Highest priority was now given to Russia. The aim was, if not to defeat the Tsarist Empire entirely, to weaken Russia to such a degree that afterwards the German armies could again concentrate on fighting the enemy in the west. The result was the combined German and Austro-Hungarian offensive in the summer of 1915 that drove the Russians out of Galicia and later, out of Russian [Poland](#), although the Germans failed to eliminate Russian military strength. The new front ran 300 km further east, from Riga in the north to Romania in the South.

In the west the German armies had extended their defensive lines and made the optimum use of the terrain and prevailing conditions. They dug deep trenches and constructed numerous well-fortified concrete bunkers along the front for protection against enemy shelling. Unlike the German military, the allied armies could not afford to wait in protected positions. Thus, the German armies in the west faced a series of major enemy offensives in 1915. The German defensive positions however were strong enough to repel these attacks. On 22 April 1915 the Germans used [chemical warfare](#) (chlorine gas) at [Ypres](#), though its use had been banned by the Hague Convention on Land Warfare (Art. 21), which Germany had

signed. Faced with the need to break the two-front war, any means seemed legitimate. But gas failed to achieve the breakthrough the Germans had envisaged, and it bore an unexpected cost in the public outrage that it caused in allied and neutral countries. Of course, the allies also used poisonous gas, justifying it as a necessary reprisal. Another taboo was lifted on the unrestrained use of force.

German naval strategy failed almost entirely at the start of the war. The Imperial Navy was not only outnumbered in all classes by the British Grand Fleet, but the British Admiralty's decision not to mount a narrow blockade of the German coast also rendered the German Navy's war plan, which aimed at a decisive battle in German waters, ineffective. In autumn 1914 German [submarines](#) successfully sank a number of allied cruisers. This surprising success – the commanding officer, Captain [Otto Weddigen \(1882-1915\)](#), became an early war hero – opened the door for a submarine offensive against the Grand Fleet and all shipping (including that of neutral countries) approaching the United Kingdom. But this failed to paralyse the British economy. After the disaster of the [Lusitania](#) in May 1915, when the Cunard liner was sunk by a German torpedo off the southern coast of Ireland, with the loss of 1,198 lives, 127 of them American, Germany was forced to suspend unrestricted U-boat warfare for fear of bringing the [United States](#) into the war in the allied camp.

War Economy

At the outbreak of the conflict, very few politicians thought in terms of a long war. They were convinced that economic regulations that accompanied mobilization, such as restrictions on the export of goods important to the war economy and greater facilitation of food and fertilizer imports, were sufficient to meet the immediate demands created by a short campaign. Given that the total population and national product of the Central Powers amounted to only 46 and 61 percent respectively of the corresponding figures for the Entente, Germany, and especially Austria-Hungary could not afford the long war into which they had stumbled. However, it was a crisis in munitions supplies, felt by late October 1914, that resulted in soldiers and politicians having to face up to the need to reshape the economy for a long war.

One of the major problems for German wartime economic planning was the decentralization of a federal system. The entire production of [armaments](#) and military substitutes was subordinated to the Prussian War Ministry. The Prussian War Ministry shared responsibility with the internal military administration that exercised power in Germany's twenty five army corps districts. The so-called war corporations, which co-ordinated private enterprises at the national level, were controlled by the newly founded War Materials Section (*Kriegsrohstoffabteilung*) of the Prussian War Ministry, which was directed by Walter

Rathenau, the influential industrialist who later became Foreign Minister in the early Weimar Republic. In 1916, the Third OHL gave authority over a still divided economic planning to the new Supreme War Office, but even this institution was unable to gain complete control of munitions production. Industrial mobilization for the production of war materials in Germany had at best a mixed success.

Germany devoted a higher percentage of aggregate supply to war production than any other major belligerent (46 percent in 1917).¹³ On the other hand, German GDP fell in 1917 to 76 percent of its 1913 level (68 percent in 1919), indicating the cost to the German economy of diverting manpower and resources to the war.¹⁴ Agriculture was especially hard hit, with output at 60 percent of its pre-war levels in 1917-18.¹⁵ This was caused by decreases in the numbers of horses and machines available to farmers, shortages of fertilizer and feed, as well as fewer farm labourers. The German economy responded to import shortages by producing materials that had previously been imported. *Ersatz* (replacement) became a common term and was accompanied by a flourishing literature on how to make do with alternative foods and materials. The [British blockade](#) made it hard to compensate for reduced food production by imports, and the occupation of large tracts of Eastern Europe proved disappointing in this regard. The situation was made worse by the government's over-bureaucratic, and therefore inefficient, control of the economic system. The attempt to impose maximum prices for [food](#) began as early as 1914 and was intended to secure the food supply. It could not meet absolute shortfalls and finally resulted in the "dead end of the state controlled economy".¹⁶ Consequently, Germans experienced considerable reductions in levels of consumption during the war.

The War in 1916

Nineteen sixteen, the year of [Verdun](#) and the [Somme](#), intensified the pressures of the two-front war on Germany without resolving them. By concentrating a major offensive on the fortified zone around Verdun, Falkenhayn took the initiative in the west, hoping to destroy the French army and split the French from their British allies. Yet after a battle that dragged on from February to October, and which cost Germany as many dead and wounded as the French, the decisive psychological blow was not dealt to the French army, which turned the battle into an epic of national defence and ended up re-taking all the ground it had initially lost. The Somme, by contrast, was a defensive battle for Germany. The most costly encounter of the war in human and material terms, it was most obviously a failure for the French and especially the British who had hoped to achieve a decisive breakthrough. Yet, Germany suffered some 400,000 casualties, compared to over 600,000 by the allies, in a dreadful bloodletting from which the army in the west never recovered.

Meanwhile, with Germany under pressure in the west, the Russians timed an offensive under [Aleksei Alekseevich Brusilov \(1853-1926\)](#) in June on the Carpathian front, which, without achieving a decisive reversal of positions in the east, reclaimed some of the territory lost to the Austro-German forces in 1915. Only the swift elimination of Rumania after its entry into the war on the allied side in the autumn of 1916 relieved this tightening pressure. In the face of dramatically shrinking army reserves, serious shortages of munitions and the growing dependence of an enfeebled Austria-Hungary, Germany found it increasingly hard to undertake large-scale operations.

The pressure was reflected in a peculiarly defensive discourse that emerged during the Battle of the Somme, which blamed the destructive violence of the war on the attacking allies. This allegation was endlessly repeated in soldiers' letters as well as in public reports. It led to the strong conviction that the best way to protect the homeland was through a "forward defensive position" in enemy territory – defending Germany on the Somme rather than the Rhine. The same logic suggested that the war must continue until security was permanent – in other words until Germany had achieved a complete victory.

For the Germans, the Somme was remarkable for another reason. As enormous losses were incurred, especially as a result of allied artillery attacks, a new concept of tactical [warfare](#) was established: the so-called "storm trooper". This consisted of the deployment at the regimental level of smaller groups led by officers with front-line experience. The writer [Ernst Jünger \(1895-1998\)](#) later created a heroic monument in his war memoirs *Storm of Steel* (*In Stahlgewittern*) to this new figure on the battlefield, whom Jünger depicted as a stoical fighter who was hardly troubled by the horrors and suffering of [industrialized warfare](#).¹⁷ This ultra-militaristic and anti-bourgeois soldier entered the literature of [nationalism](#) in the Weimar Republic and left its mark on the image of the political or paramilitary "fighter" (*Kämpfer*) celebrated by the Nazis.

On 31 May 1916, the German High Seas Fleet sailed out on a [reconnaissance](#) probe. However, the British were aware of the manoeuvre and took up the pursuit. In the waters between the Norwegian coast and Jutland, a series of running engagements between the two navies resulted in heavy losses. At the end of the [Battle of Jutland](#), the only large sea battle of the war, British losses amounted to 120,000 tonnes and 7,784 men. The German fleet lost 60,000 tonnes and 3,093 men. Despite this initial success, the German fleet remained outnumbered and withdrew to harbour. The Royal Navy continued to cancel out the threat of Germany's battleships, leaving U-boat warfare as the only alternative.

The Third Supreme Army Command

The failure of the German army to break the encircling allies at Verdun and the heavy losses incurred during the battles of 1916 led to the replacement of Erich von Falkenhayn as the head of the OHL by the dual leadership of Hindenburg and Ludendorff. For the “silent dictator” Ludendorff the new title of First Quartermaster General was created. The German government under Bethmann Hollweg appointed the duumvirate not just because of their value as military commanders but also because they believed that the popularity of the “victors of Tannenberg” would help to ensure continued public support for the war. During their leadership of the Third OHL, which lasted from August 1916 until the end of October 1918, Hindenburg and Ludendorff took military and diplomatic decisions that fundamentally changed Germany’s course of the war: unlimited submarine warfare, the dictated “peace treaty” of [Brest-Litovsk](#), the military [occupation](#) of eastern Europe from [Finland](#) to the Caucasus, and, finally, the massive [spring offensive](#) in 1918.

The Third OHL also took a series of measures within the *Reich*, which were intended to intensify the mobilization of the population and adapt the economy to the requirements of a [total war](#). The Hindenburg Programme envisaged nothing less than a comprehensive restructuring of German arms production. It entailed countless guidelines on the expansion and intensification of [weapons](#) and armaments production, the creation of new industrial plants, and much tighter controls on [labour](#), including the enforced placement of workers from occupied areas. In many areas it remained hollow. Worse, decisions such as those to extend military service for men from 16 to 60 and to introduce general compulsory service for women, aroused the ire of the powerful trade union movement and forced the military bureaucracy to come to terms with organized labour and the SPD.¹⁸ Yet the attempt to aggrandize power in the hands of the military reached dimensions, according to Max Weber, that approached those of a “political military dictatorship”. The ascendancy of the military forced the resignations of the Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg in 1917 and Foreign Minister [Richard von Kühlmann \(1873-1948\)](#) in 1918.

Jewish Census

Soon after the establishment of the Third OHL, a further fatal decision was taken. On 1 November 1916 the Prussian War Ministry instigated a census of all Jewish soldiers. Politicians and the military had given in to the demands of anti-Semitic groups, which had repeatedly attempted to prove that German Jews were avoiding their military service and national responsibility. Over the course of the war they campaigned against Jewish “shirkers” and agitated against an allegedly decisive role of Jews in the organisation of the war economy. The completion of the [Jewish census](#) was accompanied by personal insinuations

and attacks. Many German Jews rightly felt that they had been humiliated and discriminated against. The exact results of the census were never made public and as a result anti-Semitic suspicions further increased.

The reality, as later shown by the reliable survey of the committee for war statistics, was that Jewish soldiers proportionately served and were killed in the same numbers as the non-Jewish soldiers. About 12 percent had volunteered, well above one third had been decorated, three quarters of all Jewish soldiers had fought at the front (something that the anti-Semites always had disputed) and the level of Jewish losses (at around 12 percent) corresponded with those of other confessions. In February 1917 the census was abandoned, but long-lasting damage had already been done. The Jewish census of 1916 not only violated the state's promise of equality but it also shook the trust of many Jews in the neutrality of the state and in the protection offered them by German society. It also gave a new impetus to radical anti-Semitic organisations. For many Germans, Jews were guilty of the military defeat of Germany to which was added, after 1917, responsibility for "Jewish Bolshevism". Thus, for some historians, the Jewish census of 1916 represents a caesura in modern [anti-Semitism](#), from which there is a direct line to the murder of the German and European Jewish populations during World War II.¹⁹

The War in 1917

In 1917, Ludendorff and Hindenburg responded to the pressure surrounding the German military effort not by seeking a compromise peace but, on the contrary, by demanding a victorious peace that would make Germany hegemony in Europe permanent and by adopting an increasingly radical conduct of the war in order to achieve it. The idea of a permanent, if informal, empire in eastern Europe, including areas of German settlement, was advocated at a political level by a plethora of nationalist movements which found expression in the new Fatherland Party (*Vaterlandspartei*), which backed the Third OHL and achieved a paper membership of some three quarters of a million in the last year of the war.

In military terms, the Third OHL sought once and for all to end the two-front war and to achieve a decisive result in the west before the balance of material advantage swung irreversibly behind the allies. In February 1917 the German navy command announced the resumption of "unrestricted submarine warfare". Ludendorff and Hindenburg had been convinced that the deployment of submarines could quickly end the war. There were now ten times more submarines available to the Germans than in 1915. The naval command believed that the strategy of restricting imports available to Britain by sinking merchant ships entering British waters would force the British to capitulate before U.S. intervention – the predictable result of unrestricted submarine warfare. Despite some initial success, however, the intended

turning point of the war failed to materialize as the British countered the new Germany strategy with the convoy system. The consequences of the miscalculation for Germany were devastating as military success remained beyond their grasp while the USA entered the war in early April.

Prizing open the two-front pincer meant refocusing on Russia as the weaker ally, especially after the February [Revolution](#). However, this meant strengthening defensive operations in the west. The result was the Third OHL's carefully prepared withdrawal from 9 February to 15 March 1917 to the Siegfried Line, a heavily fortified set of concrete and steel defences that eliminated the broad exposed salient between Arras and Saint-Quentin, including the battlefield of the Somme. Operation Alberich was one of the most successful German operations of the war. The abandoned area was comprehensively destroyed in a scorched earth policy, the population deported to the German rear, and Allied planners were forced to modify their plans. While the German press praised the precision of the operation and justified it as a military necessity, it was taken by allied propaganda as one further example of the Germans' barbaric conduct of the war.

That the German army on the Western Front succeeded, despite numerical inferiority of two to three, in resisting the attacks of the allies, was due in large measure to their practice of the doctrine of "deep elastic defence". This was illustrated at the Third Battle of Flanders (the German name for Third Ypres, or the battle of Passchendaele). Here, from July to December 1917, the Fourth Army, under General [Friedrich Sixt von Armin \(1851-1936\)](#), with the help of concrete [machine gun](#) and [artillery](#) positions, repelled the massive attacks of the Second and Fifth British Armies. While the Germans lost 217,000 men, British and allied casualties were more than 320,000. Once again, the defensive demonstrated its advantage.

Home Front

In all belligerent countries, but especially in Germany, there was widespread exhaustion and war-weariness after three years of war. Despite the deployment of new military [technologies](#) neither side had succeeded in making a decisive breakthrough. The effects on the [morale](#) of those directing the war were considerable. At the end of 1916, Ludendorff had unsuccessfully attempted to generate a new fighting spirit by introducing patriotic instruction into the armed forces, delivered by specially trained officers. But it proved impossible to recreate the *furor teutonicus* of the first months of the war. In the face of the massive casualties and widespread privation, the ideas propagated by the nationalist rhetoric at the start of the war including those of individual courage and selfless effort for the fatherland became obsolete. Instead propaganda focused on the capacity for suffering and further endurance under extreme wartime conditions. Many soldiers and their families in the homeland no longer

wanted to hear of patriotic war aims or Christian justifications for battlefield losses. Instead, the soldier's death was increasingly seen as an individual loss.

For "war-families", as the families of soldiers were called, and above all for women and [children](#), whose husbands and fathers were at the front, the war represented a special challenge. Despite military allowances and other social measures to reduce the economic impact of the war, there was a reduction in family incomes generally and especially for [war widows](#). During the final year of the war there was a remarkable increase in offences against property. Male youths, who had escaped the supervision of their parents, were particularly responsible for increasing levels of criminality. People were forced to steal food, clothes, and other vital items. During the course of the war there was a rising curve of public breaches of the peace, resistance to state authority, and other forms of civil disobedience, which eventually developed into riots and revolutionary action.

The contribution made by women was decisive for the functioning of wartime society in Germany. At first, the conventional division of labour along gender lines worked reasonably well. The more traditional roles of many women – in the household, in nursing and care professions, as agricultural workers – were seen as part of their patriotic duty and as a feminine contribution to the war, complementing but not challenging masculine roles. Those women who broke the mould of gender by doing formerly masculine work were at first considered as nothing more than replacements for conscripted men. This applied especially to women munitions workers, many of whom had transferred to this sector following initial wartime unemployment. As in pre-war times, they were paid less than their male colleagues. The supposedly emancipating effect of the war was considerably over-rated; in Germany, as in other European countries, what occurred may be best described as "emancipation on loan".²⁰ Admittedly women obtained the [right to vote](#) as a result of defeat and [revolution](#), which was a real achievement in comparison with many other western countries. However, the social reality of the factories and workplaces was sobering, and at the end of the war many women were expelled from the "men's jobs" they had temporarily occupied.

As a result of the British blockade and the length of the war, the increasingly meagre food supply in the second half of the war placed a particular burden on women. Economic and consumer shortages reached their high point in the notorious "turnip winter" of 1916-17. Consumption was reduced to about 50 percent of its normal level through the introduction of a system of food rationing and illness and death due to food shortages occurred every day in the final two years of the war. The two groups most affected were the young and the old, and wartime mortality related directly or indirectly to malnutrition totalled about 700,000.²¹

As early as April 1917, and then again in January 1918, there were hunger protests and

finally general strikes in Berlin, Leipzig, Hamburg, and numerous other cities. By the end of January, over half a million workers had joined the strike. This strike action affected the armaments industry in Berlin more than any other sector. As they grew in strength, the demonstrations became increasingly political. In response, the government introduced a state of emergency and arrested the strike leaders. In addition, 50,000 armaments workers in Berlin, who until then had been held back from the front, were conscripted. In the face of this repression the strike was broken. Nonetheless, the revolution that determined the last phase of the war and the transition to peace grew from hunger, general hopelessness, and the collapse of the traditional social and political contract between rulers and ruled.

Constitutional Reforms

Although the German government, under rapidly changing chancellors, persevered with the concept of a victorious peace until late summer 1918, a different course for German politics began to emerge in the *Reichstag* as an increasing number of deputies demanded an end to hostilities and significant domestic reforms. Such voices were most outspoken on the far left. In December 1914, [Karl Liebknecht \(1871-1919\)](#) was the only deputy of the SPD who had voted against the *Burgfrieden*. A year later, as many as 20 deputies refused to approve new war credits and in April 1917, the opposition within the SPD founded a new party, the Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany (USPD), which demanded an immediate end to the war.

More moderate in its approach was an emerging majority of the *Reichstag* that opposed the open-ended continuation of the war and which, in July 1917, voted for the famous Peace Resolution calling for a negotiated end to the war and major constitutional reforms. The parties concerned, the Social Democrats, the Catholic Centre Party, the Progressives, and the National Liberals formed an Inter-Party Committee of the *Reichstag*, and although they were powerless against the Third OHL until defeat loomed, they provided the basis for the emergence of parliamentary democracy in the post-war Weimar Republic, in which they formed the “Weimar Coalition”. Nonetheless, the fragile nature of the minimal consensus practised by the Inter-Party Committee, was to be seen by the *Reichstag*’s ratification of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918, by which the German military imposed extremely harsh conditions on Bolshevik Russia. Only the USPD rejected the dictated treaty. The SPD abstained while all the other parties supported it. Once again, the *Reichstag* had given the military the freedom to pursue its political and economic expansion in the east, something that was to have long-term fatal consequences.

Endgame 1918

The last year of the war began promisingly for the German Empire. The fighting spirit of the

Russian army had finally been broken with the defeat of [Alexander Fyodorovich Kerensky's \(1881-1970\)](#) offensive in June 1917. In December, the Bolsheviks sought an armistice. In order to force the Bolshevik government to sign an official peace treaty, German troops began to occupy large parts of the [Ukraine](#) and [White Russia](#) and to establish friendly governments in these territories. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, signed in March 1918, brought Russian Poland as well as the Baltic states under German rule and effectively gave the Germans military control of the Ukraine and Finland. Russia had lost the ethnically non-Russian borderlands of the Tsarist Empire, along with a quarter of its population. In nationalist circles in Germany, the "victory peace" unleashed euphoria and restored confidence in the ultimate outcome of the war.

Prospects on the Western Front, however, were less promising. Ludendorff viewed the continued arrival of American soldiers and material with great concern and decided to gamble everything on a decisive offensive in the west before the [American Expeditionary Force](#) was in a position to determine the outcome of the war. The aim of the spring offensive, which began in March 1918, was to split the British and French armies in the hope of forcing each power to capitulate quickly. New tactics were planned, including the use of [Sturmtruppen](#) (assault detachments) to penetrate the front and cause chaos in the enemy's rear, and the exact co-ordination of [infantry](#) and artillery.

Initially, the spring offensive was successful and the German troops advanced up to 60 kilometres between 21 March and 5 April. However, German losses of about 230,000 were so immense that the offensive finally had to be suspended. Ludendorff, who once again had placed "tactics above strategy", could now only undertake wild attacks against the enemy at different points along the front, none of which could achieve his aim of isolating the allies from each other.²² The allied counteroffensive began in June and a carefully prepared assault by French units at Soissons on 18 July, accompanied by 400 [tanks](#), finally took all the initiative from the Germans. A British attack supported by tanks on 8 August at Amiens was the final turning point of the war on the Western Front. Although the allies only advanced 10 kilometres, the actual gains were much greater than this might indicate since, for the first time, German soldiers capitulated in large numbers. For Ludendorff, 8 August was the "black day of the Army".²³ By now, the Americans were also present in large numbers on the Western Front and had achieved the capability for military action independently of the other allies. The Germans were under constant pressure to retreat. Following years of disappointment, German soldiers who had initially greeted the March offensive with enthusiasm now felt deeply disillusioned and demoralized. In several sectors, they sought opportunities to escape a war they saw as senseless. Historians have identified a figure of up to one million German soldiers who in the last months of the war left their units without

permission, and in this context some even speak of a “concealed military strike”.²⁴

These developments induced a state of panic in Ludendorff by the end of September. Fearing the total collapse of the Western Front, he sought an immediate armistice. For the allies this came as a complete shock. The German army remained capable of military operations, with its divisions still far inside enemy territory, and the allies were planning a new offensive to push into Germany itself in the winter of 1918-19. For the German public the shock was even greater. Until the end they had been fed with idealized reports from the front and exhorted to hold out. Already, Ludendorff excused his military failures by blaming others. The German army and especially its military leadership, he claimed, had not failed. Rather the home front, “poisoned with Marxism”, had failed and in effect stabbed the army in the back. The “[stab-in-the-back](#)” myth had many creators, but Ludendorff and Hindenburg were among the most prominent, especially when the latter testified before the *Reichstag* committee established in 1919 to investigate the causes of German defeat.

The newly-formed government under the liberal politician and last Chancellor of Imperial Germany, [Prince Maximilian of Baden \(1867-1929\)](#), requested an armistice from the American President [Woodrow Wilson \(1856-1924\)](#) on 4 October and offered to commence peace negotiations. In his reply Wilson demanded – to the horror of conservative politicians and officers – that the traditional ruling elites of Germany be deprived of their power, and implicitly that the *Kaiser* should abdicate. Ludendorff attempted in vain to change course once again and now argued for the continuation of the war. But it was too late. The desire for peace among the majority of the population was too great, and revolution had begun to break out among the sailors of the Home Fleet and workers. On 26 October, Prince Max of Baden forced Ludendorff to resign. On [9 November](#) he announced the abdication of the *Kaiser* and simultaneously handed over the position of chancellor to the SDP politician [Friedrich Ebert \(1871-1925\)](#).

The terms of the armistice that took effect on 11 November at 11am were stipulated by the allies in such a way that it was impossible for Germany to recommence the war. A day earlier, Wilhelm II had fled into exile in [the Netherlands](#), but it was not until 28 November that he declared in a signed statement, that he had relinquished the crown of Prussia (and with it the “associated rights of the crown of the German Empire”). By this time the German Empire had already collapsed like a house of cards.

Conclusion

Like most political and military leaders, German ruling elites had no idea what kind of war they were going to unleash in the summer of 1914. The war was neither short nor decisive as

the *Kaiser* had promised and most generals had expected (“Home by Christmas”) but long, arduous, and demanding. The previously existing political and social tensions inside Wilhelmine society intensified despite the officially declared *Burgfrieden* among parties and public groups. Politicians and economic leaders, in addition to numerous academics and artists, lost all sense of proportion in advocating an all-out victorious peace (*Siegfrieden*) placing the accumulated gigantic costs of war on the defeated enemies’ side. After the largely indecisive battles of 1916, involving tremendous losses of men and materials, the economic and social conditions on the home front deteriorated further, while the perception of a superior German cultural and political system ultimately proved a chimera. All attempts to correct the political imbalance failed: while an emerging parliamentary majority of the *Reichstag* (the future “Weimar Coalition”) voted the famous Peace Resolution in July 1917 calling for a negotiated end to the war and major constitutional reforms, the *Reichstag*’s overwhelming support for the military to pursue its political and economic expansion in the east revealed again the fragile nature of any party political consensus and thus demonstrated the powerlessness of the German legislative under conditions of total war. On the other hand, Germany’s “political military dictatorship” between 1916 and 1918, headed by Hindenburg and Ludendorff, was largely built on sand. Unable to turn the tide of the war in the west, the military possessed neither the capacity nor the stamina to achieve their self-proclaimed goals (the Hindenburg program). In the end [German society](#) suffered from profound economic and social antagonisms and contradictions that led to a widely felt estrangement with the ruling political and military elites. Germany did not lose the war because its armies were decisively beaten or diminished on the battlefields. Rather, soldiers and civilians suffered from general exhaustion and war fatigue that involved all aspects of lives. Thus, the revolution of 1918/19 was the unavoidable outcome of this self-inflicted catastrophe.

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Notes

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14. Ibid., p. 220 (Table 15.1). [↑](#)
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Key Person(s)

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