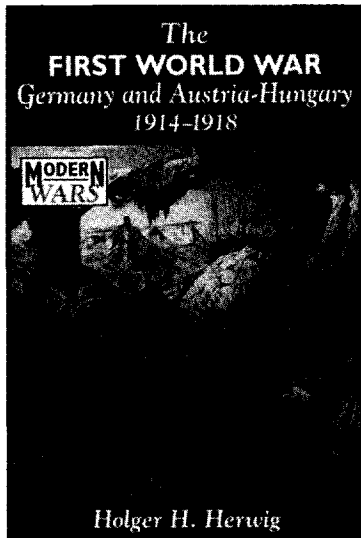


The Great War

reviewed by Williamson Murray

THE FIRST WORLD WAR, GERMANY AND AUSTRIA-HUNGARY 1914 – 1918. By Holger H. Herwig. Arnold, London, 1998, 480 pp., \$19.95. (Member \$17.95)



Holger Herwig has established himself over the years as one of the leading historians of the German navy in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as well as Germany's peculiar political structure immediately before the outbreak of World War I. He has established a reputation as a ruthless critic of the almost infinite capacity for German naval (and army) officers to confuse tactical and operational matters with strategy, and to identify their own narrow interests and concerns with those of the nation. In this superb history, he has now widened his target to examine the civilian and military leaderships of the Central Powers—Germany and Austria-Hungary—as they attempted to deal with the complex and ambiguous questions that World War I raised.

It is indeed a sorry tale that Professor Herwig has to tell. Neither government was capable of taking a strategic view of the conflict. The Austrians, in fact, bungled the war at

every level with a mixture of gross incompetence, careless indifference, and sloppy execution. Their performance contributed greatly to the eventual collapse of the Central Powers in 1918. The fascinating question, of course, is how the Austro-Hungarians hung on until October 1918. Perhaps the only explanation is that their incompetence was nearly matched by that of the Italians, and particularly that of the Russians. Yet Austria-Hungary and its unending series of military defeats was a millstone around the neck of the Reich's war effort from the beginning.

Professor Herwig attributes much of the blame for the outbreak of World War I to Austria-Hungary. Nevertheless, the Germans encouraged Hapsburg irresponsibility to the fullest extent and then, when the crisis exploded, had only a single plan—the invasion of France through Belgium and Luxembourg. The von Schlieffen Plan had scant chance of success due to operational and logistical weaknesses, but it ensured Britain's immediate entry into the war, as well as the long-term hostility of the United States.

While the Germans pounded their way to the Marne river, the Austro-Hungarians proceeded in order, counterorder, and disorder to deploy first against Serbia and then against Russia and Russian Poland on axes of advance that carried them in three separate directions. The result was military and strategic catastrophe. The three armies in Russian Poland were defeated in detail while, even more humiliating for the Austro-Hungarian empire, the forces attacking Serbia suffered a major defeat. The result was a catastrophe

from which the Hapsburg Army never really recovered.

At the heart of Austro-Hungarian difficulties was the chief of staff of its army, Gen Franz Baron Conrad von Hotzendorf, who produced an almost infinite number of war plans and, once war had broken out, schemes and proposals that possessed a general irrelevancy to military, strategic, or even political realities. If Conrad could not contribute in a positive sense to the alliance, he could certainly contribute in a negative sense. In the spring of 1916 he redeployed a substantial number of his best divisions from the eastern front to launch an offensive against the Italians. The Russians, however, failed to remain quiescent and launched the Brusilov offensive, which shattered the Hapsburg armies in the east and forced the Germans to shut down their offensive at Verdun to rush troops to rescue their allies.

The problem with the Germans was more complex. After the great Moltke's nephew had presided over the collapse of the von Schlieffen Plan—largely due, as Professor Herwig points out, to its own failings—and the failure of German attacks on Flanders, the new chief of staff, Gen Erich von Falkenhayn, actually went to the German Chancellor and suggested the Reich should seek a compromise peace. Nevertheless, while von Falkenhayn at times recognized the dangers of the Reich's strategic position, he unleashed the disastrous attack on Verdun. He also demanded that German troops in the west hold every piece of territory, regardless of its territorial significance—an approach that added immeasurably to German casualties on the Somme.

By the autumn of 1916 von Falkenhayn's failures at the tactical and operational level, as well as Germany's strategic mistakes, had brought the Reich to the brink of defeat. At this point, the Kaiser finally replaced von Falkenhayn with Field Marshall Paul von Hindenburg, aptly named the "Wooden Titan," and his chief of staff, Gen Erich Ludendorff. To all intents and purposes the latter became the virtual dictator of Germany for the next 2 years. On the strategic level the new regime failed

to improve on the Reich's dismal record. At almost the same time that Ludendorff was worrying that Denmark and Holland might enter the war on the side of Germany's enemies, he was urging the Kaiser and the Chancellor to begin unrestricted submarine warfare—an action that he knew would bring the United States into the war. As he commented in early January 1917, "I don't give a damn about the Americans." His titular commander added that any American contribution to the Allied effort would be "minimal, in any case, not decisive."

Unfortunately for Germany and Europe, Ludendorff proved far

more competent when it came to dealing with the tactical problems the war had raised. He alone of the World War I commanders recognized that tactical problems required solutions before the armies could look for operational and strategic answers to the war. He set in motion the hardheaded doctrinal examination of the 1916 battles that resulted in the publication of the revolutionary manual, *Principles of Commander for the Defensive Battle in Position Warfare* on 1 December 1916. Moreover, Ludendorff was able to force his generals, colonels, majors, captains, lieutenants, and noncommissioned officers to read, digest, understand, and

implement the new doctrine. Yet Ludendorff refused to examine the operational consequences of those changes. As he exclaimed to Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria in 1918, "I object to the word 'operation.' We will push a hole in [the line]. For the next, we shall see." And so the great German offensives of 1918 punched a deep hole in the frontline positions of British and French armies—up to 45 miles in the case of the March 1918 attack. But without either strategic or operational focus they failed at the cost of nearly 1 million casualties, nearly double those the Germans had suffered at Verdun, or the Somme river, or Paschendaele.

The alliance between Germany and Austria-Hungary made neither strategic nor political sense. Each state fought for its narrowly conceived interests; each floundered from crisis to crisis; neither trusted the other; and in the end both went down to defeat. In the case of Austria-Hungary, defeat resulted in the dissolution of that state.

There are a number of reasons why this study should be of interest to Marine officers. It is well-written, clear in its formulations, and of great use in providing a general framework for understanding the history of World War I—at least from the point of view of the Central Powers. Professor Herwig has underlined once again the point that Allen Millet and I made in the *National Interest* in the late 1980s—mistakes at the strategic level in war cannot be redeemed and inevitably lead to defeat, while weaknesses at the operational and tactical levels can be repaired, as long as the strategic framework is coherent and intelligent. Here Herwig has offered an enormously useful corrective to the belief that the Germans offer an example of military effectiveness that is worth copying. In fact, the operational and tactical virtuosity that the German military exhibited only served to make the results of strategic miscalculations in the world wars that much more catastrophic.



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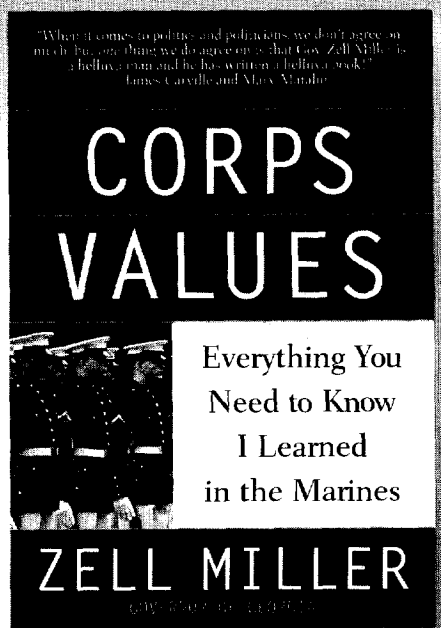
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