

Part of the Reason:

A Comparative Review

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The issue of what event or events caused the end of World War One is a topic of much discussion. Once trenches were built in 1914, although there were some offensive attacks, the war front changed little. However, in the last 100 days of the war, the Entente was able to hold a large offensive, push German soldiers back, and force peace negotiations.¹ Three articles; *The Military Collapse of the German Empire* by Wilhelm Deist and E.J. Feuchtwanger, *What Manner of History* by Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson and *The Stab in the Back - Myth or Reality* by M.E. Occleshaw, ask what changed to allow this to happen. Each article comes to a slightly different conclusion around the causes leading to the final Entente offensive being successful as there is academic debate around the cause of the end of the war; a failure of the German Army, a success of Entente equipment, and a failure of the German homefront accelerated by propaganda. Each article also uses a slightly different methodology and sources to come to its conclusion; using German secondary sources and comparisons, using the primary source of operational reports and interpreting tone of sources, and finally, through using British sources on Germany and providing a proposal, rather than a full conclusion. These three sources have both different conclusions and answers to the question of what caused the end of the war and have different writing methods. These things change the end result of the articles and influence how convincing they are. The articles most convincing are *The Military Collapse of the German Empire* by Wilhelm Deist and E.J. Feuchtwanger, and *What Manner of History* by Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson as they have a convincing argument that demonstrates causation, have appropriate sources, and a reliable methodology.

The first article that will be discussed is *The Military Collapse of the German Empire* by Wilhelm Deist and E.J. Feuchtwanger. This article argues that the tide of the war was turned

¹ Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, "What Manner of Victory? Reflections on the Termination of the First World War", *Revue Internationale d'Histoire Militaire* 72 (1990): 85.

through a German lack of morale. Deist and Feuchtwanger write that the war spirit of 1914 was lost through a series of battle losses, and poor conditions on the front lines.² Soldiers were exhausted, sick, and hungry and thus unwilling and unable to fight against better equipped and fed Entente armies.³ Complaints in the army increased, as there were issues between officers and soldiers as officers were perceived to be abusing them, were given better rations, and continuously sent soldiers into doomed battles.⁴ The authors theorize that because of the deterioration of morale in the German army, the army fell into disorganization with soldiers refusing to attack, and opened an opportunity for the Entente forces to launch increased attacks.⁵ This is a convincing argument as the authors demonstrate causation. They explain both the conditions in the trenches, and how these conditions led to unrest within the military as about one million soldiers deserted the military and went home, and other soldiers refused to follow orders.⁶ These desertions and disobedience weakened an already weak army and provided an opportunity for the Entente forces to win the war. This article is convincing as it can outline how issues in the army lead to weakening and eventual failure.

This article is also convincing in the sources and methodology that it uses. The main sources that this article draws on to make this conclusion are German sources written after the end of the war. While these are not primary sources as they are not written in the time that they are writing on, they are still close to the source as they are German sources studying German activities, and thus they would have a greater understanding of the general mood of German soldiers. This article is intended to outline the decline in morale, and propose that this may be a cause for the end of the war. It makes comparisons between the German and Entente conditions

² Wilhelm Deist and Edgar Joseph Feuchtwanger, "The military collapse of the German empire: the reality behind the stab-in-the-back myth," *War in History* 3, no. 2 (1996): 197.

³ Deist and Feuchtwanger, "The military collapse of the German empire," 199.

⁴ Deist and Feuchtwanger, "The military collapse of the German empire," 200.

⁵ Deist and Feuchtwanger, "The military collapse of the German empire," 204.

⁶ Deist and Feuchtwanger, "The military collapse of the German empire," 202.

on the front lines and the comparatively worse conditions on the German front lines helps to bring context the reason for German failure of morale. The authors direct this article at university students as a degree of background information is required, and the vocabulary is academic.

Overall, *The Military Collapse of the German Empire* by Wilhelm Deist and E.J. Feuchtwanger is a convincing and effective source, as it has a convincing argument that outlines the cause of military unrest and how this led to the disintegration of the military, and as it relies on suitable sources and comparisons to strengthen its argument. Both the sources and the audience affect how this piece is written by how in-depth the article is. The sources allow for the writers to fully explain the mood on the front lines, and as the audience is educated, little background information is required, meaning little time is needed on an overview of the war. These two factors allow this article to be more specialized. This article presents a strong argument as it demonstrates how a decline in morale caused German losses, and through effective sources and comparisons, outlines how this affected the outcome of the war.

The second article that will be discussed is *What Manner of History* by Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson. This article argues that the tide of the war was turned through improvements in Entente equipment. Germany had been suffering from a blockade preventing ocean imports for most of the war. This meant that they were lacking in many raw materials needed for industry and the building of war weapons.⁷ British forces, on the other hand, were not affected by large industrial shortages, and were able to build an increasing number of weapons, such as tanks, improved guns, and artillery.⁸ This strengthened their army and prevented large casualties, because as more modern equipment became available, fewer soldiers were needed. The Germans not only were dealing with weapon inequality and inefficiency but also large casualties, as more

⁷ Prior and Wilson, "What Manner of Victory?," 83.

⁸ Prior and Wilson, "What Manner of Victory?," 84.

soldiers were needed to man weaker weapons.⁹ The content in this article is effective, as it demonstrates the causational effect between a lack of raw materials, lack of modernized weapons, a falling behind, and the eventual loss of the war.

This article is also convincing in the sources and methodology that it uses. To draw its conclusions, this article relies primarily on operational reports. Operational reports are reports created by officers or others high in military ranking to record the movements and actions of troops. These reports, as can be seen in the quotes included in the article, are detailed, impersonal, factual and offer information without the biases of interpretation.¹⁰ These reports are an effective source, as they allow historians such as Prior and Wilson to understand the movements, successes, and failures of individual armies without being overly affected by propaganda, as these reports would have served the purpose of informing and remained internal to the army. As a methodology, this article employs an effective interpretation of tone. As its sources are primarily operational reports which have a factual rather than emotive basis, the authors must interpret the tone and situation surrounding the reports. They can do this by outlining the background of these reports, and by understanding the requests and tone of each source to understand how the army was being affected by their less modern weapons. While the sources used by this article were internal army communications, the actual article is aimed at university students. This article assumes a fairly high level of understanding of the events of World War One and uses academic language.

Overall, *What Manner of History* by Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, is a convincing and effective source as it has a convincing argument that the lack of modernized weapons led to war losses, and as it uses reliable sources as well as a methodology to interpret the tone. These

⁹ Prior and Wilson, "What Manner of Victory?," 91.

¹⁰ Prior and Wilson, "What Manner of Victory?," 95.

factors contribute to the effectiveness of this article and make it reliable and convincing. The sources and audience of this article allow the content to stand out, as the sources provide effective examples and the experience of the audience allows the authors to discuss more complicated issues like war modernization. This article is effective as it is able to explain the lack of weapons modernization, and the sources used aided in understanding how this impacted the outcome of the war.

The third article that will be discussed is *The Stab in the Back - Myth or Reality* by M.E. Occleshaw. This article argues that the tide of the war was turned by a breaking of the German war spirit on the home-front by Entente subversion efforts.¹¹ During the war, the political differences between Germans had grown, and socialism was gaining increased influence.¹² The British were able to use this political fragmentation and the socialists for their “Nemesis” system which included German socialists committing acts of sabotage and providing information about the German political and economic situation.¹³ The British were then able to use this information and chaos to drop propaganda into Germany. While this article does not argue that this campaign of subversion was the only cause of the turn of the war, it does argue that it was a cause of German home front chaos which amplified the subversion at the front lines and amplified the pre-existing feeling of Germans.¹⁴ This article, however, is not effective as it fails to show causation. While it can demonstrate that the British dropped propaganda into Germany and that there was political chaos, it does not demonstrate that this chaos was caused by British propaganda. As there is a lack of causational evidence, this article is ineffective.

¹¹ M. E. Occleshaw, "The “stab in the back”—Myth or reality?," *The RUSI Journal* 130, no. 3 (1985): 49.

¹² Occleshaw, "The “stab in the back”," 50.

¹³ Occleshaw, "The “stab in the back”," 50.

¹⁴ Occleshaw, "The “stab in the back”," 52.

This article is also not convincing as it uses poor sources and methodology. This article relies mainly on reports from British officers and secondary source articles for its research. This is an ineffective choice for an article that focuses on the change of German opinion by British propaganda as it relies mostly on how the British viewed their own program. It fails to cite reports on German home-front morale before and after propaganda drops. Without this evidence, it is unclear how much the propaganda affected the German home front, and how much change was already in action. This article is not intended to be a conclusion to the subject of propaganda, but rather a proposal that future studies should consider the impact of British propaganda in Germany. This is not an effective methodology as it proposes a theory and fails to sufficiently expand or convince the reader that this theory is true. This article is aimed at individuals in academia, as it is published in a journal that those studying history would have access to. As such, it is written with an academic tone, and with the assumption that readers have background knowledge on World War One.

Overall *The Stab in the Back - Myth or Reality* by M.E. Occleshaw is an ineffective article. It presents an interesting idea, however, it fails to show any causal effect, and the reader is left unconvinced that British propaganda had any effect on political chaos in Germany. Its use of inappropriate secondary sources further makes it an ineffective source, as the authors would not have known or had experience of the location being discussed in the article, as they were British, not German. The incompleteness of its writing also makes the idea seem unfinished and unconvincing. Overall, while this article is interesting and well-written, it fails to convince and relies on inadequate sources and methodologies.

In conclusion, the articles by Deist, Feuchtwanger, Prior and Wilson present convincing evidence, and use effective sources and methodologies while the article by Occleshaw remains

unconvincing. The cause of the end of World War One is attributed to a variety of factors all of which led to Germany's loss. Two articles discussed in this essay, *The Military Collapse of the German Empire* by Wilhelm Deist and E.J. Feuchtwanger, *What Manner of History* by Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson present convincing evidence as to why this loss occurred. These articles argue that Germany lost because of a decline in morale, and their inability to obtain modernized weapons. *The Stab in the Back - Myth or Reality* by M.E. Occleshaw, on the other hand, does not make a convincing argument as it fails to show causation for its propaganda-based loss theory, relies on poor sources, and feels incomplete. Overall, the most effective articles, by Deist, Feuchtwanger, Prior and Wilson, are those which show clear causational evidence and which use effective sources and methodology.

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