



*Mark Osborne Humphries and John Maker, eds. Germany's Western Front, 1915: Translations from the German Official History of the Great War, Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010.*

Matt Bucholtz, University of Calgary

*Germany's Western Front, 1915*, translated and edited by Mark Osborne Humphries and John Maker, is the second volume in a series of translations of *Der*

*Weltkrieg*, the official German history of the First World War. Mark Osborne Humphries teaches Canadian and military history at Mount Royal College in Calgary, Alberta and has published several works on the First World War in both Canadian and international journals. John Maker is a PhD Candidate at the University of Ottawa, working on a dissertation entitled "Shiner, Shindigs, and Shenanigans: Canadian Soldiers in Britain during the Second World War." Composed of selections from volumes VII, VIII and IX of *Der Weltkrieg, Germany's Western Front, 1915* dutifully presents one of the last triumphs of German Wilhelmine era operational level military history. Originally published from 1925 to 1944, *Der Weltkrieg* stands as the culmination of the von Rankean tradition of "*wie es eigentlich gewesen*" or 'how it actually happened' in the Great German General Staff. Humphries and Maker produced this translated work in an attempt to provide a German counterpart to the narrative of the Great War in English, which has been traditionally, and understandably, dominated by sources from England, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United States of America. In an ironic post-modern twist, the editors have sought to end the "othering" of German interpretations by translating the official (one might be tempted to say master narrative) German history of the war into English, and thus simply adding one master narrative to another. Nevertheless, both the foreword by Hew Strachan and the introduction written by the editors do an excellent job of not only situating *Der Weltkrieg* within the historiography, but also critically examining the creation and creators of the series. Throughout the volume, the editors consistently provide useful footnotes, not only to clarify various points in the text, but also to elaborate on the relationships between the subject matter and the authors of *Der Weltkrieg* (the most notable example being von Haeften's consistently negative critique of Feldmarschall von Falkenhayn's conduct throughout 1915, which directly stemmed from von Haeften's personal loyalty to his former commanding officer, Helmuth von Moltke the Younger, who was replaced by Falkenhayn). Although the usefulness of *Der Weltkrieg* is limited by its high level focus (the series does not focus on any military unit smaller than a division and is mainly concerned with the leadership *coterie* of Germany's war effort), it nevertheless remains an important resource for historians as the series was produced from sources which were destroyed during the Second World War by a wayward British bomber, and thus denied to current researchers. Although this official history was finished during the Nazi era, it remains remarkably free of National Socialist ideological overtones. Most of

the politically motivated interpretations in the series are an expression of Imperial or Weimar era internal military intrigues, not those of the Third Reich.

While the editors intended their translation of *Der Weltkrieg* to provide a German counterpart to the French and British centric narrative of the Western Front, this second volume does not centre specifically on northwest Europe. Instead, the central theme of 1915 was a crisis in strategic direction within the German High Command, highlighted by the actions of Feldmarschall von Falkenhayn. *Der Weltkrieg* puts Falkenhayn at the centre of a fragmented leadership group advocating various responses to the failure of the German Army to achieve a decisive victory in 1914. Indeed, the authors of *Der Weltkrieg* depict Falkenhayn as: balancing the demands of Germany's weakening ally, Austria-Hungary; Hindenburg and Ludendorff's proposals for decisive victory in the East against Russian; Austrian Chief of Staff Conrad von Hotzendorf's calls for a Balkan advance; diplomatic issues concerning smaller Central Powers like the Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria; and having a personal belief that meaningful, decisive victory could only be obtained in the West against Britain and France. Thus Humphries' and Maker's volume serves to place the Western Front in an overall strategic context, through its lengthy examination of the dilemmas facing Falkenhayn.

For historians and students of the First World War, this particular volume of the translation series provides a much-needed focus on what could be termed 'the forgotten year' of the conflict. Many students of the Great War can quickly rattle off the major, 'sexy' battles of the war. Places like Tannenberg (1914), the Somme and Verdun (1916), and Passchendaele (1917) play central roles in our understanding of the First World War. The Second Battle of Ypres is generally the sole mention from 1915 in the list of significant battles, and this is usually limited to Canadian and British circles. *Germany's Western Front, 1915* re-familiarizes the reader with the massive undertakings in the first full year of trench warfare. Large-scale offensives near Soisson, Champagne, and the Argonne Forest, as well as the twin fall offensives by the British and French in the Artois and Champagne regions are carefully reconstructed at the operational level. Most interestingly for tactical and operational military historians, the authors of *Der Weltkrieg* demonstrate that the impressive German defensive systems that froze strategic mobility were an evolutionary process, not a prepared prewar doctrine. The winter and spring of 1915 serves as a remarkable case study for any student of military

history, showing the responses of a command structure fighting an unexpected style of warfare without clear strategic objectives.

Ultimately this second volume in the series of translations of *Der Weltkrieg* will be interesting to those focusing on strategic and operational military history, but of little use to those asking 'new questions' of the standard focus of the past. *Der Weltkrieg* provides an excellent counterpart to the narrative of the First World War in English, which until now has been dominated by English language sources, but remains a history 'from above.' This translation of *Der Weltkrieg* will aid many military historians, but one must be careful to scrutinize the text with all of the rigors any primary source would necessitate due to the highly political circumstances surrounding its creation. The editors should be congratulated on an excellently translated text, free from many of the usual syntax oddities one encounters when reading German to English translations.

*Matt Bucholtz is a PhD Candidate at the University of Calgary under the supervision of Dr. Holger Herwig. His dissertation research concerns the political nature and activities of the German Military from 1918 to 1923.*