



2010.02.07

Scott Stephenson, *The Final Battle: Soldiers of the Western Front and the German Revolution of 1918*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Pp. xvi, 354. ISBN 978-0-521-51946-5.

Review by Michael S. Neiberg, The University of Southern Mississippi (neiberg102@gmail.com).

The Final Battle is really two books. The first, and most obvious, is the book about the behavior of veteran combat soldiers in the German Army in 1918. Stephenson investigates why the combat veterans of the *Westheer* did not join the revolution at the end of the war as one might have expected disillusioned and embittered defeated soldiers to do. Instead, combat veterans formed the backbone of the two main forces that fought against the revolution: the regular units that defended the Ebert government during the clashes of Christmas 1918 and the *Freikorps* that brutally suppressed the Spartacist uprising at the end of the year. In Stephenson's analysis, the veterans of the Western Front, the self-styled *Frontschweine* (front pigs), acted against their own class interests. In so doing, they separated themselves from the veterans of the Eastern Front and the home units, who were more likely to support radical political change.

Had he stopped here, Stephenson would have done a great service to the field of First World War history, but he has also essentially written a second book within the first. This second narrative challenges conventional "new military history" wisdom that armies should be analyzed as extensions of the societies they serve. Stephenson argues instead that the *Frontschweine's* experience in the military and, most importantly, in combat service on the Western Front, gave them a different outlook on the war from those who had not shared in their service. It also made them bitter and angry at the civilians and troops behind the lines who had not endured what they had. This latter characteristic is common in combat veterans throughout history, but Stephenson goes a step further by arguing that, in the context of Germany in 1918, it made the *Frontschweine* unwilling to accept political change at home. The reasons had less to do with the peculiar politics of Germany at the end of the war than with the position the soldiers occupied in a rapidly changing world they only partially understood.

Stephenson uses a six-point framework to analyze the behavior of German soldiers:

1. *Exhaustion*, both physical and mental. Stephenson contends that a profound war weariness dulled German soldiers to the world beyond the trenches. For most men, politics receded before a burning desire to go home and spend Christmas with their families. The call of home and hearth easily trumped any promises of a New Germany being made by revolutionaries. In the eyes of combat veterans, revolution and extended political debate only threatened to lengthen the time between war's end and their final demobilization.

2. *Isolation* from German society and the sources of political revolution. German soldiers lost regular contact with the home front in the last days of the war as communications broke down. After the armistice, they had to endure a grueling forced march to barracks east of the Rhine with Allied armies in pursuit just a few kilometers behind them, threatening to imprison any stragglers. They also had to face the icy, occasionally violent, responses of French and Belgian civilians as they retreated. Thus they had little chance to read letters or newspapers from home, leaving them relatively ill-informed about the momentous political events in Berlin. Unlike their Eastern Front comrades, moreover, they had had no contact with Bolsheviks in Russia and elsewhere.

3. *Alienation* from those who had not shared their misery. This factor may have been the most important to German soldiers, as they came to resent their fellow Germans, especially those accused of profiting from their suffering or giving up on them at the end of the war. This distancing extended to fellow German soldiers and sailors who had not shared the horrors of the Western Front. The veterans of the brutal (and

brutalizing) battles of the end of the war saw themselves as a special brotherhood, a theme of Erich Maria Remarque's *The Road Back* (1931), his underappreciated sequel to *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929).

4. *Selection*, both internal and external. Thousands of soldiers serving in Germany or on its borders simply deserted during the last days of the war and the aftermath of the armistice, many of them too disillusioned or too weary to go on. But the combat veterans on the Western Front mostly stayed with their units, providing a self-disciplined and professional core of men that German headquarters (*Oberste Heeresleitung*, OHL) could rely on. OHL, in turn, had selected those men least vulnerable to political agitation for front-line service, further isolating the *Frontschweine* from the political agitation on the home and eastern fronts.

5. *Cohesion* of units from the front. Believing they had shared a fundamental and little acknowledged experience at the front, the men were bound together by comradeship more than political ideology. This cohesion fostered good order and discipline in units and good relationships between officers and enlisted men. As a result, units held together and men continued to see the value of sacrificing for one another. Thus, when they marched under Imperial flags and banners, they were not always making a political statement, but expressing enduring loyalty to their primary groups and fellow combat veterans.

6. *Management* of units by the OHL. Through its remaining military authority and the subtle exploitation of the loyalty built into veteran soldiers, the Army was able to send political messages to its soldiers. These stressed obedience to the chain of command and protection of the new German government of moderate Socialists, which the OHL preferred to the more radical, left-leaning Independent Socialists.

Stephenson correctly acknowledges his debt to scholars like Leonard V. Smith and Alexander Watson.¹ Smith argues that French soldiers' constant renegotiation of the terms of their military service based on their perceptions of danger, likely outcome, and the competence of their leaders, helps explain the behavior of their German counterparts at the end of the war. They, too, consciously decided that remaining together and returning to Germany as a cohesive army outweighed the benefits of desertion. Watson's important and innovative study of soldier morale highlights the critical role of junior officers in preserving the lives of their soldiers by avoid needless combat in the war's last days. Stephenson builds on these ideas to highlight the role of the soldiers' own choice and the leadership of junior officers in determining their behavior.

German soldiers made choices in an environment of tremendous anxiety and loosening military discipline. They doomed the Second Reich by choosing not to support the Kaiser (see Chapter 3). Their rejection of the monarchy proves their later opposition to the Spartacists was not based merely on a reflexive conservatism. They were willing to see a future with dramatic political change, yet not to support the revolutionary movements aimed at toppling the government of the Moderate Socialists led by Friedrich Ebert. Instead, they used their power to destroy that government's enemies on the left because they saw the Spartacist movement as a threat to their own futures.

Most importantly, German soldiers chose to retain their good order and discipline as they returned from the field. Although Stephenson argues that political ideology was not the primary motivation for their decision, that display of discipline nevertheless had dramatic political ramifications. The orderly appearance of German soldiers bolstered the right by providing a shining example of stability and a reminder of the Germany of 1914, about which conservatives had already become nostalgic. Because the troops did not return to Germany as a rabble of demoralized men, politicians could claim the army had left the field unbeaten and unbroken. Their appearance also terrified the left, which correctly foresaw that these disciplined, experienced men could form the mainstay of a counterrevolutionary force.

The decisions of these soldiers, therefore, had long-lasting, and largely unintended, consequences. By behaving quite unlike other Germans, even other German veterans, the veterans of the Western Front gave hope to conservatives and helped shape new myths for the extremists who soon formed the nucleus of the *Freikorps* and then the Nazi party. To many Germans, the disciplined veterans were the only viable and

1. See, respectively, *Between Mutiny and Obedience: The Case of the French Fifth Infantry Division during World War I* (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 1994), and *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale, and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: CUP, 2008), reviewed by Robert Nelson, *MWSR* 2010.02.06.

functional elements in their rapidly fragmenting society. These circumstances facilitated the right's argument that such a body of men could only have been defeated by the criminals at home who had stabbed them in the back. Indeed, many of the *Frontschweine* were only too happy to accept such an honorable depiction of their service to the Fatherland, as the number of those who later joined the *Freikorps* suggests.

In his conclusion, Stephenson posits that the experience of the German soldiers of 1918 can help us better comprehend the actions of soldiers more generally: "military institutions have the ability to make soldiers and sailors behave in ways contrary to their 'class interest,'" and the coercion inherent in armies is only partly responsible for this transformation (320–21). More significantly, military training, socialization, and comradeship separate the soldier from the civilian. In the case of the men Stephenson studied, combat and the brutal experiences of the trenches further divided them from staff officers (the "scarlet majors" that Siegfried Sassoon so detested in the British Army), Eastern Front veterans, and men on home service. These experiences, "honed ... in terrible places like Passchendaele and the Argonne Forest," made the *Freikorps* the deadly instrument that it was.

Scholars will find much to engage with in this powerful book. Stephenson's descriptions of the German retreat following 11 November and his analysis of the soldiers' councils are among the book's strengths. His investigation of the conduct of German soldiers has implications beyond the rather unusual environment of 1918 and will speak to those interested in the behavior of veterans of all wars. *The Final Battle* is a worthy contribution to Cambridge University Press's prestigious "Studies in the Social and Cultural History of Modern Warfare" series and a valuable addition to our understanding of the critical year of 1918.