

GERHARD HIRSCHFELD & GERD KRUMEICH, *DEUTSCHLAND IM ERSTEN WELTKRIEG*.
FRANKFURT AM MAIN: S. FISCHER VERLAG, 2013, pp. 331.

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Germany in the First World War is a book written by two German historians, Gerhard Hirschfeld, Professor at University of Stuttgart and Gerd Krumeich, Professor Emeritus of Modern History at the Heinrich Heine University in Düsseldorf. Widely considered to be among

the most prominent researchers and historians of the First World War, the two authors now offer an overview of Great

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War overview, envisaged as a history of the war from the German point of view.¹ They were motivated by the fact that the contemporary Germans have quite superficial knowledge of the First World War and by the pressing need to answer many queries of their foreign colleagues about the German view of certain crucial issues during the war. The authors aim to explore the effects and consequences of the war through the prism of soldiers in the trenches, home front, and various similar approaches. In order to achieve these goals, the authors have included over one hundred images, important diplomatic and military documents, but also letters and diaries of “common people” in war-time surroundings.

The book is divided into twelve chapters, arranged in chronological order with subjects such as war propaganda, home front, and industrialization of war. Every chapter is followed by a useful bibliography used for the compilation of its content. The first quarter of the book offers an interpretation of the origins and causes of the war. Hirschfeld and Krumeich consider that the turn of the century saw not only the beginning of a chain of events that included the Russo-Japanese war, the Balkan war of 1912, and the so-called near-war crises, but also, as a corollary of those events and the arms race, the rise of the peculiar popular sentiment: “pre-war mentality”. There was the popular belief widespread amongst politicians, diplomatic and military as well as scientists, journalists, writers and artists, that the outbreak of a great war just a matter of time. Under the influence of the widely accepted Social Darwinism, and the notions of advanced and backward

races, war was believed to be “the right of might”. According to the authors, such ideas found fertile soil in Wilhelminian Germany.

At the turn of the twentieth century Germany was in the period of steady economic and demographic growth. Its population had grown from approximately 50 million in 1880 to 70 million in 1910. The German leadership pursued the risky policy of colonial expansion. To be true, lagging behind the Netherlands and Great Britain which had acquired their colonial possessions in the early modern period of European history, Germany could only attain colonies through politics of extortion or war. The German Empire embarked on the aggressive “Weltpolitik” which was propped by construction by construction of a powerful fleet especially under the leadership of admiral von Tirpitz from 1897 onwards. The Schlieffen plan was also made at that time with a view to finding solution for the conduct of a two front war.

Reviewing the near-war crises from the Moroccan affair of 1905 to the Balkan wars, the authors explain how the “psychosis” of a surrounded power came into being in Germany. It was the belief that as a Central European power Germany was surrounded by the increasingly hostile neighbours frightened of its progress and strength that gave birth to the fear of “Einkreisung”, the encirclement. Such fears were of immense importance in the July Crisis.

Hirschfeld’s and Krumeich’s account of the July Crisis hinges on three crucial points. First, the “simply irresponsible” German policy of testing the Triple Entente between Great Britain, France and Russia and especially the Russian resolve to wage war proved to have been a grave mistake. Second, the aggressive Austro-Hungarian policy towards Serbia in spite of the lack of evidence for the Serbian government’s complicity in the Sarajevo assassination, which continued even after

¹ Besides this book, they were co-editors of *Enzyklopädie Erster Weltkrieg*, with Irina Renz and Markus Pöhlmann (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2014).

Serbia had given a response considered as “a masterpiece in style of traditional diplomacy” to Vienna’s ultimatum, led to further aggravation of the situation. Finally, the Russian and Austro-Hungarian general mobilisation made the German leadership put their plans into motion. The German responsibility, according to Hirschfeld and Krumeich, is exemplified in the conduct of two key actors: Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg’s irresponsible intention to test the will of Russia and its allies to engage in a war and the “better now than later” attitude of the Chief of Staff von Moltke the Younger. There was also the shared illusion, despite some predictions and warnings, that the war would be a brief affair — similar to those of the 1870s — that plunged the governments concerned into it. In such circumstances, the Clausewitz formula that “a war is merely the continuation of policy by other means” was accepted. Euphoric reaction to the outbreak of war in the so called “August experience” is vividly described in a chapter of a same name. Using interesting patriotic songs and poems as illustration the authors explain the depths of uncritical attitudes of population through examples of scientists, writers, artists who accepted a kind of collective enthusiasm.

Having been exhausted after just few weeks of war, the German militant euphoria rapidly dissipated. The failure of the Schlieffen plan led to continuation of the war and the crimes in Belgium accounted for the lost propaganda war. The largest part of the chapter is devoted to the Western and Eastern front where the German army mainly fought. There is also a short description of the German participation in the Balkan front, mainly in autumn 1915 against Serbia. The authors conclude this part of the book with the Swiss criminologist Rudolf Archibald Reiss’ report on Austro-Hungarian war crimes in Serbia; they also point out the k. u. k. Army headquarters view of these atrocities as “senseless reprisals”.

The chapters “Propaganda” and “Home front” deal with Germany’s efforts to mobilise its full capacities in the ongoing war. The main thesis here is that the Germans never managed to counter the British and French in terms of propaganda. This happened because they were unable, or uninterested, to show a true front suffering but rather tried to create a “hero image” for its population. On the other hand, Britain and France were much more successful in utilising their total capacities for war in comparison with Germany. The atrocities committed in Belgium gave substance to the image of “the Hun” and provided German enemies with a powerful propaganda tool.

The great battles of 1916-17 at Verdun, Somme and the Brusilov Offensive reflected the increasing industrialization of war with the attendant rapid growth in the number of casualties. Also, the narrative is enriched with the excerpts from diaries of the combatants and the letters sent to their families in which the atmosphere in the front was brought to life. “It is terrible how much blood flowed and the recent successes are too small in relation to the great sacrifices that have been made,” wrote a German sergeant in early March 1916. The rising casualty count is explained in the next chapter “The industrialization of war”. This industrialisation is illustrated with statistics: in the beginning of the war, Germany produced around 40,000 rifles and in 1916 that number rose to c. 250,000. The production of artillery ammunitions also rose from 11 million rounds per month in 1914 to c. 220 million in March 1916. The usage of tanks, U-boats and poisonous gas warfare is taken into account as well.

The last quarter of the book deals with the issues of politics in a total war, German defeat, the peace conference and the legacies of the Great War. The authors provide a short overview of the “Septemberprogram” that envisaged a German

dominated Europe and the creation of a colonial empire in Central Africa. However, unlike the “Fischer school”, they do not consider this programme as the key document for the history of German imperialism. Instead, the authors endorse — “as most experts now agree” — an approach based on Wolfgang J. Mommsen’s theory of “Formelkompromiss” according to which certain politicians, the military, several rich individuals and industrialists sought for the realisation of the program. It also included the idea of ethnic cleansing of the Poles as a means of securing Germany’s eastern border which was later incorporated into Nazi plans for the expansion to the East. The closing months of the war saw the failure of German offensive in the West. However, the German Supreme Command’s hiding of the truth from the public led to the birth of the “stab in the back” legend, an illusion that the undefeated German army was betrayed in November 1918. With the defeat in the West, the German-imposed terms of the Brest-Litovsk and Bucharest

treaties were discarded and with them the conquest of Poland, the Baltic Region, Romania and Ukraine.

The main legacy of the First World War for German society, Hirschfeld and Krumeich stress, is a non-existence of the shared memory or consensus over the reasons for the defeat and its consequences. Such situation facilitated the rise of Nationalists and Anti-Republicans in the Weimar Republic and militated against the development of democratic culture in Germany between the two world wars. The closing chapter is followed by a short and useful chronology of the most important events in the first two decades of the 20th century.

In conclusion, *Deutschland im Ersten Weltkrieg* is a short, interesting and informative book which contributes to understanding of the main research topics of the First World War from the German perspective. With a lot of excerpts from original documents, the authors produced a well-written book that can serve as a suitable starting point for future researchers.