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"The Battle-Fortune of Marshal Hindenburg is not Bound up with the Possession of a Hill"

The Germans and Vimy Ridge, April 1917

HOLGER HERWIG

Abstract: On 9 April 1917 four Canadian divisions and one British division of 170,000 men broke through the "Vimy Group" of German Sixth Army of some 40,000 men. By late afternoon, the Germans had been driven off the Ridge. That day, as Brigadier-General Alexander Ross famously put it, constituted "the birth of a nation." Rivers of ink have been spilled in the Canadians' actions that day, but little attention has been paid to "the other side of the hill." Which German units defended the Ridge? What was the quality of their leadership? Why did the defence collapse so quickly? Why did the German soldiers not break and run? And how were they able to prevent a deeper British-Canadian breakthrough? On the basis of German sources, this article seeks to provide answers to those questions.

THE 100TH ANNIVERSARY of the Battle of Vimy Ridge is almost upon us. Canada's most celebrated military victory—spectacularly immortalized in the massive limestone memorial on Hill 145 at Vimy Ridge—has taken on mythological proportions ever since Brigadier-General Alexander Ross famously stated that the battle constituted nothing less than "the birth of a nation."¹ Historians have seen it as the coming of age of the young nation, as

¹ Daria Coneghan, "Ross, Alexander (1880-1973)," *The Encyclopedia of Saskatchewan*, in esask.uregina.ca.html, accessed on 4 June 2016.

its first bold step to emerge from out of Britain's shadow. And since the battle took place on Easter Monday, contemporary Canadian "poets of every stripe" linked it to the "resurrection of Christ"; and from there it was, in the words of the historian Jonathan Vance, only a small step to connect Vimy with "the birth of a nation."² It is not my goal either to uphold or to challenge that assertion, but rather to offer what all too often is missing in Canadian accounts of Vimy: "the other side of the hill."³ For as Carl von Clausewitz succinctly put it almost 200 year ago, "War . . . is not the action of a living force upon a lifeless mass . . . but always the collision of two living forces."⁴

First, the Great War needs to be set into some geographical and demographical context from the German perspective. One tends to view the German Empire of 1914 as a gigantic juggernaut of power, land, men, and money. But at about 557,000 square kilometres it was roughly 100,000 square kilometres smaller than Alberta. Its opponents—even before the United States entered the conflict—controlled a land mass of some 78 million square kilometres. And in terms of population, while the Reich's 67 million certainly outranked that of Canada (under 8 million), it was paltry compared with the aggregate population of its three main adversaries, Britain, France, Russia and their empires: 760 million.

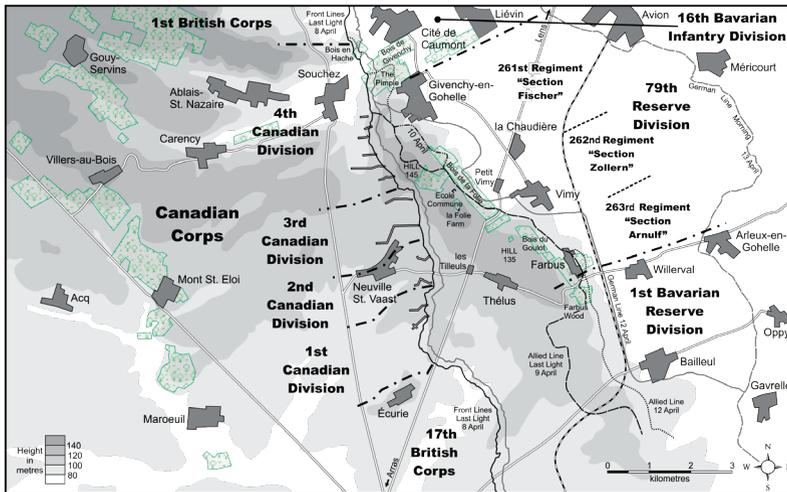
These raw figures made clear even to a layman before 1914 that any future war for Germany (and its moribund ally, Austria-Hungary) would have to be short and decisive (read, the Schlieffen Plan).⁵ A war of attrition was not Germany's trump suit. Despite countless peacetime war games that stressed mixed-arms and group tactics, flexibility and maneuver, the Imperial German Army, constituted as such only on 4 August 1914, advanced in traditional fashion: shoulder-to-shoulder in massed waves of gray-clad infantry. The result was not surprising: 143,000 battle deaths in 1914; the figure rose to 628,000 by 1915 and then to 964,000 by 1917. Again, simply by way

² Jonathan Vance, "Battle Verse: Poetry and Nationalism after Vimy Ridge," in *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment*, ed. by Geoffrey Hayes, Andrew Iarocci, and Mike Bechtold (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007), 265-66.

³ An exception is Andrew Godefroy, "The German Army at Vimy Ridge," in *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment*, 225-38.

⁴ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 77.

⁵ For a superb recent analysis, see *The Schlieffen Plan: International Perspectives on the German Strategy for World War I*, ed. by Hans Ehlert, Michael Epkenhans, and Gerhard P. Gross (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014).



Vimy Ridge. [Map by Mike Bechthold, © 2006 Canadian Military History]

of comparison: there were roughly 60,000 Canadian fatal casualties between 1914 and 1920. German military historians have calculated that units on average lost roughly one-third of their combat strength every year. After the twin attrition battles of Verdun and the Somme in 1916, the German Army of 1914 no longer existed. Its best non-commissioned officers had died; college graduates, quickly promoted to the rank of second lieutenant, had taken their place. Replacements basically meant convalescents. And Reserves. So it was at Vimy.

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In terms of German strategy on the Western Front, Vimy Ridge played almost no role. The new Third Supreme Army Command (*Oberste Heeresleitung*, or OHL) of Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg and General Erich Ludendorff had taken stock of the dire military situation at the end of 1916 and decided that the Empire could spare neither men nor guns in 1917; the tank was empty. Some 350,000 soldiers had been killed in 1916, and another 1.4 million wounded. Hospitals were strained to the limit with 3 million casualties. Roughly 130,000 men had been “combed” out of rear echelon industrial and administrative posts for service at the front, and the 310,000 men born in 1889 had already been called to the colours ahead of schedule. Thus, when Colonel-General Ludwig von Falkenhausen, commanding Sixth Army near Arras, suggested an attack against

the British-Canadian lines around Souchez, Ludendorff vetoed the plan.⁶ The German armies would spend the coming year in defensive positions, consolidating and recovering from the battles of the Somme and Verdun (almost half a million casualties each), and training in the new defensive doctrines being formulated by Bavarian Captain Hermann Geyer and Lieutenant-Colonel Max Bauer (more on this later), leaving the hoped-for victorious offensive to the Navy and its U-boats. The land forces were to be reconstituted and “modernized” for a decisive campaign in 1918. For the time being, all resources, including half a million military, civilian and POW labourers, toiled to straighten out a 20-mile bulge in the so-called “Ancre knee,” a line running from Lens to Reims via Royon. Dubbed Operation Alberich after the malicious king of the dwarves in the ancient Germanic *Nibelungen* saga, it was an audacious gamble.⁷ Ludendorff surrendered 2,600 square kilometres of hard-won French territory. Therein, he laid waste to every village, street, creek, tree, well, and rail line—or, at least those left undestroyed by the 1916 Somme battles. And in the war’s greatest feat of engineering, he deployed 1,250 supply trains of forty freight cars each to haul concrete and steel for the construction of five major defensive lines, collectively called the Siegfried Stellung (Hindenburg Line to the Allies).

It was an open secret that the Entente at a meeting in Chantilly on 16 November 1916 had laid down a comprehensive, coordinated land strategy for 1917: while Russia mounted a “large-scale action” against Bulgaria, Britain and France would launch a “grand-style attack” in the West.⁸ Sound on paper, the plan never materialized. On 12 March 1917 Prince George Lvov led a Cabinet revolt against Tsar Nicholas II, who was removed from power in favour of his brother, Grand Duke Michael. Furthermore, General N. V. Ruzsky, commander of the Northern Front, reported that his soldiers were in open revolt and that his army had been reduced to a “militia.” Still, at London on 16 January 1917 the Allies pressed on with their plans

⁶ Erich Ludendorff, *Meine Kriegserinnerungen 1914-1918*, (Berlin: Ernst Siegfried Mittler und Sohn, 1919), 332.

⁷ For a brief description see Holger H. Herwig, *The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary 1914-1918*, (London, New Delhi, New York, Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2014), 247-48.

⁸ The texts of both meetings are in *History of the Great War: Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1917, Appendices*, (London: Imperial War Museum, 1992), 1-3, 16-17.

for a "powerful offensive" on the Western Front, for they had found a new star in French General Georges Robert Nivelle—he did speak English, after all.

Nivelle, the hero of the recapture of Fort Douaumont at Verdun in 1916, had no doubts as to his ability to end the war quickly. "Objective: Total destruction of active enemy forces by maneuver and battle."⁹ To accomplish that, Nivelle proposed a two-pronged offensive in the West: the French with fifty-two divisions and 4,800 guns, and "without chance of failure," would storm the southern Aisne sector in the Champagne, to which the Germans had just laid waste in Operation Alberich. Meanwhile, the British with fifteen divisions and 2,800 guns would stage diversionary offensives around Arras, between Vimy and Bullecourt, to prevent the Germans from reinforcing the Champagne sector. Not surprisingly, then, in German documents of the time and in subsequent histories, the Entente spring offensives of 1917 are always referred to as "the twin battles of Arras and the Champagne." Nivelle assured politicians and commanders alike that after an assault of no more than forty-eight hours, his combat troops would have ripped through (*percée*) the German Aisne front in depth; his Reserves would have exploited that yawning gap to mop up German batteries and supply depots; and thereafter the French Army would have broken out into open warfare.¹⁰

To be sure, there were doubters in the Allied camp. Field Marshal Douglas Haig had no desire to launch yet another prolonged battle; his true aim was to shift the bulk of his forces to Flanders, and to drive toward Ostend and Zeebrugge, in the process capturing the Belgian coast and reducing the German U-boat menace. General Alfred Micheler, commander of Reserve Army Group and the man Nivelle had chosen to command the major assault on the Aisne, like Haig feared another prolonged battle. He doubted the likelihood of a breakthrough, given that the Germans had withdrawn significant forces from the Noyon salient to buttress their position on the Aisne. General Henri-Philippe Pétain, commanding Central Army Group and brutally honest as ever, rejected Nivelle's certainty that the artillery could destroy the enemy throughout a deep defensive

⁹ Cited in Robert A. Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory: French Strategy and Operations in the Great War* (Cambridge MA, London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 325.

¹⁰ See *ibid.*, 324-25.



General Ludwig von Falkenhausen, the new Governor-General of Belgium (second from the left), on board refloated steamer *Gneisenau* off Antwerp, June 1917. [© IWM (Q 23992)]

position, and he feared that Nivelle was attacking on too broad a front in the Champagne. He instead favoured a strategy of limited gains. “Even the waters of Lake Geneva,” he lectured Minister of War Paul Painlevé, “would have but little effect if dispersed over the length and breadth of the Sahara Desert.”¹¹ All to no avail. The politicians in London (Prime Minister David Lloyd George) and in Paris (Premier Alexandre Ribot) had faith in Nivelle. On 9 April 1917 Haig launched the Battle of Arras—a week before Nivelle struck on the Aisne. And three days after the United States had entered the war, largely as a result of Germany’s renewal of unrestricted submarine warfare.

What of the two opposing armies at Vimy? Of Field Marshal Haig’s British Expeditionary Force, two armies are of particular interest to the student of Vimy Ridge. Just east of Arras were positioned the 350,000 men of Sir Edmund Allenby’s Third Army, and directly on and slightly west of Vimy Ridge stood Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Horne’s First Army of 320,000 men and 1,100 artillery pieces. As is well known, First Army included Lieutenant-General Sir Julian Byng’s Canadian Corps, composed of one British

¹¹ Cited in E. L. Spears, *Prelude to Victory* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1939), 346.



Lt.-Gen. Sir Julian Byng, G.O.C. Canadians, May 1917. [Library and Archives Canada PA-001284]

and four Canadian divisions, with an amazing nominal strength of 170,000 soldiers.¹²

Arraigned against them was General von Falkenhausen's Sixth Army of 12 divisions and 1,016 artillery pieces. Falkenhausen had divided his Army into five so-called "corps groups." Two are of immediate interest with regard to Vimy. Between Givenchy and Loos, Falkenhausen sited General Georg Wichura's "Group Souchez," composed of VIII Reserve Corps (56th Infantry Division, 80th Reserve Division and 16th Bavarian Infantry Division). From St. Laurent to Givenchy, Falkenhausen sited General Karl Ritter von Fasbender's "Group Vimy" composed of I Bavarian Reserve Corps (1st Bavarian Reserve Division, 14th Bavarian Infantry Division and 79th Prussian Reserve Division).¹³ Raw figures for the number of divisions should not obscure the fact that Canadian divisions on paper numbered about 19,700 ranks, while their German opposites numbered but 11,600. As will be shown later, many of the German

¹² The overall strength of the Canadian Army in April 1917 was 17,802 officers and 283, 494 other ranks. See G. W. L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914-1919: Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War* (Ottawa: Roge Duhamel, 1962), 547.

¹³ Kriegsgeschichtliche Forschungsanstalt des Heeres, *Der Weltkrieg 1914 bis 1918. Die militärischen Operationen zu Lande, vol. 12: Die Kriegführung im Frühjahr 1917* (Berlin: E. S. Mittler & Sohn, 1939), 210.

divisions at Vimy had recently gone through the hell that was the Somme.

A veteran of the Franco-Prussian War, General von Fasbender had served as Chief of the Bavarian General Staff and had commanded several infantry divisions before his retirement in 1912. Reactivated at the start of the war, then Lieutenant-General von Fasbender led I Bavarian Reserve Corps as it stormed through Douai and Lens during the misnamed "race to the sea." He marveled at the beauty of the land: rich clover and beet fields, marvelous stone manor houses, quaint villages.¹⁴ But around Lens, the landscape took on a less attractive appearance: coal mines, slag heaps and industrial plants. The closer the Reserve Corps came to Vimy, the more vicious became the fighting. "The village battles are truly terrible," Fasbender wrote in his war diary. "We have to conquer the houses one by one, drag the enemy out of cellars and sheds, or kill them by throwing hand-grenades down at them." And the greater became the destruction: "All churches . . . are destroyed, all roofs torn off, walls caved in, entire houses bared to the elements. People and animals lie about, the barns are empty, cows roam about lowing; none are fed, watered or milked because no one has remained in the village."

On 6 October 1914 the I Bavarian Reserve Corps stormed Vimy Ridge—where its advance was halted by Major-General Pétain's XXXIII French Corps. Ironically, Fasbender and his Corps would return to Vimy Ridge in February 1917. It was not an enviable command. Already in November 1914, Fasbender had noted: "This campaign has developed into a sort of siege warfare, without really being siege warfare and without us having the tools of siege warfare."¹⁵ Nothing had changed by early 1917. Misery was the common denominator for Germans and for Canadians alike that winter, which turned out to have been the coldest of all four war winters.



Many of German Sixth Army's infantry units had been hastily summoned from the trenches of Artois and Flanders in February and March 1917 in anticipation of the British assault at Arras.

¹⁴ Karl Ritter von Fasbender, *Kriegstagebuch*, 3 and 5 October 1914, 12-14, 19, *Handschriften Sammlung 2212*, Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv-Kriegsarchiv, Munich.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* Entry for 7 November 1914, 19.

Lieutenant-General Roderich von Schoeler's 11th Infantry Division, for example, spent the summer and fall of 1916 in trench warfare on the Somme. Lieutenant-General Otto von Rauchenberger's 14th Infantry Division was stood up only in August 1916 and immediately deployed at Verdun; in November it was dispatched to the Somme. Both of General von Fasbender's Reserve units—Major-General Ernst von Reuter's 18th Reserve Division and Major-General Theodor von Wundt's 17th Reserve Division—spent the summer in trench warfare on the Somme and the fall in similar conditions at Ypres. Thus it is unsurprising that many of Sixth Army's formations were designated by the OHL as being "burned out," "exhausted" and "skeletal" after the Somme battles.

Of Fasbender's three infantry divisions, five regiments were sited on the narrow 700 to 1,000-metre-deep German strip at the top of Vimy Ridge, 145 metres above the Douai Plain. They had been under intense enemy artillery fire since February 1917, and in constant rain that turned the shell craters and trenches into a quagmire.¹⁶ Conditions only deteriorated, as witnessed in countless soldiers' diaries at the Bavarian Military Archive in Munich.¹⁷ Winter rains. Fog. Sleet. Hail. Snow. Ice. Heavy enemy artillery bombardment. Most of the men abandoned shelled-upon villages and slept in the mud and snow of open fields. On the Ridge, the Germans faced devastating torpedo mines. Endless tunneling. The metres-thick walls of the trenches collapsed, often burying the men alive. Fat rats ran across their sleeping bodies or feasted on the dead. The men's attempts to repeat the Christmas truces of the previous two years were quashed by their officers. In January and February, I Bavarian Reserve Corps daily noted dramatic increases in bombardments and especially in Canadian patrols, sniper activity, and sapper tunneling. The men were fatigued from hauling shells and trenching materials up the Ridge. Nonetheless, Sixth Army headquarters reported the Vimy divisions, "despite the effects of recent days," to be "capable of turning back a large assault."¹⁸

Although one often reads of the vaunted German elastic defence in depth at Vimy, this is not, in fact, the case. As already noted, the

¹⁶ *Der Weltkrieg*, 211-12.

¹⁷ The numerous diaries that I have consulted over the past two decades are in the Handschriften Sammlung (HS) of the Bavarian Military Archive.

¹⁸ *Der Weltkrieg*, 212.



A soldier amidst the ruins of the Arras-Lens front, ca. April-May 1917. [Bundesarchiv Bild 104-02757]

narrowness of the German position at the eastern edge of the Ridge and the deep down-slope behind it allowed no such deployment, either in depth or in elasticity. While some of the unit commanders had spent the winter months in training centres around Sedan learning the new defensive doctrines devised after the terrible months at the Somme, those concepts were still new and untried. Many senior front-line officers, foremost among them General von Falkenhausen of Sixth Army, rejected the notion of elasticity and instead demanded that the men hold every inch of territory—and if not, regain it by counter-attack as soon as possible. Thus he anchored his defence on immovable strong points and “hard” lines of resistance. At Vimy, he set up three static defensive lines. The First Line on the Ridge was 500 metres deep and consisted of a network of trenches protected by barbed-wire entanglements, elaborate redoubts, dug-outs, tunnels and ancient caves dug into the chalk and sand, and some concrete machine-gun emplacements. The Second Line, just below the crest east of the Ridge, featured fortified dug-outs, underground shelters, and more woven belts of wire. The Third Line, still farther east, wound down the Douai Plain from Lens to Arras in front of the small villages of Méricourt and Oppy and was studded with well-fortified

positions.¹⁹ For our purposes, it is vital to remember that discussion, disagreement and confusion about the new defensive system were widespread among front-line commanders on the eve of the Battle of Vimy Ridge.²⁰

But what were the new defensive tactics? Officially titled "Principles of Command for the Defensive Battle in Position Warfare," Captain Geyer's blueprint called for a defence that featured both depth and elasticity.²¹ The aim was "to husband one's own forces" while allowing the enemy to "exhaust himself and to bleed" heavily. What Geyer called "machines of war" (artillery, trench mortars, machine guns, flame throwers, and hand grenades) were to spare the blood of soldiers, soon to be dubbed the "workers of war." "Depth" in the defensive system translated into abandoning the old linear trench system roughly 2 kilometres deep in favor of a killing zone that ranged between 9 and 12 kilometres in depth. Three lines of defence were established and deployed much in the way as squares on a chess board, each anchored on its own steel-reinforced concrete bunkers with artillery and mortars. "Elasticity" was achieved by having the First Line resist an enemy attack only as long as was feasible and then to "evade" the main assault, drawing the adversary into a Second Line battle zone dominated by machine-gun nests with interlocking zones of fire. Third Line troops would, if need be, counterattack an invader in small groups of combined arms units (storm troops). The new doctrine of decentralization and individualization prescribed that the division become king of the battlefield: it would combine and control its own artillery, infantry, airpower, communications, and resupply. It was elevated to near independent status and given control over all its assets—land and air, men and material. And it was to man a front of no more than 2,500 to 3,000 metres.

Reserve formations were critical. They were to be sited within easy marching distance of the front lines, and they were to be

¹⁹ For a good description, see Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, 246; and *History of the Great War: Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1917, vol. I, pt. 1, The German Retreat to the Hindenburg Line and the Battle of Arras*, comp. by Captain Cyril Falls (London: Imperial War Museum, 1992), 305.

²⁰ Kronprinz Rupprecht von Bayern, *Mein Kriegstagebuch*, ed. by Eugen von Frauenholz (Munich: Deutscher National Verlag, 1929), vol. 2, entry for 9 October 1917.

²¹ Hermann Geyer, *Gesamteindrücke der Westreise, Januar 1917*, Nachlass Hermann Geyer, RH 61/924, Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv (hereafter BA-MA), Freiburg.

trained in the new storm-troop tactics. Special three-month training courses throughout the fall and winter of 1916 were to instil Geyer's new defensive warfare into commanders. But Ludendorff could not quite go all the way: in the end, he insisted that the deployment of Reserve formations and any decision to abandon battle land could be *requested* by an Army Commander, but *ordered* only by the Army Supreme Command.²² The Battle of Vimy Ridge would show the error of his ways.



At 5:30 a.m. on Easter Monday, 9 April 1917, a British-Canadian hurricane bombardment from some 900 guns and mortars rained down on the German front line from Givenchy to Neuville-Vitasse, defended by seven infantry divisions.²³ Vimy Ridge itself, as stated earlier, was held by five German regiments, with companies on average down to but seventy-to-eighty men each. In all, according to the British *History of the Great War*, the German regiments comprised a rifle strength of about 5,000 men.²⁴ At 6 a.m. wave after wave of 15,000 mostly Canadian infantrymen (equivalent to the entire 1911 population of Restigouche, New Brunswick) advanced under the fire cover of a massive creeping barrage. Smoke shells and flamethrowers went into action next. Lieutenant Gregory Clark, commanding 4th Canadian Mounted Rifles' 15 Platoon found it a thrilling experience. "It was a beautiful sight. It was still quite dark. Sleet was falling." But it was also "the edge of hell. It blazed, flashed and flickered, the bursting shells." The soldiers advanced through "an infernal wall of twisting, boiling smoke and flame."²⁵ The inadequacy of the German defence mounted by Falkenhausen's Group Vimy on the top of the Ridge was soon revealed. British and Canadian high-explosive and gas shells had killed many of the German draft animals and hence the

²² The new defensive system has been superbly analyzed with reference to 11th Bavarian Infantry Division by Christian Stachelbeck, *Militrische Effektivitt im Ersten Weltkrieg. Die 11. Bayerische Infanteriedivision 1915 bis 1918* (Paderborn, Munich, Vienna, Zurich: Ferdinand Schnningh, 2010), 169-71. Also, Bruce I. Gudmundsson, *Stormtroop Tactics: Innovation in the German Army, 1914-1918* (New York, Westport, London: Praeger, 1989).

²³ Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, 252 ff.

²⁴ Falls, *History of the Great War*, 317.

²⁵ Cited in Tim Cook, *Shock Troops: Canadians Fighting the Great War, 1917-1918* (Toronto: Viking Canada, 2008), 123.

batteries on the Ridge quickly ran out of shells. No counter-battery fire. No artillery to support a possible counter-attack. Moreover, communications between the front and the rear echelon had been blown to smithereens. The alternating rain, fog, clouds, and snow prevented critical aerial spotting for the artillery.

The thin German line holding the eastern Ridge crumbled quickly.²⁶ Bavarian first and second lines were overrun in the first hours of the assault. By 9 a.m., 14th Bavarian Infantry Division had been driven off the Ridge down to the railroad embankment at St. Laurent; in the words of the Bavarian Official History, the Division consisted of "nothing but pitiful debris."²⁷ Thélus had to be abandoned next. By 11 a.m., the right wing of 79th Prussian Reserve Division had been thrown back to its Third Line in the valley; its left wing to its Second Line; and its centre down the crest of the Ridge. As the Canadians drove 14th Bavarian Infantry Division off the heights, Fasbender's position became untenable and he was forced to order his I Bavarian Reserve Corps off the Ridge. The Germans lost the commanding heights of Telegraph Hill at noon. One hour later Hill 93 (by the Point du Jure) was also in enemy hands. Major-General Friedrich von Pechmann's 1st Bavarian Reserve Division abandoned Farbus by 1 p.m. and only halted its retreat east of the Ridge in its Third Line at Vimy Village. The unit had lost 300 officers and 3,000 men that 9 April; it had abandoned thirty artillery pieces.²⁸ It, along with 14th Bavarian Infantry Division, would take the major blame for the debacle at Vimy Ridge.

The only bright spots for the Germans on 9 April were but two: that of the eight tanks that had accompanied 2nd Canadian Division, three had been destroyed by gunfire and the rest stuck in the sea of clay mud; and that once the skies had cleared, Manfred von Richthofen (the Red Baron) scored kills 38 to 55 over and around Vimy that "Bloody April."²⁹

²⁶ Given the near total destruction of German military records by Allied bombing in April 1945, the best accounts remain with the official German and Bavarian histories: Forschungsanstalt des Heeres, *Der Weltkrieg*, 212 ff.; and Bayerisches Heeresarchiv, *Die Bayern im Grossen Kriege 1914-1918, auf Grund der Kriegsakten dargestellt* (Munich: Verlag des Bayerischen Kriegsarchivs, 1923).

²⁷ *Die Bayern im Grossen Kriege*, 367.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 369.

²⁹ *Der Weltkrieg 1914 bis 1918*, 213.

14 ∴ 'The Battle-Fortune of Marshal Hindenburg'

The face of battle, as the historian John Keegan famously called it, is well known and hence three diary entries, one Canadian, one French and one German, might well serve our purpose. Private Adelbert F. Brayman, 50th Battalion (Calgary) of the 4th Canadian Division, was wounded storming Hill 145 at Vimy. He remembered the ferocity of the battle:

From the very first minute of the attack we came under murderous and hellish fire from the machine guns . . . we lost about 30 per cent of the fighting forces before we got into [the enemy's] green line of trenches and went into hand-to-hand fighting. . . . As we looked back up that ridge in the early dawn we witnessed a scene never to be forgotten. The entire face of the hill was covered with German green and Canadian khaki. Men lay out there in that blood-soaked field, some dead, some dying.³⁰

A young French baker from Burgundy named René Jacob wrote his parents from the battlefield near Soissons as follows:

How can one describe it? What words to use? Corpses everywhere. Black and green corpses. Corpses in strange positions: a knee jutting up into the air, or an arm resting against a trench wall. Corpses that one has to cover with chalk or straw, or dirt and sand. The ground covered with their entrails. Corpses that one buries or burns. A terrible smell, a smell as from a charnel house, rises up and chokes us. . . . I spoke to you earlier of a battlefield; no, it is more like a slaughter yard. Not even the wind that blows across the Ridge can disperse the stench of death.³¹

On the German side of the Ridge at Giessler Heights, Hermann Bauer with 14th Bavarian Infantry Regiment wrote home in much the same vein:

Has all hell broke loose? An ear-splitting din and roar goes on unabated, and already the first 15mm shell bursts into the south wall of the [sand] pit. A trench wall collapses, but there is no time to think. . . . And the [snow] flakes fall much like shell splinters. They tear all life into shreds. We all suck in our breaths. . . . The Tommys have broken through.

³⁰ Cited in Cook, *Shock Troops*, 143.

³¹ Cited in Michael Epkenhans, *Der Erste Weltkrieg 1914-1918* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2015), 91-92.



The village of Oppy burns under artillery fire, May 1917. [Bundesarchiv Bild 146-1974-051-22]

Now, come on you Canadians! Suddenly they burst forth from Sand Pit 2; they disdain any ground cover, these Canadian storm troops. They seem to believe that their hellish [artillery] fire has demoralized and buried us.³²

For German commanders, this was the immediate and obvious question: what had gone so terribly wrong? First, the relatively brief British-Canadian hurricane bombardment had caught them off guard. Attacking after shelling the enemy for only four days had not been the British way. Obviously, the enemy had also learned (and applied) the lessons of the Somme. Second, the troops in the Second Line of defence had been designated only as replacement forces for the First Line; no one had thought of using them within hours of an enemy assault to come to the rescue of that front line.³³ Third, German Reserve units had been held too far back from the fighting front—in many cases as much as 20 kilometres—and thus could not relieve the hard-pressed units up on the Ridge. Many still tarried in the partly-finished Wotan (or Drocourt-Quéant) Line and, despite the use of rail and motor transport, would not arrive at Vimy Ridge

³² *Das Bayernbuch vom Weltkriege 1914-1918. Ein Volksbuch*, ed. by Konrad Krafft von Dellmensingen (Stuttgart: Chr. Belser, 1930), 408-09.

³³ *Der Weltkrieg 1914 bis 1918*, 214.



Ludendorff. [Library of Congress LC-B2- 5240-7]

until the next day. Too late to counter-attack. And finally, battlefield conditions: darkness, a snow storm and the ubiquitous chalky mud forced all operations to a halt on the night of 9 April.

On 10 April Lieutenant-General Karl Dieffenbach, commanding Group Arras south of Vimy Ridge, sent a sobering report of the past twenty-four hours to General Headquarters. "Situation unfavorable; heavy losses; much artillery lost. Shell shortage. [Enemy] fire much heavier than in the Battle of the Somme."³⁴ Telegraph Hill lost. Thélus and Hills 93 and 94 in enemy hands. The 79th Reserve Division had been badly knocked; 11th Infantry Division was being rushed into theatre to take up position around Vimy. It would eventually suffer 3,200 casualties there. Words such as "burned out," "debris" and "slag" were applied to many German formations in front-line reports. Fاسبender by late morning on 9 April had recommended a 5-kilometre withdrawal of his three divisions being ground off Vimy Ridge to the line Méricourt-Arleux-Gavrelle. Falkenhausen and his chief of staff, Major-General Karl von Nagel zu Aichberg, dismissed the recommendation out of hand. Instead, they canvassed the commanders of Groups Souchez, Vimy and Arras for their input—

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 220.

and then asked the OHL for permission for Sixth Army to launch a counter-offensive against British forces around Arras. Ludendorff passed the request on to Lieutenant-General Hermann von Kuhl, Chief of Staff to Army Group Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria, who quickly vetoed Falkenhausen's plan, arguing that the Allies would pre-empt and smash such an attack with a new offensive of their own.³⁵ Falkenhausen had no option but to bow to the obvious: during the night of 12-13 April he ordered a total withdrawal of German forces from Vimy to the line Lens-Avions-Méricourt-Acheville-Arleux-Oppy, some 7 to 8 kilometres east of the Ridge and part of the Siegfried Stellung south of Arras (Fasbender had made that recommendation a day earlier!).

Rescue for the Bavarians came in several forms. First, the Allied assault did not resume until 4 p.m. on 10 April. Second, by then, reserves had begun to arrive at Vimy. The 18th Prussian Infantry Division shored up the front of the badly knocked 14th Bavarian Infantry Division; 17th Prussian Infantry Division that of 1st Bavarian Reserve Division; and Prussian 11th Infantry Division that of 79th Prussian Reserve Division. Defence of the last lines at Vimy Village was secured by Major-General Arthur von Gabain's 17th Prussian Infantry Division³⁶ (a bitter pill for the Bavarians to swallow!).

But if there was a hero on the German side, he was, in fact, Bavarian: Karl von Fasbender. Almost 65 years of age in 1917, the former retiree was still on top of his game. He had recognized the British buildup around Arras and had warned the OHL of this five days before the assault at Vimy Ridge. To no avail. He had recognized the magnitude and the speed of the Canadian attack on the morning of 9 April. To no avail. Well before noon that day he had counselled a withdrawal to the Third Line along the railroad embankment at Vimy Village. Again, to no avail. He had kept his reserves in the line for as long as he could, and never blamed them for their defeat. And from 14 April to 20 May 1917, he held the new German front on the Douai Plain against ferocious Allied attacks emanating from the heights of Vimy. In one of those rare moments in history where valour is truly rewarded, Field Marshal Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria made certain that Fasbender received Bavaria's highest military honour, the Grand Cross of the Military Max-Joseph Order.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 225.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 222.



General Ludendorff at once launched an investigation into the Vimy debacle.³⁷ There was no question that it had been a major defeat. A complete surprise. An embarrassment. Seven divisions—mainly those from Group Vimy and Group Souchez directly in the path of the British-Canadian assault on 9 April—had been beaten so soundly that they had to be relieved at once. As well, the right flank of the Siegfried Stellung was exposed to British assault. The affected divisions had lost 23,000 men, two-thirds euphemistically listed as “missing.” And the major French blow on the Aisne was yet to come! Ludendorff dispatched staff officers to Vimy and called theatre commanders to his headquarters at Kreuznach for interrogation. How to explain a bulge 18 kilometres wide and up to 6 kilometres deep driven into the German line in just three days? Had the new Geyer/Bauer defensive doctrine proved fallible? Had the officers not learned the doctrine properly? Or had there been a failure of command?

Major-General Alfred Dieterich, commanding 79th Reserve Infantry Brigade, later elucidated the tactical mistakes committed at Vimy. The defensive First Line on top of the Ridge had been “insufficiently planned,” with the most robust dug-outs sited “mistakenly in the first line.” None were able to withstand the withering British-Canadian artillery bombardments. And the Second Line “was out of the question for a longer defence” because of its “unfavourable position at the foot of the eastern slope.”³⁸ Once the Canadians had broken through the German First Line on 9 April, the game was lost for Sixth Army.

It was time for lessons learned. On 13 April the OHL listed three major causes of failure. First, several divisions had collapsed simply because they had not yet regained their fighting strength from the terrible Somme battles. Second, the reserves had not been called up to the front lines in timely fashion. Third, sufficient artillery had not been deployed against the enemy. After further study, Ludendorff concluded that the two main causes of defeat had been the failure to call up the reserves (especially those from the Second Line) once the magnitude of the attack had been recognized, and the failure

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 234.

³⁸ Alfred Dieterich, “The German 79th Reserve Infantry Division in the Battle of Vimy Ridge, April 1917,” *Canadian Military History*: 15, 1 (2006), 72.



Anti-aircraft guns during the battle of Arras, ca. April-May 1917. [Bundesarchiv Bild 183-R41681]

to engage the heavy guns at once. (Comparatively speaking, each battery of 10th Bavarian Artillery Regiment on 9 April had fired roughly 1,500 shells.) Ludendorff ruled out failure on the part of the soldiers: "The bravery of our troops remains firm."³⁹

But someone had to pay the price. Captain Geyer's "Principles" of December 1916 had been clear: "If something goes wrong, we will arraign regimental commanders before courts-martial or dismiss General Staff officers, even before replacements for them can be found."⁴⁰ Thus, Ludendorff cashiered General von Falkenhausen (going on age 73) as commander of Sixth Army and Major-General von Nagel as chief of staff. They had failed to recognize the size, the speed and the power of the British-Canadian attack, and thus had been surprised and overrun at Vimy. Only a timely and early withdrawal from the rain and snow-soaked Ridge, as advocated by General von Fasbender, could have spared Sixth Army its ignominious defeat. Ludendorff dispatched Falkenhausen to Brussels to command a desk

³⁹ *Der Weltkrieg*, 235. Ludendorff's conclusions were based in large measure on the findings of the new, hastily-appointed chief of staff of Sixth Army, Colonel Fritz von Loßberg, his "lion of the defensive". See *Meine Tätigkeit im Weltkriege 1914-1918*, (Berlin: E. S. Mittler & Sohn, 1939), 283-84, 288.

⁴⁰ Geyer, *Abwehr*, RH 61/924 262, BA-MA; and Stachelbeck, *Militärische Effektivität*, 179.

as Governor-General of occupied Belgium, and Nagel to Romania to command a trench division on the Siret River.

The German Official History, *Der Weltkrieg 1914 bis 1918*, went further: it blamed the OHL equally for the debacle.⁴¹ There had been failures. No one at headquarters had recognized the size of the enemy deployment around Arras; only Fasbender, the I Bavarian Reserve Corps commander at Vimy, had. The construction of the Siegfried Stellung in that sector had led to a false sense of security. Heavy batteries had been removed from Group Vimy for two weeks of rear-echelon training. The power of the enemy assault—nearly twice as many heavy guns and five times the amount of heavy shells expended as on the first day of the Somme offensive on 1 July 1916—had come as a total surprise. As late as 30 March, Ludendorff and his staff had let it be known that the pending British attack was still two to three weeks away. When they recognized their miscalculation on 5 April, it was too late. While Captain Geyer's new defensive doctrine proved its value along the overall front, with specific reference to Vimy Ridge the narrowness of the terrain (less than 1,000 metres) simply had not allowed for an elastic defence in depth. And all too many units had been taken out of Flanders and Artois too hastily and deployed at Arras without proper rest and recuperation as well as retraining.

Left out in both the studies of the Third Army Supreme Command and of the Official History were several systematic failings. The reorganization of the Imperial German Army into new "army groups" had caused massive confusion. Army Group Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria, for example, made up of former Fourth, Sixth, First, and Second Armies, had been set up (at least on paper) only on 1 March 1917. Many corps and divisions had been given new commanders, and different regional formations (Bavarian, Prussian, Saxon, Württemberg) had been haphazardly thrown together.⁴² Second, the bold strategic withdrawal of troops to the Siegfried Stellung (Arras-St Quentin-Soissons) had not begun until 16 March, three weeks before the Arras offensive. Soldiers had been used as construction workers and many had not yet returned to their units by 9 April. The

⁴¹ *Der Weltkrieg 1914 bis 1918*, 236-38.

⁴² The standard work remains Hermann Cron, *Geschichte des Deutschen Heeres im Weltkriege 1914-1918* (Berlin: K. Siegmund, 1937); in English translation, *Imperial German Army, 1914-18: Organisation, Structure, Orders of Battle* (Solihull, West Midlands: Helion, 2002).

Canadian assault thus struck at a time of critical reorganizational chaos in the Reich's military structure in the West.

Still, the German Official History concluded its analysis of the Battle of Vimy Ridge with a positive spin. Whereas up to now enemy gunners had known the precise German positions and thus had been able to target them mercilessly, the withdrawal to the rolling countryside east of the Ridge evened the score: now attacker and defender alike had to deal with new and uncertain topographical realities. Its final verdict: "Thus the significance of the great British [*sic*] initial success in terms of the overall front remained operationally limited to insignificant territorial gain."⁴³ The soldiers at Vimy in 1917, both Canadian and German, I suspect, would have had some trouble with this verdict, penned in 1939.



The obvious question as always: why did the common soldier keep on fighting? Research into this central issue has largely been neglected in Germany. Military sociology, so studiously analyzed with regard to "Fighting Power" especially in the United States after 1945, remains the stepchild of German military history.⁴⁴ Most writers point to the obvious: patriotism, love of nation, honor of Kaiser and Empire, defence of wife and child and hearth against an evil enemy. Discipline. Following orders. Unit cohesion. Camaraderie. Hatred of staff officers and headquarters. Pride in one's self. Pride in one's particular region (in this case Bavaria). The hope that just one more "push" would bring an end to the war. And the obvious rewards and inducements: leave, special rations, commendations, medals, sexual refreshment behind the lines. Also, as we know from Ernst Jünger's recently published unabridged memoirs, the liberal use of alcohol.⁴⁵

And, what was the alternative to fighting on? Desertion had its own dangers. Where to? To the South, the Swiss border was closed

⁴³ *Der Weltkrieg 1914 bis 1918*, 239.

⁴⁴ A first comprehensive investigation stemmed from Hans Paul Bahrtdt, *Die Gesellschaft und ihre Soldaten: Zur Soziologie des Militärs* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1987). It largely followed Anthony Kellett, *Combat Motivation: The Behavior of Soldiers in Battle* (Boston: Kluwer-Nijhoff, 1982), commissioned by the Canadian Department of National Defence.

⁴⁵ Ernst Jünger, *Kriegstagebuch 1914-1918*, ed. by Helmuth Kiesel (Stuttgart: Klett- Cotta, 2010).

and well guarded. To the East, rear-echelon patrols were only too eager to sweep up deserters and send them to labour battalions. And to the West, the enemy: running toward his lines with one's hands up in the air was no guarantee of survival. It never ceases to amaze those of us who have for so long studied the Great War that also at Vimy, morale held—even among Fasnaber's Bavarian weekend warriors. Like their Canadian regular army counterparts, they endured the mud, the gas, the mines, the collapsing trench walls, the snow, the sleet, the slaughter, and at times, the sheer boredom.



The Battle of Vimy Ridge was downplayed in contemporary German official reports and newspapers as well as in subsequent accounts. Field Marshal von Hindenburg in his memoirs, which in fact were written by a staff officer with the Official History, spoke of 9 April 1917 as constituting "a dark picture, much shade, little light." But, he cheerily concluded, "what did losing a single position amount to in this gigantic battle when compared to the victorious mastery of the entire front?"⁴⁶ General Ludendorff allowed that he was "deeply depressed" that 9 April. It had ruined his 52nd birthday! But forty-eight hours later he casually wrote off the entire affair. "During the night [from 11 to 12 April] we evacuated Vimy Ridge."⁴⁷

The German Official History, based on after-action reports that were lost to the massive British air raid on the military archives at Potsdam on 14 April 1945, gave no figures—killed, wounded, deserted—for Vimy. Instead, using the army's cold, clinical ten-day casualty reports, it simply reported the loss by Sixth Army of 20,800 soldiers from 1 to 10 April, of 10,600 from 11 to 20 April, and of 19,800 from 21 to 30 April 1917—a total of 51,000 men against 78,000 "Tommys." Thus, while lamenting the "great loss of prisoners, equipment and territory" on 9 April, the officer-historians of the Official History deemed the following three weeks to have constituted "a total success for the German defence."⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Generalfeldmarschall von Hindenburg, *Aus meinem Leben* (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1929), 241-42.

⁴⁷ Ludendorff, *Meine Kriegserinnerungen 1914-1918*, 334.

⁴⁸ *Der Weltkrieg 1914 bis 1918*, 277.

Newspapers at home were even more inventive. And invective. Munich's main paper, the *Münchner Neueste Nachrichten*, trumpeted what quickly became the main line of argument: that the Battle of Arras had been yet another "fight between the brainless piling up of material [Haig] and the genius [Hindenburg] who inspires his tools with his will and employs them according to his laws." The British "war machine," the paper reminded its readers, was the last resort of the coward, who in the face of superior morale and infallible generalship could only seek to crush the enemy under a mass of steel and explosives.⁴⁹ It was a well-worn reiteration of the old "material-versus-morale" argument. The capital's *Berliner Tageblatt* reported only on the Battle of the Aisne: "*One Of The Greatest Battles In The History Of The World*," and one in which the attackers had been beaten back. It also briefly noted what it called "Various Minor Attacks Turned Away" elsewhere.⁵⁰ So much for British First and Third Armies. And so much for the Canadian Corps. In fact, only the *Frankfurter Zeitung* paid even indirect attention to Vimy Ridge: "The battle-fortune of Marshal [Hindenburg] is not bound up with the possession of a hill."⁵¹ Period.

The repeated references to the German overall "total success" and to the "mastery of the entire front" in the West are revealing. For, what did the loss "of a hill" mean in the grander scheme of the Nivelle Offensive (the twin battles of the Champagne and Arras)? Five Entente divisions had stormed Vimy Ridge, defended by three German divisions; 53 French and British divisions later assaulted the Aisne sector defended by 38 German divisions. Roughly 10,600 Canadians (including 3,600 killed) had bled at Vimy; some 134,000 *poilus* (including 30,000 killed) had paid the price for Nivelle's folly on the Aisne.⁵² At Vimy, Generals von Falkenhausen and von Nagel had adamantly clung to the customary system of a rigid and static defense; on the Aisne, Ludendorff adopted Captain Geyer's concept of the "Defensive Battle in Position Warfare." Thus, the German arguments ran, the debacle at Vimy Ridge was but one small side of

⁴⁹ <http://hdp.daviesmeyer.com/Home/Deutsche-Geschichte-im-Spiegel-der-Presse/Der-erste-Weltkrieg/1917>, accessed 20 April 2016.

⁵⁰ *Berliner Tageblatt und Handels-Zeitung*, 17 April 1917, 1.

⁵¹ Cited in John Frank Williams, *Corporal Hitler and the Great War 1914-1918: The List Regiment* (London, New York: Frank Cass, 2005), 166.

⁵² Figures according to the French Historical Services; cited in Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory*, 334.



German troops in the ruins of Givenchy. [Bundesarchiv Bild 146-2008-0066]

a much larger campaign; and it was easily dismissed as one of simple human failure.

To be sure, the positive spin put on the Battle of Arras by the German media is hardly surprising. The General Staff kept a tight rein on information, issuing battle reports to but ten Austrian, German and Hungarian reporters officially accredited to the OHL. The safety of its front-line troops, the General Staff allowed, could only be guaranteed by such strict control over information and publication. One of the OHL's most banal communiqués, *Im Westen nichts Neues* ("In the West Nothing New"), of course became the title of Erich Maria Remarque's wildly famous war novel, with the English-language title *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1928).

But what about the German Official History? Why the postwar positive spin even on defeats? The answer lies in the origins of the future Reichsarchiv, which eventually produced the fourteen volumes of the official history of the war. In July 1919 Major-General Hans von Seeckt, a brilliant operations officer and the founder of the Reichswehr under the Weimar Republic, laid down the ground rules for the Official History. First off, there were to be no "private individuals" involved in the project—read, university professors such as Hans Delbrück, Friedrich Meinecke and Hermann Oncken who had been even mildly critical of the General Staff in the Great War. After all, Seeckt reminded the Cabinet of Chancellor Gustav Bauer, these mandarins "worked only for themselves," and "only in a limited

sense for the state, [and] often *against* it." In the well-established tradition of the Prussian General Staff, the Official History was to be written completely by former and current officers. Ranks were closed, reputations upheld. The "prestige" of the army was to be "protected at all cost." Finally, the "morally, psychologically and physically broken Volk" needed to have faith in itself restored. That would be the primary function of *Der Weltkrieg 1914 bis 1918*. It, and it alone, Seeckt argued, could "revive the memories of the grand deeds during the world war."⁵³ The tomes written and published after 1933, beginning with volume 9, naturally had to pass National-Socialist muster and constituted what the historian Markus Pöhlmann called a "remilitarization" of the Official History project.⁵⁴ The new elite of Adolf Hitler's Wehrmacht, men who had served at Verdun and the Somme mostly in the rank of captain, were not to be exposed to criticism of that epic war.



Finally, there remains one of history's delicious "what-if" scenarios. After his injury at the Somme in October 1916 and his two-month recovery at home from a shrapnel wound in the upper leg (possibly with the loss of one testicle), Adolf Hitler—by his own report—was returned to his old unit the first week of March 1917, the 16th Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiment, often simply called the "List Regiment" after its first commander, Colonel Julius von List. The Regiment, badly shaken by the physical and psychological demands of the Somme fighting, had been stationed in what was regarded as a "quiet sector," Vimy Ridge. Hitler arrived there the first week of March 1917 to join his outfit. But then, in one of those strange twists of history, the unit was inexplicably separated from its parent formation, the 16th Bavarian Infantry Division at Givenchy, and moved a dozen miles north to La Bassée, where the OHL expected

⁵³ Seeckt's memorandum of 12 July 1919, Bundesarchiv-Berlin, R 1506 (Reichsarchiv), Nr. 41, 101-07. Cited in Markus Pöhlmann, *Kriegsgeschichte und Geschichtspolitik: der Erste Weltkrieg. Die amtliche deutsche Militärgeschichtsschreibung 1914-1956* (Paderborn: F. Schöningh, 2002), 70-71. Italics in the original.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 151 ff.

the main British attack.⁵⁵ Had the relocation of the 16th Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiment not taken place, or had it been delayed by even four weeks, the men of the Canadian Corps might have spared the world the horrors of a second world war and the Holocaust.



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Dr. Herwig has published more than a dozen books, some of which have been translated into Chinese, Czech, German, Polish, Portuguese, Serbo-Croatian, and Spanish. He has written the prize winning *The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary 1914-1918*; and *The Marne, 1914*. He has coauthored with David Bercuson *Deadly Seas; The Destruction of the Bismarck*; and *One Christmas in Washington*. Bercuson and Herwig joined James Cameron for three weeks in the Atlantic to produce "James Cameron's Expedition: Bismarck" for the Discovery Channel.

This paper stemmed from a public lecture for Valour Canada at Calgary on 8 April 2016.

⁵⁵ See Thomas Weber, *Hitler's First War: Adolf Hitler, the Men of the List Regiment, and the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 161-71, 179, 183.