



With Our Backs to the Wall: Victory and Defeat in 1918

David Stevenson

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The author tells the story of the final year of the First World War, and goes to the roots of this dramatic reversal of fortune, analysing the reasons for Allied success and the collapse of Germany and its partners. Everything from food supply to finance, from strategy to technology, logistics and morale is explored.

With Our Backs to the Wall: Victory and Defeat in 1918 Details

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From Reader Review With Our Backs to the Wall: Victory and Defeat in 1918 for online ebook

Pctrollbreath says

This is a very informative book which builds a convincing argument about how the Entente powers defeated the central powers..... i.e. only just, and only because the Central Powers rate of collapse was faster than that of the Entente.

The book is well written and comprehensive, and you feel rewarded at the end with a deeper knowledge of the period.

The problem with this book is that, as a general reader, when I purchase a book and commit hours of my leisure time to reading it, I don't just want to be informed, I also want to be entertained, and the repetitive way that this book is structured, whilst driving home the authors message, makes for a gritty and hard reading experience.

My recommendation would be that this book is a worthwhile read if you have a particular interest in the period. but to otherwise give it a miss.

David Sheedy says

This book has to be one of the most well researched and comprehensive books that I have ever read about the First World War. That said, this is not a beginners book! The author goes into great detail not only about the offenses of 1918 but also full of just sticks of the combatants, the war at sea, the homefront, and political realities of the nations involved.

Heidi says

I had such high hopes for this book. I found it in the library and I was sure I was going to love it. I didn't love it...I persevered through it! It is a VERY comprehensive account of WWI which could have been so much more interesting. In some parts it felt like a dry, outdated high school history book. Then he surprised me with very fascinating chapters that kept me going. It was good to read I suppose, but I only finished it because I felt like it would be good for me. Kindof like eating my spinach.

happy says

Good look at the last year of WW I, and not just the military operations. Stevenson looks at the economics, social changes, and how events affected the home front which in turn affected the moral of the troops at the front. He also doesn't confine himself France/Flanders, but looks at all of the theaters of the war.

I think it is very well researched, but a little dry. Like a lot of books that are exhaustively researched sometimes you can't see the forest for the trees. Worth the read though

Jonathan says

Unlike the cataclysmic ending of World War II, the First World War seemed in many ways just to peter out. This very fine account explains the hows and the whys of the results of WWI, with most of the narrative devoted not to the battles, tactics and campaigns, but the underlying and overwhelmingly important issues, such as logistics, transport, and issues of the home front, such as labor relations, politics and morale. It turns out that food supplies was a major factor in the final outcome. Professor Stevenson has surpassed himself with this work, which I would recommend to anyone with an interest in the history of World War I and wants to know more than pure tactics and strategy.

Keith W says

This book was not what I expected. Given the title, I thought the focus throughout would be on the military and political events of 1918. However, only the first 170 pages and the last chapter of 36 pages dealt specifically with those topics. The intervening 339 pages discussed much broader topics related, in the author's view, to how each side managed and fought the war, covering such areas as logistics, the mobilization of the home front, using propaganda and censorship to maintain morale and pro-war sentiment, suppressing dissent, etc. Much of this material was interesting but much of it was also dry economics. To me, this book is better read and studied by academicians and less so by lay readers who are more interested in the material that was condensed into the first 170 pages.

Robert Sparrenberger says

This is a very detailed look at the last year of World War One. It's not for the casual history reader who wants a quick synopsis. The author is extremely knowledgeable and dives into all aspects of the conflict from a civilian and military perspective. The reading is dense with analysis throughout.

Bill Osborne says

A good book for serious students of The Great War. Mr Stevenson does a great job of laying out the real impacts of 4 years of total industrialized warfare on all the participants and how that affected their conduct of the war in 1918 and the final shape of the armistice. He backs up his narrative and opinions with a tremendous amount of data--from the number and types of shells fired in each battle to the lack of underwear and coats available to the Austro-Hungarian troops on the Italian front--while maintaining an interesting and readable style. Recommended for readers already familiar WWI who want to get deeper--a lot deeper--into the war.

Matthew says

Didn't care for this book at all.

The military analysis of both the German & Allied offensives of 1918 was really interesting but there was too little of it. The author spent too much time analyzing everything else (from intelligence changes to logistics to the political dynamic) that he forgot to actually put some life into his prose & tell us why we should have cared which is a shame because the topics(s) were ripe w/ possibilities but ultimately disappoints.

Serjeant Wildgoose says

It is always sad to see a good book panned because it failed to meet the reader's expectations. This book is not a general history for the casual reader, but it is better than good. It is an academic work and highly accessible as long as you open it with the expectation that its emphasis is on informing and educating, rather than simply entertaining.

The Great War is a subject that continues to fascinate. Its end appeared somewhat abrupt, the 8 months of open warfare in the west between March and November 1918 following on from 3 and a half years of stalemate. Stevenson not only explores the immediate military causes of Germany's defeat in the West, but looks beyond the fight to give a supremely detailed picture of how the Allied powers managed to keep fighting longer than the Central. The morale of the troops was important, but it was not the only difference.

Every soldier needed to be enlisted - and every enlisted soldier was 1 less man to grow food, mine coal or manufacture the commodities of war.

Every soldier needed to be clothed and fed - as did his horses. Food production was insufficient to meet all the demands and someone had to go short. If the soldiers starved, they couldn't fight; If their horses starved, the army couldn't move; and if the civilian population starved, they might turn to revolution.

Every attack needed to be targetted and that needed intelligence. Every bullet, every shell, every sock had to be paid for (At 1 point in 1918 the British treasury was down to its last 3 weeks of funding!); every bullet, every shell, every sock had to be manufactured diverting manpower (Later womanpower) and resources from food production and consuming in the manufacture of explosives, prodigious quantities of nitrates that were urgently need for fertilisers (Sowing the seeds of America's 'Dustbowl' tragedy of the 1930s); every bullet every shell, every sock had to be transported and this demanded coal and oil and steel for rolling stock and rails - the same coal that was needed to heat civilian homes during the bitter winters; the same oil and steel that was needed to manufacture and deploy tanks and ships and U-Boats. There was never enough to do everything.

War consumes all of these things. Preparing for and understanding war, demands that all of these things are understood.

Stevenson has made one of the most significant and readable contributions to the academic understanding of why the German army was defeated on the Western Front in 1918. This could never have been achieved through a simple description of the military events unfolding in France and Flanders. The foundations of the Allied victory were laid much, much further afield. If you want a share in that understanding then I can't recommend With Our Backs to the Wall highly enough.

David Nichols says

Historians have spilled a great deal of ink discussing the causes of the First World War, but rather less than

they should analyzing the conflict's end, which, author David Stephenson observes in this 2011 study, proved much more sudden and decisive than the combatants expected. Stevenson did a great deal of research for this book, and spares the reader none of it. His densely detailed narrative and reluctance to draw sharp conclusions make it difficult to summarize his findings. At the risk of oversimplification, though, I'll give it a try:

- 1) Germany's 1918 offensive very nearly bled its army to death. Forced marches, inadequate supplies, and Spanish flu halted all of the Western Front offensives of March-July well short of any strategically important cities, and left the German army in an exposed position when the Allied counterattack came.
- 2) Germany wasn't fully able to capitalize on the Russian surrender at Brest-Litovsk because of its need to occupy resource-rich Ukraine, and Wilhelm II's desire to keep an army in the Baltic for a counterrevolutionary coup against the Bolsheviks. This tied down divisions that might have made a difference in the West.
- 3) The Allied counteroffensive of July-October 1918 benefited from superior resources and high morale. By 1918 Britain and France had a surplus of horses, cargo trucks, and oil, all of which allowed them quickly to move large numbers of troops through breakthrough points. British and French tanks, while too slow to conduct 1940-style overrun attacks, did provide Allied infantry with moving bulletproof shields to walk behind. Fresh troops from America dramatically heightened Allied morale, especially since no-one had expected them to arrive in large numbers before 1919.
- 4) The Central Powers were all famished by 1918, thanks to transport problems and Allied blockades. Food shortages contributed to the collapse of Germany's allies in the summer and fall of 1918 and to the mutinies and riots that brought down the German government. Soldiers can't fight on empty stomachs. Meanwhile, the Allies made some effort to keep one another supplied with food and fuel.

What ended Imperial Germany's bid for European hegemony, then, was not the political “stab in the back” that Adolf Hitler alleged, but conventional strategic and logistical problems. It bit off more territory than its armies could chew in eastern Europe, its allies were poor and politically fragile, and in the end its military leaders staked everything on a massive end-game offensive during a war in which offensives proved murderously difficult. The biggest surprise here is that the Allies themselves felt deep anxiety throughout 1918, suffering from their own transportation problems, worried about potential losses in a 1919 campaign, and convinced that Germany remained strong. This explains, Stevenson notes, why they were willing to grant an armistice – admittedly, a punitive one- rather than drive on to Berlin, with the result that political opportunists and rabble rousers had the time to claim that Germany's defeat was not the military's fault.

James Webster says

Very comprehensive account of ending of WWI but approach of middle chapters seemed a bit repetitive. Needs (and does in the end reward) perseverance.

Jessica says

What an awesome title. It's the reason I bought the book.

So I have finally completed this book. My goal was to read all my World War I books in 2014, to honor the

100th anniversary of the beginning of the conflict. Grad school got in the way. I have two more to go - "The Last of the Doughboys" and "Dead Wake," which I lumped in with WWI for obvious reasons.

This book is an excellent resource for looking at the messy, complicated and, ultimately, tragic end of WWI. The research is dense and thorough. I had a map open on my phone while reading, just to elevate the page flipping.

Highly recommended for readers interested in early 20th century history or military history.

Larry says

When World War I began, the participants expected glorious victory in a fairly short, decisive time and as a result of a war of maneuver. The war ended as an endurance contest between two long-suffering, dug-in, reeling combatants following almost four years of deadlock and attrition. The Allies outlasted the Central Powers because of greater resources, barely better morale (better than it should have been until the Ypres campaign), and the arrival of a flood of American troops and materiel. Stevenson offers a history of the war's last year that focuses on the morale issues, the matters of materiel, the degree of social stress each combatant nation felt, not on military matters primarily. Some have complained that the book isn't sufficiently exciting or that it doesn't draw sharper, harder conclusions. It seems plenty hard and sharp to me, and the combination of history and analysis is pretty impressive. Stevenson makes a complex set of interlocking arguments to describe an incredibly complex war. His analysis of the war's impact on women, and their contribution to the war effort is clearly important, as is his analysis of the state of the naval war in 1918 and its impact on the blockade of the Central Powers. There isn't a chapter in the book that isn't worth reading and reflecting about.

Wayne says

Good historical book with facts and information not normally seen about WWI. Unfortunately, the title is misleading making one think you are reading a book that discusses how the Allies militarily fought and "won" the war in 1918. Instead only about a 3rd of the book is about the actual fighting, while the rest concerns comparison of many facts/figures of industry, morale, leadership, etc. that affected the war's outcome. These are useful for the avid historian, but a bit dry and again not what one expects from the title and book synopsis. As such an avid historian I therefore give this book an "ok" 3 stars for the useful historical reference data, but lacks a good narrative and interesting personal stories that make for a truly good or great historical novel.
