

To what extent was Germany defeated in 1918 not by the failure of its military, but by the collapse of its wartime economy and society?

Germany's defeat in 1918 came from several interrelated crises of economic exhaustion, social breakdown, and military failure. These were never separate things happening side by side, each one fed into the other, so the army's collapse on the battlefield cannot really be understood without looking at the starvation and unrest happening at home, and that unrest cannot be understood without looking at the army's failures at the front either. This is shown by what German nationalists later claimed after the war, that the army had not actually lost the war on the battlefield at all but had instead been betrayed by a home front that lost its nerve and gave up too easily. This "stabbed in the back" myth was self-serving and largely untrue, but it lasted as long as it did because it had a small kernel of truth in it. The German army that signed the Armistice in November 1918 was not the same army that had marched through Belgium back in 1914, and the society behind that army was not the same society that had cheered it off to war four years before. Both the army and the society behind it had been worn down by the same long war, and the real question is perhaps not whether economic and social collapse mattered, because it clearly did, but how far it actually explains the timing and manner of Germany's military defeat. The blockade-driven collapse of the home front was undoubtedly the primary cause, this is shown as it set the limits that German strategy was forced to operate within and eventually took away the means of continuing the war at all. However, this cannot be separated from the military failures that made it fatal in the end. A starving economy and a fracturing society did not end the war on the eleventh of November by themselves, they ended it by making sure that the German army's last big gamble, the Spring Offensives of 1918, could not be followed up properly, and that the Allied response to it could not be resisted.

The British Naval Blockade was the foundation of Germany's economic crisis and is the most convincing starting point for explaining the collapse. Imposed almost as soon as the war broke out in 1914 and tightened more and more as the Royal Navy extended its grip over the North Sea, the blockade cut Germany off from the fertiliser, fodder, and food it had been importing before the war. Germany had not been self-sufficient in food production even in 1914, and the war took away both the imports that had made up for this and a large chunk of the agricultural labour force, who were conscripted to fight, along with the horses needed to work the land, which were requisitioned for military transport. Consequently, the effects built up slowly at first but became catastrophic by the winter of 1916 to 1917, when a failed potato harvest forced civilians onto turnips as a staple food, a vegetable that before this had only really been seen as fit for animal feed. This Turnip Winter, as it became known, is convincing evidence for the economic argument as it devastated civilian morale far more than just the lack of nutrition would suggest. Bread was mixed with substitute flours to stretch it further, meat and fats became scarce luxuries only really available through the black market, and disease, malnutrition, and the cold combined to push civilian deaths well above pre-war levels. This is important as the Turnip Winter showed ordinary Germans, in the most direct way possible, that the state could no longer guarantee even the basic provision it had promised back when the country went to war amid the patriotic unity of August 1914. Malnutrition weakened resistance to disease, lowered how productive industrial workers could be, since undernourished workers fell sick more easily or simply did not have the strength for heavy labour, and created a growing sense among civilians that

their sacrifice was being demanded endlessly with no end actually in sight. The Hindenburg Programme, launched in 1916 once Hindenburg and Ludendorff took effective control of the war effort following the costly stalemates at Verdun and the Somme, made this crisis worse rather than easing it. It was meant to massively increase the output of munitions, artillery, and war material so Germany could match the resources of its enemies, but the programme redirected labour, including skilled agricultural workers, away from the land and into the factories at exactly the moment farming most needed them. The Auxiliary Service Law that came with it in December 1916 tried to mobilise the whole male population for war work, but in reality this just moved the same limited pool of labour from one urgent task, growing food, to another, rather than actually expanding the workforce available. This made the food shortages the blockade had already started even worse, while paying for the expanded war economy through loans and printing money, rather than the politically difficult option of raising taxes properly, fed an inflation that ate into wages and savings alike. Industrial workers, who were supposedly meant to be the programme's priority, found their wages on paper failed to keep up with black-market food prices, meaning even people working in the supposedly favoured war industries went hungry too. This further proves that the Hindenburg Programme showed that Germany's economic management, which was meant to solve a military problem, actually deepened the exact civilian crisis that long-term military capacity depended on. Thus it is clear that it is hard, looking at this, to keep economic and military causes in completely separate boxes, since the same men running the military effort were also the men whose economic choices sped up the home front's decline. Resource disparity made Germany's economic position not just difficult but essentially hopeless once the United States entered the war in April 1917, and this is the most convincing part of the economic argument overall. American industrial output, money, and eventually manpower gave the Allies an overwhelming advantage that Germany, limited by the blockade to its own resources and those of its weaker and increasingly exhausted allies in Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire, could never realistically match in a long war of attrition. American loans kept Allied buying power going at a moment when Britain and France's own reserves were under serious strain, while the promise of millions of fresh American troops, even before they arrived in large numbers, completely changed the long-term maths of the war. Even if German civilians had somehow endured their hardships indefinitely, the gap in war-making capacity between the two sides was getting wider, not smaller, with every month the war dragged on, this therefore makes the economic argument more convincing as it shows Germany's position only ever got worse, never better. This resource gap gave Germany's leadership a strong and understandable reason to push for a decisive military result before American strength could be fully felt, a calculation that would go on to shape the military decisions of 1918, showing how closely tied economic constraint and military strategy had become by this stage of the war, causing military failure from economic stagnation and social deprivation.

Moreover, starvation and deprivation did not stay a private hardship, they became a public and political problem that ate away at the German population's will to keep fighting the war, and this makes the social argument convincing on its own terms. The sense of inequality between social classes, between those who could still find food on the black market and those who could not, between war profiteers visibly doing well out of munitions contracts and ordinary families going hungry in queues outside half-empty shops, fuelled a resentment that the patriotic unity of 1914 simply could not survive forever. Hunger is not just uncomfortable, over years it wears away the legitimacy of whatever authority fails to prevent it, and by 1917

that process was well underway across German society, shown by falling industrial output, rising absenteeism, and a noticeable drop in enthusiasm for subscribing to war loans. This process produced clear social polarisation, showing how the public opinion and state of society back in Germany dictates the war front. The Burgfrieden, the wartime truce by which Germany's main political parties, including a Social Democratic Party that had historically been hostile to the imperial state, had agreed back in 1914 to put domestic conflict aside for the sake of national unity, collapsed under the strain of hunger and inequality. The Social Democrats themselves split in 1917, as a more radical wing broke away to oppose the leadership's continued support for war credits, something that would have been completely unthinkable in the patriotic fervour of August 1914. The clearest sign that the Burgfrieden had broken down came in January 1918, when hundreds of thousands of munitions workers across Germany, most visibly in Berlin, went on strike, and this is convincing evidence of how far social consent for the war had collapsed by this point. This was prompted partly by continuing deprivation and partly by the harsh terms Germany was forcing onto a defeated Russia at the Brest-Litovsk negotiations, terms which suggested to a lot of workers that the war's purpose had shifted from defending the country to outright conquest. These strikes signalled, about as clearly as possible, the mass breakdown of consent for the war effort. This shows how the workforce willing to strike in the middle of total war, fully aware of the personal and political risk involved, including the very real chance of strike leaders being conscripted straight into the army as punishment, was a workforce whose patience had run out after years of sacrifice with no end in sight. Political revolution, when it finally arrived in November 1918, with mutinies in the German fleet at Kiel and workers' and soldiers' councils spreading rapidly across the country, leading to the Kaiser's abdication, has to be understood as a result of this longer process of social breakdown rather than as its cause, this makes the social element of Germany's defeat more complicated. By the time sailors at Kiel refused orders for what they correctly judged to be a pointless final battle against the much larger British fleet, German armies on the Western Front had already been pushed back for weeks past the supposedly unbreakable Hindenburg Line, and Ludendorff himself had already told his own government, back in late September, that the war was lost and an armistice was essential. However, the revolution did not cause Germany's defeat, it was the moment when years of built-up economic and social strain, combined with the now undeniable fact of military failure, made it impossible to squeeze any more sacrifice out of a population and a fighting force that no longer believed the cause could be won.

Germany's military was believed to be destined for greatness and victory in early 1914 through the immense reputation of the great Prussia and proposed ideas for a quick and decisive victory. However, Germany's strategic position had been compromised right from the start of the war by the two-front dilemma, the need to fight France and Britain in the west while also holding off Russia in the east, a problem the original Schlieffen Plan had failed to solve through the quick, decisive victory in the west it had promised back in 1914. The failure at the Marne condemned Germany to exactly the long two-front war its planners had feared most, putting sustained strain on manpower and resources that no single campaign could relieve. Russia's collapse, first through the February Revolution and then more decisively through the Bolshevik seizure of power, and the harsh peace forced on Russia at Brest-Litovsk in March 1918, finally freed around a million German troops from the Eastern Front, this is less convincing as a turning point though, as it came too late to undo the basic strain that fighting on two fronts for three and a half years had already put on German manpower, equipment, and morale. The troops freed up from the east were a genuine

opportunity, not a solution to Germany's deeper problems, the structural damage of years of attrition had already been done, and a lot of the divisions moved west were themselves under-equipped and partly demoralised after long service in the east. Ludendorff used these newly available troops to launch the Kaiserschlacht, the Spring Offensive of 1918, starting in March and aimed at breaking the Allied line decisively before American manpower could be brought in at war-winning levels, a decision directly shaped by the resource disparity discussed above. The offensive failed to get the breakthrough it was aiming for, which makes the military argument convincing in its own right, separate from the economic one. German Stormtrooper divisions, the best-trained and most capable infantry Germany had, made dramatic tactical gains in places, at one point even bringing German guns within shelling range of Paris, but lacked the mobility, not enough motorised transport and not enough cavalry to actually exploit these gains before Allied reserves arrived to plug the gaps. By the time the final phase of the offensive failed in July 1918, these elite divisions had been used up without achieving anything decisive, leaving the now over-extended German line defended mostly by exhausted, under-strength, and increasingly inexperienced ordinary infantry. Thus, military failure had its own causes separate from the economic and social disparity back on the home-front, Germany had gambled its most valuable remaining military asset and lost it for limited gains that could not even be held for long anyway. The main primary proof of the failure of the German Army lies with The Hundred Days Offensive, starting with the Battle of Amiens in August 1918, this showed a mastery of all-arms warfare, the coordinated use of infantry, artillery, tanks, and aircraft together, that Germany, with its Stormtrooper reserves used up and its economy unable to match Allied tank and aircraft production or supply enough fuel and horses, could no longer resist. German forces fought skilful defensive battles and were not simply routed outright, but they were pushed back steadily and permanently through the autumn, losing prisoners and territory at a rate the German high command itself recognised could not continue. By the time the Armistice was signed on the eleventh of November, the German army's ability to keep up organised resistance, while not completely destroyed, was unmistakably and permanently broken, a defeat caused as much by operational mistakes in the spring and genuine Allied tactical superiority in the autumn as by the economic exhaustion that had made those mistakes and that inferiority impossible to recover from. This shows that the military defeat was not just from miscalculations in operations but rather from being outproduced by the Allies and being crippled on the home front which is all related to economic and social factors.

As a result, economic and social collapse created the conditions in which no military strategy could really succeed, this is shown clearly through the blockade's slow strangling of German agriculture, the self-defeating logic of the Hindenburg Programme, and the overwhelming resource gap created by American entry, which all came together to produce a home front that could no longer sustain the war. Starvation, social polarisation, and the eventual collapse of the Burgfrieden wore down the popular will the war effort depended on, with political revolution coming as the final consequence of this rather than the cause of it, making the economic and social perspective more important in the defeat in the First World War. However, military failure was real and decisive in its own right too, as the two-front dilemma, the failure of the Kaiserschlacht to turn tactical gains into anything strategically decisive, and the Allies' clear superiority during the Hundred Days were genuine military events with genuine military causes, not just economic exhaustion playing out on the battlefield, causing the views of the military reasons to be seen as a primary factor in Germany's defeat in the First World War. Germany's defeat was total, economic, social, and

military all at once, and the explanation of that defeat lies in how all three came together, an economy and society that could no longer sustain the war, and an army that, weakened by both of those, could no longer win it either.

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