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Review of The Brusilov Offensive. By Timothy C Dowling

Foster, I

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The Brusilov Offensive. By TIMOTHY C DOWLING Indiana University Press:
Bloomington and Indianapolis. 2008. 208 pp. £18.99. ISBN 978-0253351302.

The campaign waged by the Russian general Aleksei Brusilov on the Eastern Front from June through to September 1916 destroyed the Habsburg Army as a fighting force and made him a national hero, both at the time and later in the Soviet era as one of the few Russian military commanders who was not an aristocrat. The Brusilov Offensive also cost Russia nearly one million casualties, while Austria-Hungary lost 1.5 million soldiers, of whom 400 000 were taken prisoner. Driven back to the Carpathian Mountains, the Habsburg forces never truly recovered from the series of crushing defeats inflicted on them.

While the Western Front continues to dominate Western European and American perceptions of the First World War, for entirely understandable reasons, it is useful to have a corrective in the shape of a monograph devoted to the contribution of that other equally important theatre, especially as the Brusilov Offensive itself was partly conceived to relieve pressure on the Western Allies.

Professor Dowling's laudable aim is, as he puts it, to provide a comprehensive view of the Brusilov Offensive "by bringing together sources in German, Russian and English". His German primary sources, given the destruction of many key Imperial German records, are drawn exclusively from the Austrian State Archives. He is able to deliver a blow-by-blow account of the failures of tactical leadership that led to the wholesale annihilation of the Habsburg Fourth Army and the desperate attempts of the German High Command to shore up weakened and demoralised Austro-Hungarian

units – the metaphor used at the time was that German officers and soldiers would provide ‘Korsettstangen’, corset stays, to steady the line. Although his secondary references in Russian are of an older vintage and much of his German secondary material dates from the First Austrian Republic, Dowling follows more recent US and Austrian research in seeing Brusilov’s tactical innovations on the one hand and the incompetence of Habsburg generals on the other as largely to blame for the collapse, rather than the desertions and unwillingness to fight of unreliable Slav regiments on the Habsburg side.¹ Throughout the 1920s and 1930s former Habsburg officers, led by Conrad von Hötzendorf himself in his monumental, five-volume autobiography *Aus meiner Dienstzeit* (1921-1925) waged an unremitting desk-top campaign of self-exculpation. Dowling’s focus on Brusilov’s meticulous planning and his exploration of the breakdowns in communication between the Habsburg generals and their soldiers at the front and between the Austro-Hungarian leadership and their German counterparts deal precisely with those long-propagated Habsburg myths. While Brusilov himself blamed his fellow Russian generals for the lack of men and materiel to capitalise on the breakthroughs that ensued, it is clear that his tactics achieved more than intended in that they ensured German domination of Central Europe by removing Austria-Hungary as a military threat and ultimately brought Romania into the war. Both of these developments marked the high point of Russian military achievement in the period but also set the Russian Army on the path to revolution.

At the practical level, however, Professor Dowling’s book has a number of flaws that could easily have been avoided by more scrupulous editing. The table of officer rank equivalencies on p. 47 seems to have German titles listed under the Russian column.

¹ See, for example, John Schindler, ‘Steam-rolled in Galicia: The Austro-Hungarian Army and the Brusilov Offensive, 1916’, *War in History*, 2003 10 (1) 27-59 or Graydon A. Tunstall, ‘Austria-Hungary and the Brusilov Offensive of 1916’ *The Historian* 2008 70 (1) 30-53.

These same German titles reappear on p. 71 in the table listing the Russian Order of Battle and are here variously misspelled. No explanation is given for this presentation. My assumption is that Professor Dowling has transcribed the details from German-language sources. The Austrian general's title "Feldzeugmeister" is repeatedly spelled as "Feldzugmeister". In the bibliography on pages 197-203, the list of primary sources in German contains four spelling mistakes, while five of the eight German language texts listed have orthographical or grammatical mistakes in the titles. With an increasing number of undergraduates studying European military history without any firm grounding in any of the relevant modern languages or, more is the pity, an opportunity to learn those languages at an early stage in their careers, it is all the more disappointing to see an otherwise valuable monograph fall short of the mark in accurate presentation of foreign names and titles.

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