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***The German Army at Passchendaele*** by Jack Sheldon, (Barnsley, Pen & Sword, 2007).  
£25.00 hardback.

Review by Ian Passingham

General Hermann von Kuhl, Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria's Chief-of-Staff, memorably wrote that the Third Ypres campaign, which culminated in the bloody struggle to hold Passchendaele Ridge, was "*The greatest Martyrdom of the War.*"

Other German references have been used in the past to suggest that the German defence of the Ypres Salient in 1917 was less traumatic and have been cited to give further credence to the notion that the Third Ypres campaign, or "Passchendaele" as most would know it, was a bloody disaster for the BEF. This belief, alongside the enduring view that the whole campaign was fought in glutinous, sucking, fatal mud, are what colour any true sense of perspective about the battles fought here between July and November 1917.

It was with this desire for perspective that I first studied and then wrote *Pillars of Fire*, which detailed the planning, conduct and aftermath of the Battle of Messines in June of that year, from both the Allied and German viewpoint. Jack Sheldon has now taken that effort considerably further in his meticulously researched book: *The German Army at Passchendaele*.

Jack's *opus* proves beyond all doubt that a wealth of original and excellent primary and secondary sources exist for historians to draw from in order to develop a well-balanced understanding of the often visceral fighting that did occur in Flanders at that time. The principal problem has been that lack of knowledge of German – and German Gothic Script – has hampered many historians in attempting to decipher the sources that are available. Some efforts have been made, especially over the past decade, to address this problem.

However, the difference here, as with Jack Sheldon's previous work on the Somme in 1916, is that it is abundantly clear from the plethora of lengthy individual accounts from the German officers and men within the Salient that this was a grim, depressing and often soul-destroying campaign from their perspective. Facing the threat of annihilation from the incessant artillery bombardments, as well as determined attacks by the BEF, the German defenders had no choice but to hold on, regardless of the suffering and horrific conditions in which they had to fight. These conditions were at least as bad as those on the other side of no-man's-land.

An enduring fear gripped most German soldiers who experienced a tour of duty in the Ypres Salient. *The German Army at Passchendaele* gives voluminous testament to this and, in a systematic, chronological way, draws our attention to the awful German defeat at Messines, highlighted by the criminal incompetence of German leadership within *Gruppe Wytschaete*,



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and then the roller-coaster fortunes of the dogged German defence of the Salient between 31<sup>st</sup> July and 10<sup>th</sup> November 1917.

More German divisions were thrown into the cauldron of the “Passchendaele” campaign than had been committed in such adventures before. The fact that a number of these divisions were forced to return several times says much about the anguish that the German Army was going through during the campaign.

Raw courage and the ability to withstand shot and shell, as well as the extraordinary efforts of the British and Dominion attacks, were just enough to prevail in the defence of this blasted rump of Belgium. But, it was only just enough, and, as Crown Prince Rupprecht was to record, the dreadful weather in October following the British and Australian attack at Broodseinde proved to be Germany’s ally.

In covering such a landscape from the German angle, Jack Sheldon has produced a masterly, scholarly book that traces the German Army’s experience of the Third Ypres campaign with authority and *gravitas*. It puts personal German accounts, as well as the more measured higher level “memoirs” into their proper context. Photographs and maps/illustrations support the well-sourced research/cross-referenced text. The book leaves the reader with full confidence in the authenticity of the original sources that Jack Sheldon has not only unearthed, but also translated, before adding each one to the narrative.

My only reservation is that it reads more as a reference work than a generally free-flowing narrative of these momentous events. Nevertheless, *The German Army at Passchendaele* (as with the *German Army on the Somme*) is unique in its coverage of the German Army’s story of these campaigns and should become a pivotal reference work for the “enemy’s” views on the Third Ypres/Passchendaele campaign.

Overall, Jack Sheldon’s *The German Army at Passchendaele* is a superbly produced, academically unique and compelling addition to the historiography of the First World War. It should be acquired and read by any serious reader of the history of the conflict.

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