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Introduction

In 1871 after the defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian War the region of Alsace was The Kaiser's Reluctant Conscript incorporated into Germany. In common with the rest of the German Empire, its young men were routinely conscripted for military service. Dominik Richert was one

of these young men. He was born in the Saint Ulrich in the Sundgau, close to the Swiss border in 1893 and grew up in a German-speaking environment where French was banned. He proved to be an able pupil at the The Kaiser's Reluctant Conscript local school, and when he was due to leave, the local teacher visited his father and tried to persuade him to let him continue his education. However, his father needed his help on their small farm and Dominik's formal education finished at the age of thirteen.

At this time a railway line was being built in the area, and Dominik was able to find employment as a messenger. Later, he loved to tell his family of the pride he The Kaiser's Reluctant Conscript felt the first time he came The Kaiser's Reluctant Conscript home with his pay – a 20 Mark gold piece. As well as bringing in some well-needed cash to the family income, this job also gave him contact with people from very different backgrounds. There were a number of Italians working on the railway, and The Kaiser's Reluctant Conscript one of them encouraged Dominik to be sceptical of people in authority. He was learning to think for himself.

The Kaiser's Reluctant Conscript

Dominik was called up in 1913, and did not return home till 1919. By this time, as a result of Germany's defeat, Alsace had once again become part of France. After his return, he started to write his memoirs, eventually filling nine notebooks with a very detailed and lively account of his experiences in the First World War. His ability to recall the events The Kaiser's Reluctant Conscript of the war in detail is very remarkable.

In 1922 Dominik married Adele Kayser and they had two sons, Marcel and Ulrich. They had reached manhood by the time that, in 1940, Germany invaded Alsace. By 1942, young men from Alsace were being conscripted for the German army. Given his experience of the First World War, Dominik encouraged his sons to escape across the border to Switzerland.

As a result of this act of civil courage, Dominik and Adele were deported to do forced labour in Germany in 1943.

When they heard that their parents had been deported, Dominik's sons joined the French Resistance and took an active part in fighting in France.

Dominik and Adele were dreadfully exploited, having to work fourteen to sixteen hour days on a farm The Kaiser's Reluctant Conscript in the Palatinate, but survived and returned home in The Kaiser's Reluctant Conscript 1945. The health and morale of both had suffered as a result of their ordeal. Alsace once again became part of France.

In the early 1960s Jean-Claude The Kaiser's Reluctant Conscript Faffa, a young man who had known Dominik in the village and had read his notebooks, decided to type them up in the hope that they would be published. He sent one copy of the typescript to Heinrich Böll, the The Kaiser's Reluctant Conscript German writer, but unfortunately Böll was not willing to lend his support. He sent the copy he had received to a military archive in Freiburg.

Dominik died in 1977 at the age of eighty-four in St Ulrich and is buried in the village churchyard.

In 1987, Bernd Ulrich, a The Kaiser's Reluctant Conscript postgraduate student of modern history from Berlin, discovered Faffa's typescript in the military archive and quickly realised its importance. He showed it to his friend Angelika Tramitz, and together they managed to establish The Kaiser's Reluctant Conscript contact with Dominik's sons, and to check the authenticity of the manuscript and its contents.

They sought and found a publisher and were actively involved in editing the book for publication. It was published in German in 1989, and a French translation was published in 1994.

One reason for the book's interest is its sheer scope. Dominik Richert was involved in the war from its outset until he deserted to the French in 1918, and his war service saw him fighting on both the Western and Eastern Fronts. His experience on the Eastern Front will be of particular interest to English speaking readers who are less likely to have read about the conflict from this perspective. His book provides a continuous The Kaiser's Reluctant Conscript autobiographical narrative – almost like a diary – for the entire period from the start of the war until his eventual return home in 1919.

It will also be of particular interest to The Kaiser's Reluctant Conscript English speaking readers to read his account of the fighting with Indian troops in 1914, and of the The Kaiser's Reluctant Conscript battle at Villers-Brettonneux in 1918, where many Australian troops were involved, and some of the first German tanks were in action.

Wherever he went, Dominik was interested in his environment and curious to learn more, visiting cities and towns, looking at the landscape and the The Kaiser's Reluctant Conscript way people lived.

However, the most important and valuable aspect of the book is the author himself. From The Kaiser's Reluctant Conscript the outset, it is clear that Dominik was a reluctant soldier who questioned authority and was willing to stand up for himself. There is also a clear development in his willingness to act independently as the narrative progresses, and he refuses to accept the propaganda which he encounters. He continues to fight to survive, but he still feels pity for his enemies, and has little respect for the upper echelons of his own army, or the society which sent it to war. He has a clear sense of humanity which transcends national boundaries. In this, he is a very modern hero.

Note on the Text

The translation is *The Kaiser's Reluctant Conscript* based on the published German edition and on Jean-Claude Faffa's typescript. I have added some of the footnotes from the German edition, and a few of my own where I felt it necessary to do so.

As it was not originally intended for publication, the original *The Kaiser's Reluctant Conscript* book was simply entitled *My Experiences in the War 1914 – 1918*. The title for the *The Kaiser's Reluctant Conscript* English edition was chosen in agreement with Mr Ulrich Richert and the publisher.

Acknowledgements

I am very pleased that all the people who were involved in my project were helpful and cooperative. In particular *The Kaiser's Reluctant Conscript* Angelika Tramitz was consistently supportive and helped me contact Ulrich Richert, the son of the author.

Ulrich Richert has given me a great deal of help and support. In particular I would like to thank him for sending me his copy of Mr Faffa's typescript, which enabled me to provide a complete translation, and for his provision of photographs of his father.

My interest in German was first encouraged by teachers at my Scottish high school – Madras College in St Andrews. I greatly respect their decision to promote the teaching of German and foster contact with Germany in the years following the Second World War.

My brother-in-law, John Walker encouraged me to study for a German degree at Birkbeck in 2002. Thanks to John, and to Eckard Michels, who taught me German history, I discovered the book and the need for a translation.

I would also like to thank Henry Wilson and Matt Jones of Pen and Sword. It is thanks to Henry's appreciation of Dominik Richert's story that it will be published, and he helped guide me to find the right title – not an easy task! Matt Jones has painstakingly guided the text through the proof stages and has been consistently helpful, enthusiastic and co-operative.

Finally I would like to thank my wife Sheila for all her help and encouragement in getting the translation right.

The Kaiser's Reluctant Conscript

David Carrick Sutherland

The Kaiser's Reluctant Conscript

Note on Map

There are a large number of places named in the book and many have had their names changed since the time of writing. In order to help the reader, in addition to the map printed on the previous page, we have also set up a more comprehensive map which is freely accessible on the internet using the following url: The Kaiser's Reluctant Conscript <http://goo.gl/maps/hZFAE>.

For those who have internet enabled smart The Kaiser's Reluctant Conscript phones, the map can also be viewed by scanning the QR code below.

Diary of a Conscript

At the age of Twenty

On the 16th of October 1913, at the age of twenty, I was called up for military service and

assigned to the First Company of Infantry Regiment 112 which was stationed in Mülhausen (Alsace). After about half a year we recruits had been trained by the German Army's usual drill to become soldiers ready for war. In the middle of July 1914 our Regiment was moved to the military training ground in Heuberg on the border between Baden and Württemberg in order to take part in a large-scale combat exercise. While we were there we were often rushed around and The Kaiser's Reluctant Conscript drilled in the most mean and nasty way.

On the 29th of July 1914 we had a brigade drill in the morning, and in the afternoon the field artillery had target practise. As we were allowed to see what was happening, I decided to go along, as it seemed to me that I would never again have the opportunity to see something like this. I found it really interesting. I stood behind the guns and was able to see how the shrapnel exploded and how the shells hit the ground at the targets which had been erected. None of us soldiers had any idea that The Kaiser's Reluctant Conscript war was imminent.

On the 30th of July 1914 we went to bed early as we were exhausted. About ten o'clock in the evening the door was suddenly opened and we were ordered to get up by the Company Sergeant as the declaration of war was imminent. We struggled to wake up. To start with, nobody was in a fit state to say anything. War, where, with whom? Naturally everyone soon came to the conclusion that it would be the French. Then one of us started to sing *'Deutschland, Deutschland über alles'*. Almost everyone joined in and soon hundreds of soldiers' voices boomed it out in the night sky. I really did not feel like singing, because I thought straight away that the most likely thing that can happen to you in a war is that you will be shot dead. That was a really unpleasant prospect. In addition, I was worried about my relatives and my The Kaiser's Reluctant Conscript home, because they were near the border and therefore at risk of being destroyed.

We all had to hurry to get packed, and that same night we went down to the station in Hausen, which was located in the Danube Valley. As there was no train there for us we then had to return to our barracks until the following evening. Then they packed us into an overcrowded train – like salt herrings in a barrel – to transport us back to Mülhausen The Kaiser's Reluctant Conscript where we were garrisoned. At six o'clock in the morning on the 1st of August 1914 we arrived there and marched to the barracks. We were supposed to be allowed to rest until midday, but instead I was wakened by some of my comrades at nine o'clock and we were issued with our combat equipment from the stores – all brand new from head to foot, together with one The Kaiser's Reluctant Conscript hundred and twenty live bullets each. Afterwards we had to go to the armoury where our bayonets were sharpened.

The Kaiser S Reluctant Conscript

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