

# Johann Knief on the Slaughter of Modern Battle (September 29, 1914)

## Abstract

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In this letter from the front written in September 1914 to the editor of *Vorwärts* (the SPD party newspaper), soldier Johann Knief describes an early battle on the Western front. Before the war, Knief had been a member of the Social Democrats (SPD) in Bremen, and a spokesman for its left wing. He was conscripted in 1914 and fought in several battles before suffering a nervous breakdown. He was discharged from the military in 1915. In January 1918 he was arrested for political activities opposing the war and remained in custody until freed by the November Revolution. He supported the founding of the Spartacus League and was a leading figure in the Bremen Soviet Republic of 1919 but died of appendicitis that same year.

## Source

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“Men, shout hurrah as loud as you can, then the French will run away without battle,” the officers encouraged the soldiers. And they shouted as the hordes of Hermann the Cheruscan might have shouted, as true Teutons. The enemy, meanwhile, behaved completely calmly and some of our fellow soldiers might really have believed that shouting was indeed the best assault weapon. [...]

As close as 50 meters the cunning Frenchmen let the misguided troops approach. Then, however, a fire of cannon muzzles and rifle barrels rained down on the brave ones, so that one might believe that the end of the world had come. A dense hail of bullets pelted the dense ranks of the Germans. A confusion arose that blew apart the entire advancing regiments in an instant. Everyone ran around all over the place, officers started to retreat with 8, 10, or 12 men as the sad remains of their company. They fled far behind the frontlines. It's all over now, I heard a lieutenant say. [...]

Source of original German text: H. Otto and K. Schmiedel, eds. *Der erste Weltkrieg. Dokumente*. East Berlin, 1983, pp.95–6. Excerpted/reprinted in Bernd Ulrich and Benjamin Ziemann, *Frontalltag im Ersten Weltkrieg. Wahn und Wirklichkeit*. Berlin, 1995, pp. 86–7.

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