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Anette Neder:

*In Search of the 'German Way of Fighting': German Military Culture from 1871 to 1945*

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## REVIEW ARTICLE

### **IN SEARCH OF THE 'GERMAN WAY OF FIGHTING': GERMAN MILITARY CULTURE FROM 1871 TO 1945**

ANETTE NEDER

PAUL FOX, *The Image of the Soldier in German Culture, 1871–1933* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 240 pp. ISBN 978 1 4742 2614 1. £85.00

BEN H. SHEPHERD, *Hitler's Soldiers: The German Army in the Third Reich* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 664 pp. ISBN 978 0 3001 7903 3. £25.00

BENJAMIN ZIEMANN, *Violence and the German Soldier in the Great War: Killing, Dying, Surviving* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 320 pp. ISBN 978 1 4742 3958 5. £85.00

Although the debate about an anti-modernist *Sonderweg* in German history between 1871 and 1945 has been largely settled among historians,<sup>1</sup> the notion of German exceptionalism remains virulent in the research on German military history.<sup>2</sup> After the Second World War, British historians identified Prussian militarism and the widespread 'subject mentality' (*Untertanenmentalität*) in Wilhelmine Germany as key factors for the catastrophic course of German history in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> Since the 1960s several generations of German scholars have critically reassessed Prussian-dominated German military culture with the aim of identifying those elements that

<sup>1</sup> See Jürgen Kocka, 'Looking Back on the Sonderweg', *Central European History*, 51/1 (2018), 137–42.

<sup>2</sup> Dirk Bönker, 'A German Way of War? Narratives of German Militarism and Maritime Warfare in World War I', in Sven Oliver Müller and Cornelius Torp (eds.), *Imperial Germany Revisited: Continuing Debates and New Perspectives* (New York, 2011), 227–38, at 227.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. A. J. P. Taylor, *The Course of German History: A Survey of the Development of German History since 1815* (London, 1945). During the war Robert Gilbert Vansittart, who was a diplomat in the Foreign Office and a prominent

paved the way for the criminal and genocidal warfare of Germany's armed forces in the Second World War. In this context, a wide range of aspects has been discussed: the special relationship between military, state, and society, which prevailed not only in Imperial Germany but also in the Weimar Republic; the unbroken power of the old military elites in the Reichswehr after the First World War; and peculiarities both of German mentality and of military strategy. Many researchers argue that the experience of the Great War and the 'trauma' of defeat played a crucial role in the radicalization of German military culture. The proponents of the *Sonderweg* theory claim above all that the Imperial army cultivated traditions which predisposed Germany to 'absolute destruction',<sup>4</sup> and that the practices of war in Imperial Germany differed significantly from those in other Western countries. Some researchers, such as Jürgen Zimmerer, see direct continuities between genocidal practices of violence in German colonialism and the Holocaust.<sup>5</sup> However, this master narrative has been repeatedly contested in the past by military historians who emphasized the differences between traditional Prussian-dominated military culture and the military spirit under Nazi rule. Others have focused on ruptures and elements of refusal in German military history as indicators of possible alternative paths of historical development.

This review article will discuss three recent publications on German military history covering the period from 1871 to 1945, which all seek to further define the 'German way' of fighting, as Paul Fox describes it (p. 7), and to explain peculiarities of German warfare and practices of violence. Since these publications deal with consecutive historical periods, they open up a long-term perspective, which allows us to draw connections between similar or related phenomena and thus identify continuities and discontinuities in German mil-

proponent of a sharp anti-German line, promoted this view of German history in a series of radio broadcasts. His portrait of German history, which was published in 1941 under the title *Black Record: Germans Past and Present*, became a huge bestseller. See Jörg Später, *Vansittart: Britische Debatten über Deutsche und Nazis 1902-1945* (Göttingen, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> See Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca, NY, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> See Jürgen Zimmerer, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz? On the Relationship Between Colonialism and the Holocaust* (New York, 2015).

itary culture. What also makes these studies interesting for comparison is their authors' quite different theoretical and methodological approach to the analysis of the topic. In his inquiry *The Image of the Soldier in German Culture*, Paul Fox analyses the visual representations of Germans at war from 1871 to 1933. Benjamin Ziemann's study *Violence and the German Soldier in the Great War* closely examines how soldiers experienced violence during the First World War and how it affected post-war society. While the first two studies conceptually focus on one particular aspect of German military culture, Ben Shepherd's book *Hitler's Soldiers* aims to present a general and comprehensive analysis of the German army under Nazi rule.

Fox's study is a substantial contribution to a visual history of the twentieth century and, especially, of modern conflict.<sup>6</sup> Proponents of visual history believe that images produce meaning and thus fundamentally affect reality.<sup>7</sup> It is indeed worthwhile to study visual representations of Germans at war. Illustrations, pictures, and photographs not only reveal a great deal about German military culture, but in the era of mass communication also had enormous influence on the way the recipients of these images perceived and thought about the military and war. One special characteristic of visual representations is their aesthetic dimension. Because of their rapid intelligibility – pictures convey meaning through association – they offer a more direct access to comprehension. Fox analyses a body of over forty representative images of Germans at war, mainly samples from illustrated histories and photobooks. As his main interest, apart from defining the German way of fighting, is describing the relationship between cultural production and military thought, he concentrates on popular visual accounts of war, which were broadly patriotic and depicted idealized forms of soldierly behaviour. In order to further define how Germans fought, he examines how the three components

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. Gerhard Paul, *BilderMACHT: Studien zur 'Visual History' des 20. und 21. Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen, 2013); Gerhard Paul, *Das visuelle Zeitalter: Punkt und Pixel* (Göttingen, 2016); Joanna Burke, *War and Art: A Visual History of Modern Conflict* (London, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Horst Bredekamp's *Bildakttheorie* ('image act theory') claims, following the tenets of speech act theory, that images do not only function as representations of reality, but that they have the power to affect the recipient's thoughts, emotions, and behaviour. See Horst Bredekamp, *Theorie des Bildakts: Frankfurter Adorno-Vorlesungen 2007* (Berlin, 2010).

of fighting power—the moral, the physical, and the conceptual—were related to each other in visual representations of war from 1871 to 1933. For Fox, the most striking element of continuity in the field of popular visual representations of war is the notion of a ‘German way of fighting’ that was ‘characterized by aggressive operations conducted by a coherent force whose collective will to battle in itself advances a compelling claim to moral superiority, even in defeat’ (p. 190).

In the first part of his book, the author describes the visual research methods of his inquiry and extensively reflects on the cultural sources of German military thinking. It would have been more fruitful, though, to integrate these reflections into the empirical part of the study in order to establish a closer link between theory and practice. The chapter ‘Politics of Border-Landscapes’ shows how visual representations of contested, newly conquered, or lost border territories were used to influence the mental map of their viewers. In the months following the armistice, the integrity of Germany’s eastern borders became a prominent theme in visual culture.<sup>8</sup> Faced with the threat of losing territories to Poland, visual representations of German-Polish borderlands aimed to mobilize patriotic sentiments. These propaganda images symbolically underlined Germany’s moral claim to the eastern territories by typically portraying soldiers who conquered or defended the nation’s borderlands as working hand in hand with farmers who cultivated the terrain. The representations of border zones and conflicts drew upon visual traditions that go back as far as the Franco-Prussian war, when the German Empire conquered Alsace-Lorraine. The illustrated histories of the Franco-Prussian war also present soldiers and farmers as equally important for the integration of newly conquered territories into the nation.

Fox bases his analysis of the visual representation of the Great War on two prominent photobooks edited by Franz Schauwecker and Ernst Jünger respectively, which were published around ten years after the armistice.<sup>9</sup> This narrow perspective on nationalist lit-

<sup>8</sup> For example, posters encouraging former soldiers to volunteer for border security operations circulated.

<sup>9</sup> See Franz Schauwecker, *So war der Krieg: 200 Kampfaufnahmen aus der Front* (Berlin, 1927); Ernst Jünger, *Das Antlitz des Weltkrieges: Fronterlebnisse deutscher Soldaten* (Berlin, 1930).

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erature can be criticized as it entirely leaves out republican and left-wing interpretations of the war experience, an omission compounded by Fox's failure to discuss the political implications of these publications. The aesthetic stylization of the war experience needs to be viewed in the context of the massive political and social transformations of the post-war era. The interpretation and memory of the war experience were major points of contention between the opposing political camps in the Weimar Republic, as Ziemann demonstrates in his study. The photobooks were designed to engage reader-viewers emotionally and to make them identify with the German soldier. Therefore they had a documentary character, focusing on episodic events experienced at the minor unit level or by individuals. Testimony from veterans is included to lend them authenticity.

Fox points out that the visual accounts of the Great War centre around the values associated with soldiers' experiences at the Front, such as bravery, selflessness, comradeship, and team work, which 'were antithetical to the notion of defeat' (p. 108). This narrative appealed to many veterans who regarded themselves as moral victors regardless of the outcome of the war, as it emphasized the 'great deeds and great suffering' of German front-line soldiers and transformed mass death into a meaningful event.<sup>10</sup> The desire to restore the honour of German soldiers after 1918, however, also fostered tendencies to assign the blame for military defeat to external circumstances, preparing the breeding ground for the exculpatory stab-in-the-back myth. Furthermore, the visual representations of the Great War maintained the illusion of human agency. They frequently incorporated 'tropes of individual heroism in near-overwhelming circumstances', underlining the superior moral qualities of German soldiers and their indomitable will to battle, even though in industrialized warfare masses of men and material were far more important than individual bravery (p. 115).

The experience of industrialized warfare deeply affected German military thinking and planning for future wars. Fox discusses the impact of modern military technology on German concepts of war in detail. Although modern weaponry became increasingly important

<sup>10</sup> Jünger, *Das Antlitz des Weltkrieges*, 11. George Mosse first described how the terrible reality of war was transformed into the myth of the war experience. See George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York, 1990).

in the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1), it played a somewhat more subordinate role in the field of visual representations. During that period, illustrated visual histories foregrounded the outstanding moral qualities of German soldiers rather than their technological excellence. In the course of the First World War, however, the relationship between morale and technology underwent a significant change, especially in the face of defeat. For the first time, technological superiority was acknowledged as a decisive factor in determining victory. Visual accounts of Germans at war now emphasized the importance of modern weaponry to national survival. The tank, which became the icon of military modernity, is presented as the most decisive weapon of the machine age. Still, the ineluctable will to battle is privileged over technological and material aspects of fighting power and praised as the most important feature of German moral superiority. The message conveyed by illustrated histories of the First World War is that situations of technological inferiority give German soldiers the chance to prove their superior moral qualities. The notion that physical and material inferiority could be overcome by such superior qualities would reappear in the Second World War, as Shepherd outlines in his study. Hitler believed that sheer fanaticism and an iron will to victory could stop the enemy. Thus he refused to countenance withdrawal in critical situations, instead issuing orders to stand firm at any cost. The fanatical spirit of National Socialist warfare became especially virulent in the final stages of the Second World War, when soldiers were expected to fight with sheer willpower against well-equipped and highly mechanized Allied forces.

In his study, Shepherd also broaches the relationship between modern military technology, strategic thinking, and warfare. He shows how the German army developed new theories for the deployment of armoured forces in the inter-war period in order to be prepared for future warfare. Having learned the bitter lessons of the First World War, military planners aimed to combine German organizational skills and moral qualities with the destructive potential of mechanized warfare. The Reichswehr and, later on, the *Wehrmacht*, consistently tested, practised, and refined both German armoured warfare doctrine and the employment of technologies in tactical combination in manoeuvres and war games. In 1935, when the Nazi regime began to rearm Germany, the first three tank divisions ‘designed as self-supporting mini-armies’ were formed, which was a

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'major development in armoured warfare' (p. 18). At the heart of German armoured doctrine was the concept of *Auftragstaktik* (mission-type tactics), which granted independent front-line commanders the flexibility to respond to changing battlefield situations, thus ensuring mobility, manoeuvrability, and the possibility of immediate response. The German doctrine of armoured warfare was not essentially new, but evolved from traditional strategic thinking, which was largely shaped by Prussian concepts of warfare. Here we find a clear connection between the findings of Shepherd and Fox, who characterized the German way of fighting as driven by an aggressive, offensive spirit. Fast and flexible warfare required a quick exchange of information. The German army benefited enormously from the use of highly developed radio communication, unparalleled in other armies. Because of these efforts, the German army gained high proficiency in combined-arms mobile warfare, which contributed largely to its success, as Shepherd points out. In fact, this is a central argument of his book.

Shepherd's rather traditional study of military history with its emphasis on military thinking, command structures, and campaigns is a skilful synthesis of previous research on the German military in the Second World War. The novelty of his approach lies in his exclusive focus on the army. First, Shepherd stresses 'how vast, diverse and subject to profound change the army was over the course of the war' (p. 521). As his study strives to present a comprehensive picture of the army under Nazi rule, it covers the entire span of the war and tackles a wide range of topics. It considers, among other things, the different theatres of war, the social structure and ideological indoctrination of the army, the mentality of the officer corps, the army's involvement in war crimes and the Holocaust, and the different occupation policies established by the army in the various occupied countries.

The spectacular early successes of the war in particular gave the German army an aura of invincibility. That is why it 'still enjoys a reputation as the most proficient, effective fighting force to take the field of modern land combat' (p. xi). Shepherd's study explains why the army was so successful, but also deconstructs the myth of Germany's superior fighting power by shedding light on the flaws inherent in the army. It not only reveals the grave mistakes the army made at all levels of warfare, even during the early, victorious campaigns,

but also demonstrates how much the army's successes depended on the weaknesses and errors of Germany's opponents. It argues that the German army was not only defeated because of the vast numerical superiority of the Allies. The Allies' capability to learn from their military failures and to improve at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels was also significant for their triumph over Nazi Germany. After the war, former German army commanders tried to put the blame for the debilitation of the army's performance on Hitler's mismanagement of the war efforts.

Yet the army was not a victim of Hitler and the *Wehrmacht* High Command. As Shepherd demonstrates in his book, high-ranking army commanders made numerous strategic and operational blunders that contributed to Germany's eventual defeat. He points out how profoundly the army leadership disregarded logistics and intelligence, and discusses economic and organizational weaknesses. The biggest failure of the army leadership, however, lay in its inability to develop a grand strategy regardless of the restrictions imposed by Hitler's plans. Shepherd underlines that the army's operational goals exceeded its practical means on the Eastern Front from as early as the summer of 1941, which 'fatally damaged the German army at the operational level' (p. xii). Moreover, Shepherd identifies an 'infernal feedback mechanism' that led to the army's ultimate destruction. During the final two years of the war, the 'army's moral and military failure reinforced one another' (p. 536). The desperate military situation reinforced the brutality of the German troops. The excessive brutality, however, hardened the enemy's will to destroy Nazi Germany and thus contributed further to the army's military defeat.

Shepherd does not refer to any of the classical theories of *Wehrmacht* research in order explain why the army maintained the struggle for so long, though it was obvious that the war was effectively lost for Germany.<sup>11</sup> He explains the fact that the army fought almost to the point of self-destruction by the warped sense of honour harboured by many German senior officers, arguing that the unresolved trauma of the Reich's military collapse in 1918 strengthened the latter's will to keep fighting to the bitter end this time. This is a valid

<sup>11</sup> Other scholars have argued that cohesion among primary groups, Nazi indoctrination, the Nazi terror apparatus, the Hitler myth, comradeship, and the German sense of duty were the main reasons why the German army did not disintegrate until May 1945.

argument. The experience of Germany's humiliating defeat in the First World War certainly influenced senior officers' behaviour in the final phase of the Second World War. Shepherd's argument that a number of senior military leaders continued the fight to expunge the dishonour they felt in the wake of the July 1944 attempt on Hitler's life, which was itself carried out by a group of high-ranking *Wehrmacht* officers, however, is not at all convincing. He argues further that soldiers of all ranks simply continued to fight out of sheer pragmatism, as it was their best option for survival in the desperate situation of spring 1945. But he also stresses that fear of the vengeful Red Army invading the Reich was one of the most important motives for sustaining the fight in the last months of the war.

Shepherd adheres to the well-known thesis of a 'partial identity of goals' shared by the military elites and the Nazi regime, first put forward by Manfred Messerschmidt: 'the leadership of the German army willingly entered into a Faustian bargain with Adolf Hitler that provided the opportunity and means to meet its highest aspirations' (p. 521).<sup>12</sup> He recognizes several important areas of overlap between the officer corps' worldview and Nazi thinking: racial contempt for Slavs, deep-rooted antisemitic resentments, pronounced anti-Bolshevism, and 'the technocratic ruthlessness that had characterized the officer corps since the First World War' (p. 55). This is a major reason, he argues, why so many soldiers participated in war crimes and the Holocaust on the Eastern Front, or at least tolerated them. Already during the Polish campaign, it became clear that the face of warfare in the East was to differ significantly from that on the Western Front.

As we learn from Fox's study, a broad spectrum of the German public after the First World War believed that Germans had a moral claim to contested German-Polish borderlands. Thus it is not surprising that the invasion of Poland in 1939 was broadly accepted by German soldiers, who regarded it as fulfilment of revisionist claims to former German territories lost under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. The Polish campaign must, however, also be understood within the broader historical context of a German 'drive to the East' (*Drang nach Osten*). In the nineteenth century German nationalists demanded an expansion into Slavic lands as they were convinced that Germans had a civilizing mission there. They legitimized their

<sup>12</sup> Manfred Messerschmidt, *Die Wehrmacht im NS-Staat: Zeit der Indoktrination* (Hamburg, 1969), 1.

demands by reference to the eastern colonization of Germanic peoples in the high and late Middle Ages. In his study, Ziemann also demonstrates that the 'German soldiers' willingness to fight on the Eastern Front' during the First World War 'was directed not simply against Russia's military, but also its entire culture and society' (p. 59). The Nazi *Lebensraum* concept, which aimed for the extermination and resettlement of Slavic populations and the 'Germanization' of former Slavic territories, could build upon the vision of a German 'drive to East'. In fact, it was only a small step from considering the Slavs culturally inferior to the concept of racial inferiority as propagated by Nazi ideology.

It is a well-known fact that the army committed war crimes on an institutional level, as did individual officers and soldiers of all ranks. Shepherd does not produce a single explanation of why individual units or soldiers participated in these crimes. He also stresses the blatant differences with regard to involvement in war crimes. Occupation units were, for example, much more complicit in war crime than front-line units. In this context, several factors played a role: one's age, the unit one belonged to, the level of ideological indoctrination, and numerous situational factors such as time and place. Both Ziemann and Shepherd show that stereotypes of cultural or racial inferiority were important factors enhancing violence. Yet they also highlight the complex interactions between ideological indoctrination, racial contempt, and circumstances. By comparing the anti-partisan struggle on different fronts, Shepherd illustrates how ideological indoctrination, situational factors, and feelings such as fear, anger, or desire for revenge contributed to the escalation of violence against partisans and civilians suspected of supporting the partisan movement. He shows that Nazi racial ideology played a significant role in this regard. While the army exhibited restraint in partisan warfare on the Western Front, it practised brutal violence in anti-partisan operations in Greece, the Balkans, and on the Eastern Front. Shepherd argues that the German military had a 'pronounced hatred for irregular warfare', which had its roots in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1 and first manifested itself in the brutal reaction to alleged *franc-tireur* attacks in Belgium and France in 1914 (p. 290).<sup>13</sup> The

<sup>13</sup> The question of whether an organized *franc-tireur* movement existed remains a highly controversial issue to the present day. John Horne and Alan Kramer claim that the presumed sniper attacks were just a product of self-

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German atrocities of 1914 play a central role in the debate about the brutalization of warfare, since they are often considered as the starting point for the escalation of German violence against civilians in the first half of the twentieth century.

The question that arises is this: does the ruthless brutality with which the military responded to irregular warfare constitute a line of continuity in German military culture? Ziemann and Shepherd seek to explain the dynamics of wartime violence and identify the reasons for the escalation of brutality in both the First World War and the Second World War. They show that in both wars similar factors led to the outbreak of irregular violence and that similar arguments were employed to justify severely disproportionate reprisals and other harsh measures against the civilian population, for instance, the necessity of war or security reasons. However, similarities should not be confused with continuities. The war the German army unleashed against Soviet Russia in 1941 'was *sui generis*. Nazi warfare, characterized by the readiness to commit massive war crimes and genocide, differed fundamentally from the war in 1914.'<sup>14</sup>

Ziemann's study is an impressive example of how to write modern military history. His argumentation is clear and concise, and at the same time he provides a vivid description of the manifold experiences of violence during the First World War in numerous biographical case studies. Ziemann explores different types of violence practised by the German army and studies the soldiers' motives for perpetrating violence, but also for refusing to take part in it. Since violence is a core wartime experience, the subject is highly relevant. Though the main focus of the study is the Western Front, it also sheds light on significant differences between the Eastern Front and the

induced paranoia. In 2017 the art historian Ulrich Keller published a book in which he opposed this widely accepted thesis and presented evidence indicating that an organized guerrilla movement existed. For example, he referred to German military hospital records from 1914 saying that German soldiers had wounds that could not have been inflicted by regular army weapons. See John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914: A History of Denial* (New Haven, 2001); Ulrich Keller, *Schuldfragen: Belgischer Untergrundkrieg und deutsche Vergeltung im August 1914* (Paderborn, 2017).

<sup>14</sup> Alan Kramer, 'German War Crimes 1914 and 1941: The Question of Continuity', in Müller and Torp (eds.), *Imperial Germany Revisited*, 239–50, at 248.

Western Front. The First World War is understood as a 'laboratory of violence', since all armies experimented with new forms of the latter.

Ziemann devotes one chapter of his study to Ernst Jünger's reception of violence. Since Jünger's depiction of trench warfare has already been well researched, Ziemann attempts to provide a fresh perspective on the subject, but it would have been more interesting if he had chosen a less well-known author. Ziemann is especially interested in Jünger's authentic experience of violence in front-line combat. Thus he analyses his original war diaries, rather than the literary, stylized version of his war accounts, which were first published in 1920 under the title *In Stahlgewittern* (*Storm of Steel*). Jünger's war diaries show that the killing of the enemy followed a complex set of rules and that artillery dominated the battlefields of the First World War. Trench warfare often condemned the soldiers to passivity. The 'man against man' fight Jünger had dearly longed for was the exception rather than the rule. Jünger's attitude towards violence, as displayed in his war diaries, was typical of a conservative front-line officer at that time. Throughout the war, he was guided by the ethos of the Prussian officer corps, striving to be a worthy representative of the German officers' caste. Thus even after four years of exposure to brutalizing violence on the front-line, his behaviour was primarily determined by traditional soldierly values, such as honour and comradeship.

Historians still disagree about the extent to which prisoners were killed on the battlefield after surrender in the Great War. While some scholars assume that this was a frequent phenomenon,<sup>15</sup> Alan Kramer claims that prisoner killing 'was the exception to the general rule'.<sup>16</sup> The analysis of Jünger's war diaries confirms Kramer's theory as it reveals that surrendering soldiers were generally treated well, even though prisoner killings occurred from time to time in the heat of battle. Ziemann therefore concludes that the majority of the soldiers on the Western Front regarded the enemy as fellow human beings,

<sup>15</sup> See e.g. Niall Ferguson, 'Prisoner Taking and Prisoner Killing in the Age of Total War: Towards a Political Economy of Military Defeat', *War in History*, 11 (2004), 148–92; Tim Cook, 'The Politics of Surrender: Canadian Soldiers and the Killing of Prisoners in the Great War', *Journal of Military History*, 70 (2006), 637–65.

<sup>16</sup> Alan Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction: Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War* (Oxford, 2007), 63.

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which marks a decisive difference from the *Wehrmacht's* war of annihilation against Soviet Russia. Ziemann claims further that Jünger's alter ego in the war diaries is 'neither a protofascist fighting machine nor a prophet of the amalgamation of man and military machine' (p. 90). This is a strong indicator that Jünger did not undergo a process of political radicalization until after the war. It appears that the experience of defeat and revolution had a great influence on both his political thinking and his attitude towards violence. The considerable revisions made to his published war accounts in the course of the 1920s also support this hypothesis. The later versions of *In Stahlge-wittern* display a stronger nationalist colouring and a more aggressive idealization of combat.

A large section of Ziemann's study deals with the refusal of violence in the German army during the First World War. Ziemann suggests that deserters 'were in many respects completely ordinary soldiers', who lacked a common social or generational background (p. 119). In many cases, desertions were caused by shortages of supply, poor quality of food, or an easy opportunity arising. Only a minority deserted for political reasons. Nevertheless, desertion rates were especially high among national minorities in Imperial Germany (such as soldiers from Alsace-Lorraine and Poles). All deserters were, in a certain sense, outsiders. Desertion was not a group phenomenon; most deserters planned their escape from the front-line service alone. Only in the final phase of the war did deserters 'turn from outsiders into a mainstream current' (Fox, p. 120). Military historians unanimously agree that during the summer of 1918 morale among German field soldiers on the Western Front drastically deteriorated. This progressive erosion of morale caused soldiers to desert or absent themselves from their units, surrender to the enemy, or search for other ways of evading front-line service. After the failure of the last German offensive on the Western Front in July, 'the army began deflating like a pricked balloon, new arrivals being vastly outnumbered by those leaving'.<sup>17</sup> The gravity of the situation can be appreciated by the fact that the Supreme Army Command and the field authorities issued increasingly harsh and desperate directives to stop this ongoing process of disintegration.

<sup>17</sup> David Stevenson, *With our Backs to the Wall: Victory and Defeat in 1918* (Cambridge, 2011), 288.

There remain, however, two controversial questions: when and why did the German army actually collapse? In 1986 the military historian Wilhelm Deist put forward the thesis that a hidden military strike took place among German soldiers in the final months of the First World War.<sup>18</sup> The hidden strike is not to be understood as an organized strike, but as a mass movement of soldiers fleeing the front on their own initiative to save their lives in the face of looming defeat. Deist claims that this covert mass flight was responsible for the Reich's defeat, thus providing a fundamentally new interpretation of Imperial German history. According to his theory the Reich was not overwhelmed by superior enemy forces, nor did it fall because the soldiers were 'stabbed in the back' by internal enemies. Rather, it simply collapsed militarily from within. In his 2008 comparative study on the fighting morale of German and British troops, the historian Alexander Watson claims, however, that 'shirking' was not a mass phenomenon on the Western Front.<sup>19</sup> Instead, he points out that large numbers of German soldiers were taken prisoner after giving themselves up voluntarily in 1918. He argues further that the mass surrender of German soldiers could not be interpreted as a symptom of a dramatic decline in fighting morale. The soldiers were strongly encouraged to lay down their weapons by Allied propaganda, and junior officers led their men to surrender in an orderly fashion. Watson therefore concludes that the collapse of the German field army was not the result of a hidden strike, but 'foremost that of an ordered surrender'.<sup>20</sup>

Ziemann rejects Watson's thesis of an 'ordered surrender' as an explanation for the army's disintegration in the summer of 1918. His criticism is directed not only at the weak empirical evidence – in Ziemann's opinion Watson only presents a single detailed piece of evidence to support his narrative – but also at the historical and political implications of Watson's theory. By emphasizing that German soldiers were obeying orders until the end of the war, and only went

<sup>18</sup> Wilhelm Deist, 'Der militärische Zusammenbruch des Kaiserreichs. Zur Realität der Dolchstoßlegende', in Ursula Büttner (ed.), *Das Unrechtsregime: internationale Forschung über den Nationalsozialismus*, vol. i: *Ideologie, Herrschaftssystem, Wirkung in Europa* (Hamburg, 1986), 101–29.

<sup>19</sup> See Alexander Watson, *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914–1918* (Cambridge, 2008).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 123.

into captivity in large numbers led by junior officers, his theory affirms a prominent part of the 'stab-in-the-back myth', which says that the field army never participated in a revolutionary mass movement.

Ziemann supports and empirically substantiates Deist's thesis of a hidden military strike based on materials from the Bavarian War Archives in Munich. In his study, he reconstructs the various practices of evading front-line service in the summer of 1918 in order to obtain a more precise picture of this mass refusal of violence, which therefore represents an important event in German military history. The largest group of soldiers moving around in the rear area were probably soldiers who were sick or wounded but still able to walk. Besides this group, a rapidly growing number of men absconded from troop trains carrying them from Germany to the front. The Bavarian sources provide evidence that allow us to quantify the extent of the covert strike. Ziemann estimates that an absolute minimum of 185,000 soldiers left their units to move rearwards in the summer and autumn of 1918.<sup>21</sup> He adds that the number of men reported sick—more than 900,000 men between August and the armistice—far exceeded the numbers of wounded, killed in action, or taken prisoner.

Ziemann agrees with Watson and others 'that a truly comprehensive disintegration of command authority' on the front did not take place until October 1918, when the German government asked for an immediate armistice on the basis of Wilson's Fourteen Points.<sup>22</sup> But he also emphasizes that the military apparatus had been steadily eroding since June, which was why the army collapsed as quickly as it did. The 'barbarization of military justice' under Nazi rule was an obvious reaction to the hidden military strike (Shepherd, p. 384). In order to prevent this disintegration of the army from within repeating itself, the Nazis established a harsh military justice system to maintain morale and discipline. Desertion, for example, was punishable by death. As German military fortunes began to wane, military courts imposed particularly severe punishments that were intended to terrify soldiers into obedience.

<sup>21</sup> Wilhelm Deist arrived at an estimate of between 750,000 and one million based on Erich Volkmann's report for the Reichstag from 1929.

<sup>22</sup> Christoph Jahr, *Gewöhnliche Soldaten: Desertion und Deserteure im deutschen und britischen Heer 1914–1918* (Göttingen, 1998), 166.

The question of whether the war experience had brutalizing effects on German society is the subject of continuing controversy among scholars. It poses, however, several theoretical and methodological challenges: how can one measure the degree of brutalization of a society? Is it possible to establish direct causality between the violence experienced in war and different types of brutal behaviour that occurred in the Weimar Republic? How can one reason exclude others? How can we distinguish whether aggressive behaviour has its origin in wartime or post-war experiences? Ziemann and others differentiate analytically between the brutalization of soldiers who actively participated in the war and 'violence-affirming interpretations, images and myths' which circulated in the post-war era and were also adopted by those who had not actively fought in the war themselves (Ziemann, p. 166).

In his ground-breaking study, *Fallen Soldiers*, George Mosse claimed that the experience of industrialized warfare led to a brutalization of European societies after 1918.<sup>23</sup> For Mosse, brutalization was not only a 'process that penetrated most aspects of German political life', but also 'an attitude of mind derived from the war and the acceptance of war itself'.<sup>24</sup> The brutalizing effect of the war experience manifested itself, according to Mosse, above all in an appetite for violence, an emphasis on aggressive masculinity, and the militarization of society. There is, however, a powerful counter-argument to Mosse's brutalization theory. Not all European countries showed violent tendencies after 1918; instead, the losers of the Great War tended to be especially subject to this development. Thus Robert Gerwarth argues in his book *The Vanquished* that it was not the experience of violence during the Great War that led to a brutalization of German society, but rather the experience of defeat and revolution.<sup>25</sup> He describes the period between 1918 and 1923 as the 'long end of the First World War', since many European countries faced enduring conflicts. Contrary to all hopes and expectations, the peacetime order established at Versailles did not end violence across Europe. Those countries which were on the losing side in the Great War—the

<sup>23</sup> See Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 159, 161.

<sup>25</sup> See Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End, 1917–1923* (London, 2016).

## THE 'GERMAN WAY OF FIGHTING'

Habsburg, Romanov, Hohenzollern, and Ottoman empires and their successor states—were shaken by three types of conflict: inter-state conflicts, civil wars, and political or social revolutions. In Germany, violence did not vanish after 1918, but became an essential part of the political culture in the inter-war period. For example, the founding of the Weimar Republic was accompanied by a wave of violence that in some places even reached civil war-like conditions.<sup>26</sup> Gerwarth is right, of course, in pointing out that the immediate post-war years have received too little attention so far in the context of explaining the destructive path of German history in the first half of the twentieth century. It is true that many Germans became habituated to paramilitary violence and radicalized themselves in the political and social turmoil of the post-war era, as Ziemann showed for the case of Ernst Jünger.

Both Ziemann and Gerwarth strive for a more differentiated analysis of the impact of violence on post-war societies by adopting a transnational perspective on this issue. They seek to determine the decisive factors for the escalation of violence in the twentieth century in order to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon of violence per se and general mechanisms of brutalization. Ziemann also argues that it was not the war experience itself that had brutalizing effects on post-war European societies. The crucial factor was how societies dealt with the war experience after the violence ended. He claims that the effective containment of post-war violence depended largely on whether societies found a common frame of reference for interpreting and remembering the war experience. In this regard, he recognizes significant differences between the British, French, and German situations. While German post-war society lacked an overall frame of reference that could have had the potential to unify different social classes and political parties, the British and French nations arrived at a consensual interpretation of the war experience transcending heterogeneous social milieux and political camps.

The British nation successfully revived the unifying self-idealization of itself as a 'peaceable kingdom' promoting the values of civility and peaceableness. In France, veterans' associations played an important role in shaping a common national framework for remembering the Great War. Their willingness to co-operate regardless of

<sup>26</sup> See Mark Jones, *Founding Weimar: Violence and the German Revolution of 1918–1919* (New York, 2016).

their diverging political orientations – in 1927 they even founded an umbrella organization – conveyed a sense of unity and thereby had remarkable stabilizing effects on the political culture of the Third Republic. The British and French examples show that the existence of a collectively shared interpretation of the war experience made it easier for the veterans to re-adapt to civil society and distance themselves from the violence experienced prior to 1918.

In Germany, by contrast, the debate on the interpretation and memory of the war experience was deeply polarized, since the Weimar Republic ‘lacked a liberal culture that could have functioned as a shared point of reference’ (Ziemann, p. 164). Thus the conflict between the opposing political camps over the interpretation of the war escalated. The creation of the stab-in-the-back myth accusing socialists, Jews, and women of having stolen victory from the undefeated army is an important example of the nationalists’ efforts to gain discursive hegemony over the interpretation of the war experience. In the wake of defeat, the nationalist camp underwent a process of radicalization. A considerable number of veterans joined right-wing veterans’ groups, such as the *Stahlhelm* (Steel Helmet), which pursued an aggressively revisionist policy. The nationalist-conservative spectrum did not reject violence, but glorified it as a legitimate political tool. The enthusiasm for military traditions and practices remained unbroken in large parts of German society.

With regard to the brutalization of soldiers who actively participated in the First World War, Ziemann concludes, primarily based on previous research, that ‘all in all, it appears unlikely that the experience of war resulted in extensive brutalization among German soldiers’ (p. 169). This claim raises strong doubts, mainly because it is not empirically substantiated. In his study, Ziemann himself presents evidence indicating that the war experience had brutalizing effects on front-line soldiers. He discusses the violent excesses of the ‘Black and Tans’ against civilians in the Irish War of Independence. Among those were many veterans of the Great War. Thus, ‘the example of the Black and Tans shows that the aggression built up during the war had the potential to develop and intensify further’ (Ziemann, pp. 160–1). Moreover, one could argue that German veterans had indeed adopted ‘wartime attitudes, which persisted into the post-war period’, such as the preference for violent solutions to conflicts.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, 161.

## THE 'GERMAN WAY OF FIGHTING'

In the last section of his book, Ziemann focuses on those political and social forces in the Weimar Republic which rejected militarism and violence. He presents the interesting biographical case study of Hermann Schützinger, a former career officer in the Bavarian army, who served in a people's militia immediately after the war and later joined the Reichswehr, but eventually converted to pacifism and was involved in the No More War Movement. Schützinger's delayed rejection of violence is just one of many examples. Hundreds of thousands of former soldiers distanced themselves from the violence of war, gathering in pacifist veterans' associations such as the Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold, or supported their pacifist aims. Ziemann also sheds light on two anti-militarist novels which were widely read in the early Weimar Republic but are little known today.<sup>28</sup> Ziemann's decision to focus on the pacifist delegitimization of violence after 1918 can be criticized as being too one-sided. Thus he does not give enough weight to the mystically charged glorification and heroic stylization of the war experience within the nationalist-right spectrum, which largely influenced the attitude of many Germans, especially the younger generations, towards violence in the inter-war period.

The 'German way of fighting' was shaped by ideologies and military doctrines, the experiences of Germans in armed conflicts, and how these military conflicts were collectively commemorated after the violence ended. The studies reviewed in this article reflect all of these aspects that have contributed to German military culture. They examine the origins of, and changes within, military culture and seek to trace similarities, continuities, and ruptures within German military history. It is not possible, however, to verify or falsify the *Sonderweg* thesis in the field of military history by focusing on German history alone. There is undoubtedly a great need for further transnational comparative studies in order to highlight transnational similarities and national idiosyncrasies, and thereby assess peculiarities of German military culture and practices of violence.

<sup>28</sup> Wilhelm Appens, *Charleville: Dunkle Punkte aus dem Etappenleben* and Heinrich Wandt, *Etappe Gent*, which were published shortly after the end of the First World War.

## REVIEW ARTICLE

ANETTE NEDER is a Research Fellow (*Wissenschaftliche Mitarbeiterin*) in the History Department of the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz. She specializes in military history and her Ph.D. thesis investigates the emotional cultures of German soldiers during the Second World War.