



Violence and the German Soldier in the Great War: Killing, Dying, Surviving

by Benjamin Ziemann.

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In the last fifteen years, Benjamin Ziemann (Univ. of Sheffield) has emerged as a leading historian of the experience of German soldiers both during and following World War I. In *Violence and the German Soldier in the Great War*, he seeks to “explore the connections between killing, surviving, and refusal in the German army” (13). This angle of analysis allows him to both engage with the relevant historiography and unravel how soldiers navigated the brutality of the frontlines.

The first of the book’s three parts addresses practices of violence. Though face-to-face violence was rare during the First World War, Ziemann rightly stresses that machine-gun fire and long-distance artillery bombardment posed dire psychological and physical threats to soldiers—to the point that soldiers came to think of themselves as victims and tried to minimize their exposure to violence through unofficial ceasefires or desertions. Ziemann amplifies the voices of three individual soldiers to evoke the atmosphere of the war’s bewildering opening engagements that included the German forces’ murder of Belgian and French civilians. He finds that, though some soldiers questioned Germany’s involvement in the war, most saw the conflict as a “self-affirming journey” (60) during which exposure to violence and loss fostered a willingness to kill.

One chapter in this part of the book concerns a most *uncommon* soldier, Ernst Jünger. Unlike most other historians, Ziemann focuses on Jünger’s diaries rather than his published works,¹ which portray him as a “fighting machine” coldly embracing the violence of war. The diaries reveal a more complex warrior who can feel empowered by the perpetration of violence, yet longs for peace and considers killing necessary for victory rather than intrinsically valuable.

Part II discusses soldiers’ refusal to commit violence, and chronicles how and why they deserted. Rejecting blanket explanations, the author canvasses deserters’ diverse rationales for flight. That said, he does identify certain commonalities: deserters often came from minority populations within the German empire (e.g., Poles and Alsace-Lorrainers); many were unmarried and planned their departures individually. Desertion was symptomatic of a larger breakdown within the German army, and Ziemann attributes the collapse of the war’s final weeks to exhaustion and disillusionment.

Another chapter concerns the debate initiated by Wilhelm Deist² over whether a covert military strike caused Germany’s defeat in autumn 1918. Ziemann remarks that

up for debate is nothing less than the whole series of events that were of fundamental importance not only to the outcome of the First World War but also the history of violence and the German military in the years up to 1945. (153)

1. Esp. *The Storm of Steel*, trans. Basil Creighton, 1927 [Germ. orig. 1920, rev. 1924].

2. “The Military Collapse of the German Empire: The Reality Behind the Stab-in-the-Back-Myth” [tr. E.J. Feuchtwanger], *War in History* 3 (1996) 186–207.

The author sides with Deist against Alexander Watson's more recent claim³ that Germany's final defeat was an "ordered surrender" led by junior officers. Regardless of these debates, Ziemann argues convincingly that the sheer desire to survive the violence of the front was decisive.

Part III examines effects of veterans' emotional scars on postwar society. Ziemann challenges George L. Mosse's influential contention⁴ that the war's brutalization of German society opened the door to Nazism. He believes this brutalization was a European, not a purely German, phenomenon and that a minority of soldiers were so affected. Furthermore, the social and political turbulence of the postwar years shows that brutalization was not solely a product of the trenches. The desensitization felt by some soldiers no doubt made the violence of fascism more acceptable, but thousands of veterans preferred to join pacifist organizations. The author adduces the career of officer Hermann Schützinger to show that postwar events like the 1920 Kapp Putsch drove even loyal veterans who had held out till the bitter end into the pacifist camp. Schützinger's move toward the "No More War" movement, Ziemann argues, proves that postwar developments had a significant bearing on veterans' processing of wartime violence.

Pacifist literature was never as prominent as nationalist accounts of the war produced in the early Weimar Republic. But Ziemann demonstrates the diversity of veterans' literature by analyzing pacifist works by, for instance, Wilhelm Appens and Heinrich Wandt.⁵ These debunked the image of the noble German soldier and the veneration of war by exposing the debauchery rampant in the rear areas of the Western Front. Appens and Wandt paid dearly for their exposé of soldiers' self-indulgent behavior. Their careers were ruined in the struggle to determine just how the violence of the Great War would be remembered.

Violence and the German Soldier is an important, salutary, and perceptive study that complicates our understanding of the German veteran's responses to the carnage of war. It is, however, aimed squarely at Ziemann's fellow historians and its lack of a smooth narrative flow will put off general readers as will its extended criticisms of other scholars' work. Nonetheless, the book is essential reading for all serious students of the effects of violence on the veterans of the First World War.

3. In *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale, and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914–1918* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2008).

4. In *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1990).

5. Respectively, *Charleville: Dunkle Punkte aus dem Etappenleben* (Dortmund: Gerisch, n.d. [1919]) and *Etappe Gent: Streiflichter zum Zusammenbruch* (Berlin: Frei Presse, 1920).