DISCUSSION

A German Way of War?


Is it too soon to retire the Sonderweg? We may have forgotten how much that dark narrative of German history is owed, not just to Germany’s invasion of Belgium in 1914, but to the crimes of its troops, beginning on August 5, there and in France. Villages were looted and razed, hostages used as human shields, civilians shot, bayoneted, and confined to buildings which were then set alight. Children, including seven babies in Les Rivages, were among the 6,500 victims. Especially during the first three weeks, such violence was ‘endemic throughout the German army’ (p. 76), involving about half of its 300 regiments on the Western Front. The ‘proximate cause’ of these outrages was anxiety during the great gamble of the Western invasion (p. 42). Pillaging was ‘the natural consequence of armies outstripping their supply trains’ (p. 119); rage, fuelled by alcohol, the not unnatural consequence of meeting unexpectedly stiff Belgian resistance. But underlying these obvious explanations lay the German army’s belief that its progress was being sabotaged by civilian snipers (francs-tireurs); that their wounded were being mutilated by innocent-looking maidens and children; that they were confronted, in short, with the same kind of Volkskrieg that had beset them in France in 1870–71. The belief was false, sparked in most cases by panic at friendly fire. But along a front of more than 500 kilometres hysteria spread from foot soldiers to command: ‘a massive case of collective self-suggestion, probably unparalleled in a modern army. A million men were swept by a delusion …’ (p. 77). Within two weeks it encompassed the home front as well. It was this astonishing ‘myth complex’ that stimulated a young Marc Bloch to embark upon his investigations into the history of rumour, irrationality, and mentalité. It stimulated German officers to issue orders which underwrote the initially spontaneous ‘reprisals’ with an official policy of exemplary massacre.

The documentation of these atrocities is only the beginning of what, in lesser hands, could easily have become three books. The authors’ hearts are less in
the story of what happened (Part I), gripping though it is, than in its explanation
(Part II, to which I shall return) and in the ‘transnational cultural history’ of
how the atrocities were publicized by the Entente, disbelieved by the German
public, and denied by those who eventually knew better, both during the war
(Part III) and beyond (Part IV). Under the impact of their own ‘self-
mobilization’ for the war effort, even Socialists, Catholics, and academics, three
pre-war ‘communities of truth’ (Horne and Kramer’s useful term for trans-
national networks whose shared values included an expectation that evidence
would be read in the same way on both sides of a border) proved acrimoniously
unable to agree upon a common narrative even twenty years after the events.
Perhaps because of their dual authorship, these chapters are sometimes
repetitive, but they are also extraordinarily rich. So central were the atrocities,
and the inventions they stimulated, to the meaning of the conflict for contem-
poraries that – teasing apart the way they were understood casts a flood of light
on the histories of wartime Belgium, France, Britain, and the United States, and
in the case of Germany, on its post-war history as well. For Articles 228–30
of the Versailles Treaty, requiring Germany to hand over its war criminals for
trial, proved even more offensive to the vanquished than Article 231 on war
guilt, and got considerably more press coverage. Eventually, competing war-
crimes trials were held in the victorious countries and at the supreme court in
Leipzig. Memorializing the victims kept controversies hot, subverting the
premise of Locarno diplomacy, which was to draw a line under the war and
move on.
In Germany, a foreign office pursuing an ‘innocentist’ strategy massively
subsidized the work of foreign scholars, and not just during the war: Harvard’s
Sidney Fay was one of those receiving its largess. Its efforts fed a shift in
public opinion that had already begun in Britain and America, first among
pacifists but reaching ever more influential circles. The belief grew that the
real atrocity lay not in the deeds of this or that belligerent, but in the war itself,
which had devoured nine million young lives in its industrialized maw. The
call went out for ‘moral disarmament’; that is, for resistance to the ‘cultural
mobilization’ begun in August 1914, and especially to negative assessments of
the enemy that were now dismissed as propaganda. The exposure of egregious
falsehoods, such as the tale of German factories rendering the fat of Allied
corpses for use in war production, fed this revisionism, as did rueful novels
and memoirs. The upshot of the strange career of Germany’s atrocities was
that ‘a new, skeptical narrative of the war emerged in which condemnation of
German military behavior in 1914 was replaced by a critique of atrocity tales’, a
turn supported not only by the likes of Alan Hodge and Robert Graves, but
also, the authors want us to know, by Adolf Hitler. By 1944 George Orwell
was noting that the word ‘atrocities’ had become a synonym for lies.
Few readers can come away from this absorbing study, based on archival
work in seven countries, without feeling stimulated, refreshed, and enormously
in the authors’ debt. The book resonates with issues that are still very much
on our minds: the manipulation of memory, not only by cynical foreign offices, but also by well-meaning citizens intent on resisting manipulation; the silence of the pope in the face of insistent demands that he condemn German evil-doers (Benedict XV’s comments are ‘sibylline’, his efforts at imparzialità. ‘sinuous’, p. 270); the conflicting claims of victims for justice and the international community for closure.

For those whose picture of the war has been coloured by images of the 1914 Christmas truce; by Jean Renoir’s ‘Grande Illusion’ (1937), celebrating reciprocal Franco-German gallantry; by manufactured atrocity stories like ‘The Fall of Antwerp November 1914 as reported in the European press’ (a fiction innocently re-printed in Louis Snyder’s Historic Documents of World War I, 1958, 1977), this book will shock. Nor do modern accounts of the war guarantee adequate preparation. German atrocities do not appear in Holger Herwig’s fine military history, The First World War, Germany and Austria-Hungary 1914–1918, (1997) or Roger Chickering’s excellent Imperial Germany and the Great War, 1914–1918 (1998). Niall Ferguson, it seems clear, discovered Horne and Kramer’s work (a footnote cites an article and a paper) only just in time to tack a four-paragraph conclusion beginning, ‘There is no question that the German army did commit ‘atrocities’…’ (p. 246) onto the end of a chapter about propaganda, the whole thrust of which was an archly different message. A later slip, referring to the killing of Belgian babies as fictional (p. 384), reveals how close his Pity of War (1998) came to providing Horne and Kramer with yet another example of the erasure of German atrocities from the academic memory of the war—and how difficult they are to integrate into a view of history that has left the Sonderweg behind.

Horne and Kramer do not shrink from grasping the nettle of national difference. A ‘German Way of War?’ (p. 161) asks a section title, and their answer (qualified by nods toward skeptical voices here, plural traditions there) is: Yes. Joffre, they suspect, would not, under the same circumstances, have instituted collective reprisals; Poincaré would not have endorsed them (‘But we cannot be sure’, p. 424). The Allies were ‘not mistaken in seeing a pattern in the German violence’ (p. 167). A ‘myth complex’ so ubiquitous could not have arisen on the spur of the moment without particular mentalities and predispositions on the part of the German military hierarchy (pp. 92, 424). Whence came this ‘paranoid world-view’ (pp. 161, 419)? Ask a cultural question, you get a cultural answer. Its roots lay ‘ultimately in the dominant political culture of the Kaiserreich.’ While the French lauded the ‘spirit of the volunteer—the self-motivated citizen defending nation and Revolution’ (pp. 140, 141), the German army’s obsessive fear of the franc-tireur was ‘... rooted in a deep ideological aversion’, shared by Germany’s élites, ‘to the politicized citizen who viewed warfare as an extension of politics ... Hence it was not accidental, or merely circumstantial, that the German military should have created a collective fantasy in 1914 of one of its own worst fears’ (p. 421). Its response was inhibited by no countervailing constraints, because it believed that
civilian resistance was itself an atrocity, and because it had a ‘Clausewitzian commitment to using the most ruthless means necessary to win victory’ (p. 424). For all its disappearance in academia, this is an explanation familiar in popular histories; Barbara Tuchman’s hugely successful Guns of August (1962, 1994, 2000; German and British editions, 2001) contains exactly these ingredients. It is embedded in a longer narrative, one that begins with Clausewitz and his doctrine of Vernichtungskrieg and ends with Hitler, whose response to the resistance of irregulars ‘was recognizably related to that of 1870 and 1914’ (p. 422). Although they reject any implication of essentialism, with an arc of continuity reaching from 1807 to 1945, one hardly needs an essence.

Must different assessments of franz-terrirs reflect national cultural differences? Far from seeing civic virtue in these ‘free corps’, the British historian Michael Howard refers to their activity in 1870–71 as ‘terrorism’, quoting a French contemporary that they were ‘the terror and ruin of the country-side which they should have protected.’ (The Franco-Prussian War (1961), pp. 252, 253, 380). Colmar Freiherr von der Goltz, on the other hand, a veteran of the campaign, treats what he calls ‘the people’s and guerilla war’ briefly and matter-of-factly (Léon Gambetta und seine Arméen (1877), pp. 35–6, 49–50, 146), describes Gambetta as ‘magnificent,’ and proclaims: ‘Should—God forbid—our German fatherland experience a defeat like France’s at Sedan, then I would wish indeed that a man would arise who would know how to ignite out resistance à outrance …’ (pp. 1, 231). After a brief setback, Goltz was soon plucked out for preferment by none other than the elder Moltke.

As for Germany’s political culture, not all of Horne and Kramer’s evidence is as compelling as their evidence for atrocities. They clinch the pan-German views of the army by noting that ‘appreciative responses’ to Heinrich Claß’s 1912 polemic If I were the Kaiser ‘came from officers of all ranks’ (p. 155). Whom do they cite for this damning detail? That notorious self-promoter, Heinrich Claß. It takes considerable imagination to see ‘brutal faces’ (p. 100) on the franz-terrirs drawn by Max Feldbauer, for they are interchangeable with those of their German captors and hardly the ‘demonized view of the Belgian people’ (p. 18) I had expected. Horne and Kramer rightly consider the ‘Appeal to the World of Culture’ endorsed by ninety-three German academics an example of ‘uncritical self-mobilization.’ But does the Appeal’s defence that ‘without German militarism, German culture would long since have been erased from the earth […] The German army and the German people are one’ reveal its signers to be ‘unequivocally identifying German culture with the army’ (p. 281)? The italics are theirs (although not identified as such), and the sentence supplanted by their bracketed ellipsis asserts that ‘it [that is, ‘our so-called militarism’, mentioned earlier] arose to protect it [German culture] in a land that for centuries had been afflicted as no other by marauders.’ Given the sarcastic ‘so-called’, do these lines really demonstrate that German professors associated ‘German culture with German militarism’ (p. 283), rather than believing it dependent on security? Is it militarism or garden variety patriotism
to proclaim, in wartime, that you army and your people (not, *pace* Horne and Kramer, your culture) are one?

When they raise the army’s chilling orders to impose collective penalties to a general principle of (German) conduct, we know we are in *Sonderweg* country: ‘Undoubtedly, the calculation of the German supreme command and government was analogous to those on war finance: just as the costs of the war would be extracted from Germany’s defeated and occupied enemies, the principle “might is right” would expunge war crimes from the historical record’ (p. 420). What is ‘undoubted’ is always a matter of opinion; the view that Germany financed the war differently from the other powers, however, is based on a fallacy, as Ferguson, among others, has shown (*Pity* pp. 320, 322–24).

Determined to be fair, the authors dutifully call attention to the atrocious treatment of civilians by other armies: from Sheridan in the Shenandoah (though he destroyed property, not lives) to the genocide of the Armenians in Anatolia (‘a different phenomenon’, p. 84); from the brutalities of colonial warfare (although here too, ‘the Germans took the palm …’, p. 423) to the suffering inflicted on more than three million Jews and other minorities by the Tsarist army during its retreat in summer 1915 (‘probably greater than anything experienced by civilians in France and Belgium … but it was also a different phenomenon’, p. 84). The Russian and Spanish Civil Wars also resulted in massacres of hundreds of thousands, ‘though possibly not with the intensity of what occurred within a fortnight in Belgium and France in the second half of August 1914’ (p. 433). The cumulative effect of these thumbnail comparisons, with their shifting measures of atrociousness, is to make the Germans look even worse. More obvious analogies are missing. Was the German army more cynical, when it relegated the 1907 Hague Convention’s restrictions on land warfare to the appendix of their field manuals, than those members of the British admiralty who negotiated the 1910 Declaration of London, excluding food from contraband, even as they were preparing a strategy of starvation? And why, given the authors’ wide-ranging exploration of the modern boundaries between soldier and civilian, does one find only the most offhand references to the bombing of cities? The omission of Dresden and Hiroshima, however, confirm the authors’ larger argument that what we consider an atrocity is culturally constructed, according to a ‘changing moral yardstick’, whose scale has its own history (p. 431). Demonstrating this truth is not the least of the contributions of this provocative and necessary work.

*University of California, Berkeley*  
MARGARET LAVINIA ANDERSON