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Alexander Watson, *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914–1918*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008. Pp xv, 288. ISBN 978–0–521–88101–2.

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Alexander Watson has made a significant and compelling addition to the scholarship of the First World War. After ninety plus years of nationally-based (and thus blinkered) historiography, in the last decade we have begun to enjoy the fruits of comparative history. Indeed, there is no surer way to shatter long-held myths than through the simple comparison of similar elements of individual nations' experiences. Here, by analyzing a myriad of sources, Watson reveals the many ways in which the soldiers of the British and German armies "held out" for four long years, and simultaneously shows us how similar these men ultimately were. *Enduring the Great War* enhances our understanding of the cultures of consent in 1914–18 that allowed such a war to continue and strengthens the growing consensus that it is misguided to treat the lower-rank soldiers of World War I as mere victims. To a certain extent, most of them "believed" in what they were doing.

Watson, currently the British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow and Research Fellow, Clare Hall, Cambridge, does not, however, follow his Oxford supervisor Niall Ferguson in characterizing the soldiers as both "believing" and "enjoying" what they did. Although an ardent believer in the overwhelming level of consent versus resistance in both armies, Watson early disavows Ferguson's statement that many soldiers "simply took pleasure in killing," as well as Joanna Bourke's similar conclusions with regard to face-to-face killing, and the French "war culture" school's insistence on a deep soldier hatred for the enemy (6–7).¹ The vast majority of killing was anonymous, and duty and comradeship must clearly have outweighed any homicidal instincts in the soldiers' behavior.

Watson successfully lays out his argument in a chapter-by-chapter analysis of the different resiliency strategies practiced by the soldiers of both armies. In Chapter 1, "War of Endurance," he indicates just how rarely bayonets, grenades, and close-quarters rifle fire killed the enemy, as opposed to decidedly non-face-to-face sniper fire, machinegun strafing, and, of course, the biggest killer of all, random and impersonal shelling. Indeed, in an environment of relentless artillery fire, life and death were so "uncontrollable" that Watson discusses early on the psychic trauma so prevalent in this war. Fully five percent of all soldiers were "officially" psychiatric casualties, but, of course, the "real" number was much higher. Watson consistently references contemporary psychological accounts to explain and analyze this phenomenon, recognizing the danger of dating his work by citing only up-to-the-minute, twenty-first century literature. After all, it was already understood at the time, and has been reaffirmed ever since, that the less human beings control their surroundings, the more helpless (and prone to psychological breakdown) they become. Since all the training in the world could not ward off random shells from soldiers huddled in dugouts through hours of continuous bombardment, the war naturally inflicted massive psychic trauma.

In Chapter 2, "Why Men Fought: Combat Motivation in the Trenches," Watson discusses comradeship as a major protection against psychic breakdown. Stressing the "existence" and strength of comradeship sends Watson straight into the teeth of one of the main historiographical battles of the First World War, particularly among German historians. For maintaining that soldiers believed in comradeship (a "positive" aspect of war) flies in the face of the hegemonic emplotment of the war as tragedy, a narrative solidly in place since the late 1920s (even though a seminal work of this tragic canon, *All Quiet on the Western Front*

1. Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (NY: Basic Books, 1999); Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth-Century Warfare* (NY: Basic Books, 1999); Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14–18: Understanding the First World War*, tr. C. Temerson (NY: Hill and Wang, 2002 [orig. 2000]).

[1929], is rife with comradeship). In the 1990s, mainly through the work of Benjamin Ziemann, the prevailing argument was that the so-called “comradeship” of 1914–18 never existed and was instead merely a post-war (right wing) construction of a united soldiery fighting and defined against a backstabbing home front. It was further argued that any real comradely connection between soldiers was virtually impossible during a war in which casualties physically prevented long-term, deep friendships.² Indeed, Ziemann, along with Wolfgang Kruse, strongly pushed an image of a resentful, embittered, and even revolutionary army of soldiers as victims.³ In the last ten years, the key to overturning this concept of an army of “resisters” has been comparative history. By comparing German and British soldiers’ letters, Aribert Reimann found much evidence of consent in both armies.⁴ Further, Klaus Latzel, in comparing First and Second World War letters, again found the language of consent in those of German soldiers of 1914–18.⁵ Watson’s work further cements this new trend, and he argues that comradeship was larger than close personal friendship, extending even beyond death with the ritualistic memorialization of fallen comrades and the promise that their sacrifice would not be in vain. Additionally, he detects strong evidence of obedience and conservatism across social classes in both the British and German armies.

Chapter 3, “Self-Deception and Survival: Mental Coping Strategies,” reveals the soldiers’ constant resort to humor, religion, and fatalism. Crucially, though, and returning to the arguments of Chapter 1, Watson does not discover much “hatred of the enemy,” at least outside of those moments just before and after an attack. He thus takes a “culture of consent” position, but does not concur with Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker⁶ that such a “war culture” requires that soldiers deeply hate the enemy and desire to kill them.

Watson’s most important contribution to existing research is his broadening of this comradeship theme beyond the rank and file in Chapter 4, “Junior Leadership: Command, Cohesion and Combat Motivation.” It has long been accepted wisdom that British junior officers were paternalistic and loved by their men, while German officers were standoffish and hated. Watson, however, restricts the German stereotype to the men’s opinion of high-ranking officers well behind the lines, and contends that junior officers, the ones who went over the top with their troops, were every bit as paternalistic and thus admired as their British counterparts. Eventually, though, strains between the men and even lower-ranking officers arose from the insufferable hunger that Watson claims caused the German collapse in 1918. As the effects of the Allied Blockade took hold both at home and at the front, the discrepancy between the meager rations of the enlisted men and the healthier portions enjoyed by officers became too glaring to ignore.

Watson’s final chapters—5: “Morale and Military Endurance,” and 6: “The German Collapse in 1918: Strike, Mutiny or an Ordered Surrender?”—show that German material disadvantages, unmistakable from the time of the Somme, became the main contextual difference in the lives of German and British soldiers. As opposed to the “resistance” argument of Wilhelm Deist, specifically that the Collapse of 1918 was a “covert military strike,”⁷ Watson concludes that junior officers, in the face of Spanish Flu, huge losses post-Operation Michael, and dwindling food and material, organized “ordered surrenders” up and down the line. Key to this thesis is the fact that in those final months the ratio of German officers to lower ranks among those captured (1 to 38) was almost exactly that of the German army as a whole. Unlike their British counterparts, well-supplied and reinforced by a million Americans, German officers and men experienced no rest and refit, and saw no other way out:

2. *War Experiences in Rural Germany, 1914–1923*, tr. A. Skinner (NY: Berg, 2007 [orig. 1997]). See also, Peter Knoch, ed., *Kriegsalltag: Die Rekonstruktion des Kriegsalltags als Aufgabe der historischen Forschung und der Friedenserziehung* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1989).

3. Bernd Ulrich and Benjamin Ziemann, edd., *Frontalltag im Ersten Weltkrieg: Wahn und Wirklichkeit: Quellen und Dokumente* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1994); Wolfgang Kruse, “Krieg und Klassenheer: Zur Revolutionierung der deutschen Armee im Ersten Weltkrieg,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 22 (1996) 530–61.

4. *Der Große Krieg der Sprachen: Untersuchungen zur historischen Semantik in Deutschland und England zur Zeit des Ersten Weltkriegs* (Essen: Klartext, 2000).

5. *Deutsche Soldaten—nationalsozialistischer Krieg? Kriegserlebnis—Kriegserfahrung 1939–1945* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1998).

6. Note 1 supra.

7. See “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.

Exhaustion and disillusionment did not result in the disintegration of the Germany army by a process of protest and revolt but rather caused its demise by sponsoring a gradual decline in its combat efficiency.... As has been argued, until October disobedience and desertion remained at a relatively low level. Indeed, judging from British intelligence reports, the number of mutinies taking place in combat units may actually have declined from a high point in mid-summer 1918. The beginning of the Allied counteroffensive not only increased the level of fatigue on the German side of the lines, making protest against the war impossible, but it also made it unnecessary. Rather than attempting to alleviate or escape the strain of war by active disobedience, many combat troops saw their salvation in passively awaiting an enemy advance and then giving themselves up without resistance (215).

Alexander Watson has made a major contribution to First World War historiography, bolstering current “culture of consent” arguments as well as offering new twists. Although the book is a revised doctoral thesis with a rather specialized focus for a specific audience, it is well written and accessible to both advanced undergraduate and graduate students in military history courses.