

Spring 3-2009

War Experiences in Rural Germany 1914-1923.

Michael Nolan Dr.

Western Connecticut State University, nolanm@wcsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://repository.wcsu.edu/historypaper>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Nolan, Michael Dr., "War Experiences in Rural Germany 1914-1923." (2009). *History Faculty Papers*. 12.
<http://repository.wcsu.edu/historypaper/12>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History and Non-Western Cultures at WestCollections: digitalcommons@wcsu. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Papers by an authorized administrator of WestCollections: digitalcommons@wcsu. For more information, please contact ir@wcsu.edu.

structures, large processes, and huge comparisons," but explores nuances in cultural representation and social agency in the past.

STEFAN GOEBEL

UNIVERSITY OF KENT AT CANTERBURY

doi:10.1017/S0008938909000132

War Experiences in Rural Germany 1914–1923. By Benjamin

Ziemann. Translated by Alex Skinner. Berg: Oxford and New York.

2007. Pp. xiii + 302. Cloth \$105.00. Paper \$32.95.

ISBN 184520245-7.

Benjamin Ziemann's excellent study of the *Kriegserlebnis* of soldiers and civilians from rural Bavaria during World War I, first published in 1997, is now available in a fine translation by Alex Skinner. (The original German title, *Front und Heimat. Ländliche Kriegserfahrungen im südlichen Bayern*, more accurately reflects the scope of the book.) Ziemann's monograph is an important contribution to the literature available in English concerning the war's effects on German soldiers and the home front, and draws on an impressive array of sources.

Ziemann explains in the introduction that his book is an attempt to provide a broader perspective on the development of a war culture, so often associated in the past with students, intellectuals, and others who were more likely than the general population to publish letters, memoirs, diaries, and fictional accounts of the war. By focusing on peasants from southern Bavaria, whom he describes as "by no means a marginal group," Ziemann aims to provide a rounded-out *Erfahrungsgeschichte*, or history of experience, as a corrective to the often-idealized *Fronterlebnis*, or front experience, more narrowly conceived, much of which was of postwar construction (p. 9). One of his primary targets is the long-accepted notion that the "brutalization" of the front generation contributed indirectly to the coming to power of the Nazis, when, in fact, it was the younger generation, born after 1900, that provided the bulk of the foot soldiers of the movement (p. 6).

Ziemann draws on a wide variety of conventional sources for his account of southern Bavaria at war, including press reports, letters, diaries, and memoirs. More importantly, however, he makes use of reports prepared by district bailiffs at the request of the State Counselor in the Ministry of the Interior, Gustav von Kahr, regarding responses to mobilization and the war effort. Many of these reports are based in turn on the testimony of local priests and teachers (p. 17). These district reports offer a perspective similar to that of the prefectural reports concerning the effects of mobilization on the French population utilized

by Jean-Jacques Becker in his pioneering work *1914: Comment les français sont entrés dans la guerre* (Paris: Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 1977). Ziemann's work covers a longer time span, and the reports themselves are less systematic than those Becker consulted; nevertheless, they represent a valuable resource, and the regional focus allows for a rich portrayal of peasant soldiers and civilians at war.

Ziemann's book includes chapters devoted to the initial mobilization, military cohesion during the war years, the increasing war weariness as the conflict progressed, and the mentalities of soldiers and civilians in wartime. Like Becker in his study of France, Ziemann describes the relatively unenthusiastic reaction to the outbreak of war in rural districts, which was marked by grim determination and what Ziemann describes as "martial enthusiasm, rather than enthusiasm for war as such" (p. 24). Added to the worries of families concerning the fates of the soldiers was the distressing prospect of a prolonged absence of men from their farms and the hardship that this caused for women. Ziemann demonstrates that certain prevailing impressions of the time, such as that rural soldiers suffered a disproportionate number of casualties (p. 38) while also benefiting more from leave policies, causing widespread resentment (pp. 47-48), were in fact inaccurate. He also notes that, contrary to the belief widespread among front commanders that discontented civilians corrupted the morale of soldiers on leave, it was the soldiers' accounts of the front that adversely affected the home front (pp. 65-66). Ziemann examines the problems of war weariness and the rising tensions between peasant soldiers and often-inept junior officers, who frequently insulted the men under their command (pp. 77-80). In the later years of the war, declining morale led to increasing instances of low-level insubordination and disobedience, though rarely mutiny, among rural recruits (pp. 99-100).

More difficult to fathom were the attitudes of soldiers and civilians, and the interplay between the two, in the face of a war of unprecedented violence and cost in lives. In the chapter on "Mentalities 1914-1919," Ziemann again challenges many persistent assumptions that took root in Germany in the postwar years. The idealized notions of comradeship, insofar as they ever reflected reality, were undermined by the heavy losses in the field, generational and class differences, the strains between officers and men, and the inevitable distrust between regulars and reservists (pp. 112-115). As was also the case with their British and French counterparts, German soldiers resented the gap between the images of heroic struggle presented to the home front in the press and the miserable realities of their lives at the front. There was widespread resentment among soldiers of clumsy attempts to manipulate public opinion, such as the formation of the Fatherland Party, which many believed was run by those who had a vested interest in continuing the war without themselves having to serve at the front (p. 141). Not least, Ziemann demonstrates that

from the earliest months of the war, soldiers frequently used Social Democratic slogans in recounting their own experiences and trying to make sense of the war, though perhaps without deep consideration of such terminology (pp. 146-149).

Perhaps the most tantalizing chapter of the book is also the one, as Ziemann readily admits, that reflects the relative sparsity of sources, that on "Veterans 1918-1923." The immediate postwar period, in which the beginnings of a "transfiguration" of the war experience occurred, was marked by the chaos and confusion of demobilization, as well as the breaking off of many of the personal accounts, exchanges of letters, and regular reports that Ziemann was able to draw on for the earlier chapters. In spite of the lacunae, Ziemann offers glimpses of attitudes prevailing in the months immediately following the end of the war that again challenge subsequent assumptions. There was widespread indifference to Germany's defeat among the veterans, many of whom found it difficult to readjust to civilian life. There was no evidence of belief in the "stab in the back legend" in those first months, and many rural soldiers supported the Social Democrats, though more as a register of their dissatisfaction than out of political conviction (pp. 214-218). There was also a marked increase in hostility to the clergy, a disturbing development in rural Bavaria (pp. 222-223). Ziemann also confirms that the myths surrounding the formation of paramilitary units, notably the *Freikorps*, are just that. Most paramilitary groups were founded to defend against thieving citydwellers, disbanded soldiers, and the like, rather than to engage in counterrevolutionary combat (pp. 227-230).

Ziemann's book offers a useful corrective to the legends surrounding the Fronterlebnis and the relations between soldiers and civilians that only began to emerge in the postwar years. While the book focuses on southern Bavaria, it was precisely in Bavaria where it was widely believed that these attitudes were most deeply rooted. The book marks an important advance in the growing body of work on the actual effects of World War I on German society, as opposed to the stuff of legend.

MICHAEL NOLAN
WESTERN CONNECTICUT STATE UNIVERSITY

doi:10.1017/S0008938909000144

Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy. By Eric D. Weitz. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2007. Pp. xi + 425. Cloth \$29.95. ISBN 978-0-691-01695-5.

College teachers interested in cultural and intellectual history routinely lament the fact that survey textbooks either fail completely to address those topics or, at best,

Copyright of Central European History (Cambridge University Press / UK) is the property of Cambridge University Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.