

Gerhard Hirschfeld, Gerd Krumeich, Irina Renz (Hg.), Die Deutschen an der Somme 1914–1918. Krieg, Besatzung, Verbrannte Erde, Essen (Klartext) 2006, 279 p., ISBN 3-89861-567-7, EUR 18,90.

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Heather Jones, London

1st July 2006 marked the ninetieth anniversary of the beginning of the battle of the Somme, a key turning point in the totalization of warfare during the twentieth century. However, this book is not, as its editors point out, a »memorial« to that cataclysmic battle, which cost over 1.1 million casualties in total, dead, wounded or taken prisoner – twice as many as the battle of Verdun (p. 7–9). Rather it is an insightful attempt to place the battle in its longer term context and, particularly, to explore the German experience in the Somme region throughout the First World War. For, as the editors emphasize, the Somme region mattered to Germany during the war in a way that has long since been forgotten; it became synonymous with the defense of the nation, a »Wacht an der Somme«, only to be gradually supplanted after the conflict by the memory of Verdun. The purpose of this book is, therefore, to raise awareness of the Somme, which in Germany remains an »almost unknown war landscape« (p. 9).

To this end, the book presents a series of extracts from German accounts of the war in the Somme region, taken from diaries, orders, notebooks and letters. The French view of their German occupiers is also briefly covered with two extracts from the diaries of French civilians living in Lille and Roubaix, conveying the difficulties of life under German control. The book also includes seven introductory essays by leading historians on particular aspects of the war in the Somme area, intended to compliment the primary sources by providing context for a general readership. They achieve this aim admirably; although historians of the war will not find any major new interpretations of the conflict here, the essays offer fresh insights into the German experience.

The value of this book is twofold. First, in contrast to works such as Christopher Duffy's »Through German Eyes: The British and the Somme, 1916« (London, 2006), Martin Middlebrook's »The First Day on the Somme, 1 July 1916« (London, 1975) or Lyn Macdonald's »Somme« (London, 1983), it successfully highlights that the German presence on the Somme was not restricted to 1916, the year which dominates British historiography of the region in particular. In fact, as this book shows, the area was a war zone for the whole of 1914–1918 and was central to the German occupation of Northern France: its main towns, such as Péronne, took on a mythic status for German soldiers as sites of invasion, recreation and major combat engagements, as well as being scenes of deliberate destruction during the German retreat to the Hindenburg line in 1917, and renewed fighting during 1918.

Second, the documentary extracts in this book are new and well chosen; often accompanied by striking photographs, they give a remarkably immediate sense of the war. One of the most notable examples is the extract from the diary of Gustav Krauß from July 1916 accompanied by his dramatic

personal snapshots taken during the same period under fire in the trenches. The interaction between the diary and the images is stark: Krauß photographed his comrade, Küpper in a cheerful pose on 19 July 1916; the diary relates Küpper's death under shellfire the following day, »his whole brain hanging across the trench wall« (p. 119). Few readers will fail to find the primary source extracts in this book engrossing, and at times poignant: »If I fall, I die a hero's death for the Fatherland! In the life insurance policy am I also covered for war?« wrote the 23 year old Hugo Frick to his mother, three months before he was killed (p. 151). The destructive impact of war upon the physical landscape emerges here as a constant preoccupation of such ordinary German troops; some saw it as a kind of German achievement, epitomizing mastery of the new warfare, as illustrated by the sign left in the ruins of Péronne »nicht ärgern, nur wundern« (Do not be angry, just marvel) after the deliberate German destruction of the town during the retreat to the Hindenburg line. Others found the destruction disturbing: »how the old man cried«, wrote Hugo Natt, a German doctor, describing the forced removal of an elderly French civilian from his house which was immediately plundered by soldiers (p. 160). Natt found the scene »disgusting« (p. 160). If there is one criticism, however, it is that personal details about the authors of the primary documents, including whether they survived the war, have been relegated to the back of the book; it would be better if this information appeared alongside each extract.

The introductory essays provide valuable context for the primary sources. The first two, by John Horne and Annette Becker respectively, deal with invasion and occupation. Horne outlines succinctly how the German invasion failed to achieve its objectives, as set out under the Schlieffen Plan, leading to the development of the trench system, and describes how during the invasion the German army carried out brutal reprisals, killing some 6 500 Belgian and French civilians. Annette Becker discusses the difficult civilian experience of occupation that followed. The third essay by Gerhard Hirschfeld, deals with the battle of the Somme in 1916, while the fourth, by Michael Geyer, considers the effect of the German retreat to the Hindenburg line and the accompanying scorched earth policy of 1917. Both these contributions are masterful explanations of the political and strategic context. Geyer's piece, in particular, sheds new light on the sheer scale of the German retreat of spring 1917 and the deliberate destruction it encompassed; over 29 divisions had to be withdrawn and approximately 150 000 local civilians deported while their towns and villages were razed (p. 177).

In his contribution, Markus Pöhlmann explores how the German army's return to the Somme area, following the gains made during the Ludendorff Offensive of spring 1918, was often deeply personal; troops saw it as a return to land that had become a German »Heimat« because of the German blood shed there. Gerd Krumeich and Frédéric Hadley in their essays discuss the question of memory. Krumeich argues that the memory of the »defensive« battle on the Somme played a powerful role in German war commemoration in the early 1920s but later the image of the »offensive« battle of Verdun became more popular as it appealed more to the Nazis. Hadley explores the history of war tourism in the region, up to the present day.

These final essays grapple with the paradox that the Somme, such a major feature of the German war

experience, failed to win a place in German collective memory in the way that it did in Britain, where the opening day of the battle, when the British army lost 57 470 casualties, remains synonymous with national catastrophe. For Pöhlmann, one explanation is that after 1945 there was a need to find a battlefield that could symbolize Franco-German reconciliation; Verdun could serve this purpose in a way that the »international« battlefield of the Somme could not (p. 214). This suggestion is not entirely convincing; other nations such as Ireland and to some extent France, also »forgot« the Somme in the light of later national traumas and perhaps the answer lies more with the fact that the memory of the battle was simply overshadowed in Germany – like the memory of the First World War as a whole – by the subsequent cataclysm of 1939–45¹. Whatever the ultimate reason, however, this book offers a timely, impressive attempt to redress this amnesia.

¹ The first official state commemoration of the Irish dead of the Battle of the Somme by the government of the Republic of Ireland took place in July 2006.