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Isabel V. Hull. *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005. 384 S. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4258-2.

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Many historians will at first be skeptical of Isabel Hull's conclusion–that imperial Germany's political system and military culture made possible a singularly reckless approach to war that led to genocide and National Socialism. Such skeptics can point to the two decades of scholarship on elections and reform movements that question whether the *Kaiserreich*'s political system was backward, inflexible, and hopelessly authoritarian. These scholars connect Nazism and the Holocaust not so much to imperial Germany's peculiarities as to the crisis of classical modernity during the Weimar Republic and the progressive radicalization of violence during the Third Reich. Skeptics read on: *Absolute Destruction* is a major achievement, the result of meticulous scholarship and comparative analysis. Departing from traditional approaches, Hull draws on cultural theory and investigates the destructive practices in wartime that emerged because of doctrine, training, and shared, unwritten assumptions about virtue. This original perspective allows her to make one of the strongest cases since Fritz Fischer's for the uniqueness and continuity of German aggression. Some historians will find her thesis somewhat overstated, but most will agree that the evidence she adduces recasts our understanding of militarism during the *Kaiserreich*.

German military culture, she argues in a disquieting case study that constitutes the first part of the book, led to genocide during the Herero revolt in Southwest Africa from 1904 to 1907. Citing "military necessity," the German command under Lothar von Trotha encouraged German troops to summarily execute captured and wounded soldiers and civilians, including women and children. In order to exact victory under the doctrine of a final decisive battle, German troops pursued the Herero into the inhospitable desert, where thousands perished. Von Trotha also gave an extermination order. Hull estimates that two-thirds to three-quarters of the Herero died at the hands of the German military.

The narrative of the Herero genocide is well known to specialists, but the book's second part, a theoretical inquiry and historiographical synthesis, breaks new ground. Hull argues that because of Germany's limited finances and manpower and its vulnerability to a two-front war, military planners favored audacious offensive battles to defeat their numerically superior enemies. The Schlieffen Plan, Germany's main defense strategy, assumed soldiers would be ruthless, daring, and qualitatively superior. It also assumed they would take enormous risks in flanking attacks and savage pursuits to achieve complete military annihilation in a single blow. At the same time, military planners dismissed diplomacy and negotiation as a way to end conflict. Under the illusion that commanders could will their way to victory, they also ignored logistics and provisioning. To succeed, the Schlieffen Plan demanded detailed operational planning, rigid adherence to tactics, and soldiers who had fierce and determined characters. This delusive approach to war–which unleashed extreme violence on enemies while leaving German troops woefully undersupplied and vulnerable to disease, thirst, and hunger–became practice in colonial wars; under the constitution, the Reichstag and the civilian government lacked oversight over the army. Furthermore, middle-class anger at Wilhelm II for his timidity in foreign policy pressured the monarch to expect aggression from his army. German missionaries who decried the massacres in Southwest Africa for these reasons had little influence. By contrast, when the British army killed civilians during the Boer War, public outrage and parliamentary and citizens' inquiries stopped the violence. The assumption in German military culture that war was existential and that soldiers were not subject to law began in 1870–when the Prussian army raided French towns for provisions, used civilians as human shields, demanded they serve as guides, and killed them when they refused or their compatriots engaged in acts of sabotage. Hull convincingly argues these practices in the Franco-Prussian War established prece-

dents and became standard in the colonial wars.

In the last part of the book, Hull argues that the catastrophe of the First World War was that the civilian government lost control of policy to the General Staff and this reckless military culture. Adhering to the doctrine that war was not over until complete military victory, generals in charge systematically dismissed options for a negotiated peace and made fantastically large demands for annexations for military security. All the while, they disregarded the dire deficiencies in logistics and provisioning that in the end brought defeat. The German army was in some ways as ruthless in the occupied territories of France, Belgium, and Poland as it had been in the colonies. Under the justification of "military necessity," officers had troops pillage resources, raze industries, destroy whole villages, summarily execute suspected spies, use civilians as human shields, deny residents adequate food, and institute extensive regimes of forced labor. Though German civilians starved in the last years of the war, Generals Hindenburg and Ludendorff became even more heedless, spurning a diplomatic peace and making increasingly risky decisions, such as unrestricted submarine warfare and the March 1918 offensive. Hull claims that the *Endkampf*, the horrifying plans at the end of the war for a massive and bloody insurrection to repel the advancing Allies, was neither a bluff by Ludendorff nor a ploy to launch the stab-in-the-back legend but rather a strategy consistent with German military culture.

The evidence for these arguments comes from voluminous research and excellent comparison of other nations' military cultures, all presented with far more sophistication and subtlety than I can here. I wondered, however, if *Absolute Destruction* at times exaggerated the recklessness of German military culture and the lack of controls over it. For example, Hull argues in her account of the Armenian genocide that while some German military attachs cited "military necessity" and condoned the slaughter by the Turks, others were clearly disgusted and outraged (p. 281). Furthermore, because she omits public opinion from her analysis, the reader gets the impression that the German constitution insulated the army from criticism. In fact, to take one example, the brutality of the war in Southwest Africa led to mounting criticism at home and a refusal by the Reichstag in 1906 to approve an emergency military budget. She does not ask questions about the "Hottentot" elections of 1907, such as why and how Chancellor Blow succeeded in toppling Center and Socialist opposition. Was it because German voters tacitly accepted military culture? An affirmative answer would suggest the problem was not the constitution but a broader pathology in the German bourgeoisie.

Even though *Absolute Destruction* devotes just two paragraphs to the post-1918 legacy of imperial military culture, its thesis will resurrect the moribund debate about continuity and peculiarity in the history of Germany from 1870 to 1945. Because of this book, historians of the Holocaust and the Third Reich will once again be considering how the *Kaiserreich* nurtured the seeds of genocide.

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