



**Thomas Kühne.** *Kameradschaft: Die Soldaten des nationalsozialistischen Krieges und das 20. Jahrhundert.* Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006. 327 Seiten. EUR 39.90 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-525-35154-3.

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## German Soldiers, Comradeship, and the Pursuit of War

The complicity of the *Wehrmacht* and its personnel in the National Socialist pursuit of war, racial empire, and genocide has become the subject of an ever-proliferating body of scholarship. Historians disagree about the exact shape and extent of this participation, that is, the ways and extent to which most *Wehrmacht* soldiers became actively involved in the Nazi *Vernichtungskrieg* and lent shape to it as killers and willing bystanders. Historians also struggle to offer convincing explanations for the mass involvement of “ordinary” German soldiers in racial war and their willingness to fight until the bitter end of catastrophic defeat. Existing explanations range from the pervasiveness of a collective, deep-seated racist nationalism to wartime Nazi ideological mobilization, from the dictates of organizational cultures to social pressure to conform within primary groups.[1]

In this outstanding book on notions of comradeship and German soldiers of World War II, Thomas Kühne stakes out new interpretive ground beyond such explanations. Exploring *Kameradschaft* (the literal English translation is “camaraderie,” which has a significantly more light-hearted connotation than the German term) as both a mythical construct and social practice, Kühne argues that it helped to mold the ideas, deeds, and experiences of the more than seventeen million German men who fought as *Wehrmacht* soldiers and that it engendered social life and community in the midst of mass killing and genocidal warfare. These soldiers carried out genocidal and total war, argues Kühne, because their participation ensured an “enormous intensification of social life (and not physical survival)” (p. 21). In other words, the ideal of *Kameradschaft* and its appropriation by millions of Germans explains both the murderous deeds and the cohesion of the *Wehrmacht*, and the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft* (people’s community) at large, during the war. If we believe Kühne, *Kamerad-*

*schaft* could acquire this centrality precisely because it was neither simply the product of Nazi policy, war, and military socialization, nor was it endowed with fixed meanings. Rather, *Kameradschaft* had gained its potency as a mythical construct well before the formation of the Nazi regime. This highly malleable construct originated from within German society in the 1920s and drew its strength from its openness towards different appropriations by multiple social actors; it expressed a collective yearning for national unity and social belonging prevalent among diverse political camps in a deeply divided society coming to terms with the traumas of total war and defeat.

Offering an “experiential history of national socialist war” (p. 14) and building on Reinhart Koselleck’s conceptual insights on war temporalities, Kühne’s book falls into three parts.[2] The first explores the horizon of expectations with which the soldiers of Nazi Germany went to war as it was shaped by the formation of *Kameradschaft* as a mythical and culturally potent construct in interwar Germany. The second part explores *Kameradschaft* as a social practice molding the experiences of German soldiers in World War II. The final part traces the workings of both communicative and collective memory in post-war Germany, taking the story all the way to the present. Throughout these parts, Kühne explores the dialectics both between the semantics and experiences of *Kameradschaft* and between their multiplicity and the simultaneous production of conformity and community. He also convincingly casts the fortunes and meanings of *Kameradschaft* as a social ideal in terms of a contest between cultures of individualistic conscience and collective shame.

In part 1, Kühne excels at demonstrating the many meanings of comradeship in the interwar period, drawing primarily on an analysis of contemporaneous periodicals, war literature, and other writings.

On one level, Kühne delineates the ways in which, during the 1920s, people of different political persuasions and camps imbued *Kameradschaft* discourse with their own individual meanings. In its right-wing reading, *Kameradschaft* was about the militant, revanchist *Volksgemeinschaft* and the hierarchically organized community of frontline soldiers. Working at a counter-myth, left-wing writers, in contrast, upheld the horizontal bonds among common soldiers, pacifist internationalism, and opposition to military hierarchy. While asserting that such differences became less important after 1930, Kühne then highlights the *Verstaatlichung* of comradeship under the Nazi regime—its transformation into an official state project. Casting itself as a “state of comrades,” led by a charismatic leader, the Nazi regime created a militant, racially defined, and heavily policed *Volksgemeinschaft*. By 1941, when Nazi Germany launched its war of extermination against the Soviet Union, this commitment fully permeated Nazi military pursuits. Kühne also untangles the highly charged and malleable gender politics of *Kameradschaft*, which oscillated between “hard” soldierly manliness on the one hand, and tenderness, caring altruism and other traits usually coded as “feminine” on the other. As mythical construct and social practice, *Kameradschaft* created a space to communicate the tension between “heterosexual norm” and “sublimate homosexuality,” or so Kühne argues.[3]

Part 2, on *Kameradschaft* as wartime social practice, lucidly delineates the ways in which the ideal and embrace of *Kameradschaft* sustained the Nazi pursuits of war and genocide, engendering social life and community among *Wehrmacht* soldiers and propelling them forward into acts of military killings and mass murders. Offering richly textured analyses of individual soldiers’ diaries, personal letters and memoirs, Kühne demonstrates how the cult of *Kameradschaft* worked differently among the three major groups of soldiers. A small group of soldiers, the *Unsoldaten*, the “un-soldiers,” kept its distance from the call of military *Kameradschaft*, which they experienced as a threat to their sense of self and civilian bonds of friendship and family. Yet these soldiers remained outsiders who had to hide their opposition because there were no safe social spaces, either in the military or in Nazi Germany more generally, to retreat to and in which to voice discontent. On the other end of the spectrum, a minority of “born” soldiers enthusiastically experienced *Kameradschaft* to the fullest and defined the mili-

tary community as their true home and source of social life, at the expense of civilian society or individual identity. These enthusiastic soldiers carried along the mass of the *Wehrmacht* soldiers, who were less involved in living out these ideals. Making up at least 80 percent of all *Wehrmacht* personnel, such non-enthusiastic, *gezogene* (drafted) soldiers expressed ambivalence about the promises of war, military service, and male bonding. Emotionally, they remained torn between soldierly and civilian identities, front and home, male military community and family, comrades and friends. But again little room was available to articulate and act out such inner ambivalence openly, other than in muddling through, or *Wurstigkeit*, to use a contemporaneous German term, which was premised on continuous participation in the pursuits of the larger military collective. These unenthusiastic soldiers also fought the war in the expectation that the future, and not only the present, belonged to the claims of Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft* and *Kameradschaft*. They saw no alternatives or countervailing forces. And even as these soldiers confronted the specter of defeat after Stalingrad, they took experiences since 1918 to mean that active military participation would be key to their personal and public lives in any postwar society.

The many metamorphoses of *Kameradschaft* discourse and its demise in postwar West, and then reunified Germany, constitute the center of part 3. Mostly drawing on sources similar to those used in the first part, Kühne deftly explores how the myth of *Kameradschaft* and the veterans’ culture that surrounded it both shaped the political and social life of the Federal Republic and dominated official and popular memories of the war well into the 1970s and 1980s. Kühne’s main emphasis falls on the new meanings *Kameradschaft* took on as war veterans held up positive memories of war and military ideals in the face of the “stigma” of violence and genocide and the materialist pursuit of happiness in a new democratic state. The privatization of *Kameradschaft* was one aspect of this process: it started off in prisoner-of-war camps as notions of friendship permeated the understandings and practices of bonds of support; it prevented the formation of a political veterans’ movement; and it eventually turned veterans’ meetings into family gatherings. Another was the reworking of “good” wartime *Kameradschaft*, which was now cast as an exercise in “practiced democracy” and social harmony and associated comradeship with the values of humanity, solidarity, reconciliation, and egalitari-

anism. While tracking the many material and practical ramifications of these transformations, Kühne depicts the continuous belaboring of *Kameradschaft* as the work of a vocal minority of veterans, which rested on a “division of labor” with a mostly disinterested “silent majority” that was sustained, by and large, by the popular entertainment industry. But, Kühne argues, the “political immunity” of this vocal minority and its peculiar image of the war ended in the 1980s as the generation of veterans passed into retirement and civilian society reexamined its relationship to the military. Presentist concerns about high levels of armament and the specter of nuclear war triggered debate about the Nazi past and German societal complicity. By the 1990s, the myth of *Kameradschaft* had lost its luster and become “history.”

Thomas Kühne has written a superb book. His multifaceted history of *Kameradschaft* as a mythical construct and social practice takes us beyond the existing accounts of *Wehrmacht* soldiers and Nazi war, which are founded either on ideology, group pressures, primary groups, or organizational culture. And yet as an “experiential history” of National Socialist war that purports to explain the war pursuits and cohesion among *Wehrmacht* soldiers, Kühne’s book has its limitations; in fact, one might argue that it falls short of providing exactly the kind of explanation Kühne promises. Kühne has given us a “history of war that speaks of death” from the vantage point of *Kameradschaft* as a spring of social life and cohesion in times of war.[4] But his is still a rather “civilian” history of war, in which military combat is not at the center and actual killing zones and “military” practices of war are mostly absent. The reader encounters *Wehrmacht* soldiers as real or imaginary comrades of various sorts, but hardly as combatants. True, the analysis of the workings of comradeship goes a long way towards explaining the participation, the *Mit-Machen*, of soldiers and their continuous functioning in the murderous killing zones of war; and yet ultimately what is still required is an analysis of the practices and experiences of combat as both individual

and collective acts within the confines of the military as a large-scale and professionally led organization committed to man-made mass death in the pursuit of war.[5] No doubt Kühne has laid the groundwork for such an exploration. But its absence casts a long shadow on his attempt to explain the tenacious war-making of German soldiers during World War II.

#### Notes

[1]. Omer Bartov, *Hitler’s Army: Soldiers, Nazis and War in the Third Reich* (New York, 1991); Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Random House, 1996); Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper, 1992); Edward Westermann, *Hitler’s Police Battalions: Enforcing Racial War in the East* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005); Martin van Creveld, *Fighting Power: German and U.S. Army Performance, 1939-1945* (Westport: Praeger, 1982).

[2]. Reinhart Koselleck, “Der Einfluß der beiden Weltkriege auf das soziale Bewußtsein,” in *Der Krieg des kleinen Mannes. Eine Militärgeschichte von unten*, ed. Wolfram Wette (Munich: PIPER, 1992), 324-343.

[3]. See also Thomas Kühne, “Comradeship: Gender Confusion and Gender Order in the German Military, 1918-1945,” in *Home/Front: The Military, War, and Gender in 20th Century Germany*, ed. Karen Hagemann and Stefanie Schüler-Springorum (Oxford: Berghahn, 2002), 233-254.

[4]. Michael Geyer, “Eine Kriegsgeschichte, die vom Tode spricht,” in *Physische Gewalt. Studien zur Geschichte der Neuzeit*, ed. Thomas Lindenberger and Alf Lüdtke (Frankfurt: SUHRKAMP, 1995), 136-162.

[5]. Michael Geyer, “Vom massenhaften Tötungshandeln, oder: Wie die Deutschen das Krieg-Machen lernten,” in *Massenhaftes Töten. Kriege und Genozide im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Peter Gleichmann and Thomas Kühne (Essen: Klartext, 2004), 105-142.

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