H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Leonard V. Smith. *The Embattled Self: French Soldiers' Testimony of the Great War*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007. 210 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4523-1.

Reviewed by Jesse Kauffman (Eastern Michigan University)
Published on H-German (August, 2010)
Commissioned by Benita Blessing

There Is No (War) Outside the Text

"This book," Len Smith writes in the introduction to *The Embattled Self*, "turns a historical truism into a historical problem: we can understand the Great War … only as a tragedy and the soldier who fought it only as a victim" (p. 1). Having established his central theme with succinct elegance, Smith goes on to show how this "tragic" reading of the war was not the only, or even the primary, way that it was interpreted in France. While it raged and in its aftermath, a great many varieties of interpretation were brought to bear on the conflict, with the "tragic" variant reaching its as-yet-unchallenged position of cultural supremacy only in the 1930s.

Smith first illustrates the degree to which narratives of the war initially posited its early days, from mobilization to the first taste of combat, as a classic rite of passage. This form, however, was inadequate: True rites of passage require a shared understanding of the rite's meaning as well as a predetermined outcome, both of which the war lacked. The search for other modes of understanding and interpretation thus continued. Chapter 2 introduces the reader to narratives in which the author attempts to "master" the experience into which he has been thrust. This was also an interpretive framework ill-suited for making sense of a war whose sheer complexity overlapped with overwhelming horror. The next chapter, "The Genre of Consent," is the book's most compelling. Here, Smith posits that soldiers' narratives of consent (that is, narratives that express a sincere commitment to continuing the war to the bitter end) were widely popular and gave combatants a way of interpreting the experience of war before the tragic narrative won out. Smith further argues that this viewpoint represented a uniquely republican reading of the war, which gained its power from the belief that "citizen-soldiers were expected to obey an authority whose source and legitimacy lay in themselves and their compatriots." To reject the war thus meant that a Frenchman "surrender[ed] who he was as a political being" (p. 109). Finally, Smith shows how the novel played a crucial role in cementing the reading of the war as a horrible tragedy inflicted upon hapless victims.

Smith builds this argument on a body of evidence that he collectively calls *témoignage*, an elastic category of "testimony" that denotes published first-person accounts of the war, both fiction and nonfiction. He uses a host of obscure letters and other types of narratives, as well as familiar novels–such as Henri Barbusse's *Le Feu* (1916). Refreshingly, Smith argues that scholars have wrongly interpreted Barbusse's novel as pacifist, when in fact the author ultimately portrays the war positively: the war, he believed, would construct a new and better world. Many readers will have serious reservations about the ease with which Smith passes back and forth between fictional and nonfictional accounts. For example, Smith notes claims that the texts by Jules Romain and Roger Martin du Gard proved crucial to solidifying this tragic. Yet, neither author served in combat. Still, if the reader accepts Smith's central proposition–that a certain shared understanding of the war developed within texts, rather than through any extra-textual reality, forever unknowable–then the elision of the difference between the sources is understandable, if not to be unreservedly embraced.

Smith's sources are in fact most powerful when he presents them as an expression of an individual's attempt to come to terms with what he has actually seen and done. Maruice Genevoix offers an important example: his tale about gunning down several German soldiers at close range in September 1914 changed substantially over his lifetime. The original 1916 story was absent in a later edition of Genevoix's war writings. In the 1950 edition, Genevoix provided a footnote explaining, in somewhat abashed terms, that "When this book was republished, I suppressed this passage. It was an indication of

this 'reflection on one's own conduct,' which was fated to arise later on. I put back that passage today, taking for lack of honesty the voluntary omission of one of the episodes of the war that shook me most deeply and that has made an ineffaceable imprint on my memory" (p. 97). Nonetheless, the story continued to change until, in 1977, Genevoix "gave a television interview " in which he said "as his face turned crimson, with a stricken and doubting look, 'I very much hope I did not kill them"' (p. 99).

Smith briefly alludes to one factor that may help explain Genevoix's changing story–namely, that after a certain time, stories about killing Germans no longer found resonance with reading audiences. The context in which writers produced these narratives had changed, an aspect that Smith does not discuss sufficiently. Despite Smith's insistence on the autonomy of text and author, Smith tacitly acknowledges the crucial importance of context by providing the dismal litany of political and economic crises that formed the background against which the "tragic" reading of the war gained its ascendancy. A devastated Europe, on the verge of collapse, no longer provided a setting for triumphant stories of the war.

Despite its (nearly) exclusive focus on France, there are many reasons that historians of Germany working on the Great War will want to read this book. First, it provides a sense of where the field of cultural history is going; Len Smith is one of the foremost Anglophone historians of the French experience of the Great War. He is also affiliated with the research center at the Historial de la Grande Guerre in Pérrone, France, at whose conferences, seminars, and workshops the field's senior scholars map out the contours of the field. In addition, the problems and themes explored by Smith cry out for a comparative approach. He notes that, incredibly, no transnational history of the reception of Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) has been written, a topic ripe for exploration. Smith's arguments about consent and republicanism also provide rich ground for transnational explorations. Were stories of consent peculiar to the French, or to democracies? Is consent necessarily democratic in nature? Smith actually provides evidence that it was not, showing that the writings of the fascist Pierre Drieu La Rochelle extolled a non-republican vision of consent. How was consent articulated in Germany?- These are questions raised in chapter 3 that will hopefully provide fruit for future debates. Finally, those writing the cultural history of the war would do well to emulate Smith's style. Unlike much work that is heavily influenced by literary and cultural studies, Smith's is largely jargon-free and his elegant prose is absolutely crystal-clear. Smith's work is thus to be admired–even if most of us are not quite ready to abandon the search for the war outside the text just yet.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Jesse Kauffman. Review of Smith, Leonard V., *The Embattled Self: French Soldiers' Testimony of the Great War*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. August, 2010.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=30559

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.