H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sonja Levsen. *Elite, Männlichkeit und Krieg: Tübinger und Cambridger Studenten 1900-1929.* Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005. 411 pp. EUR 48.95 (paper), ISBN 978-3-525-35151-2.

Adam R. Seipp. *The Ordeal of Peace: Demobilization and the Urban Experience in Britain and Germany, 1917-1921.* Farnham: Ashgate, 2009. 291 pp. $114.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7546-6749-0.

Reviewed by Brian G.H. Ditcham
Published on H-German (April, 2011)
Commissioned by Benita Blessing

The War's Long Shadow

What difference did victory and defeat in the First World War actually make for Britain and Germany?- The leading tenors of the "Literature of Disillusionment" which flourished in Britain (though revealingly not Germany) from around 1930–writers like Robert Graves, Siegfried Sassoon, or Henry Williamson–at times came close to implying that the actual outcome of the war was at best a secondary consideration compared with the sufferings of the front-line soldiery. Though focusing on very different groups, both works under review here attempt to address this basic question.

Sonja Levsen's comparative study of male students at the universities of Cambridge and Tübingen over the period 1900-29 argues that the outcome of the war made a substantial difference. Though wide-ranging and richly documented, her message is very straightforward. Before 1914 the similarities between the two groups outweighed the differences. Both groups saw themselves as a consciously masculine elite called to lead their respective nations. Both were deeply imbued with a broadly militaristic ethos underpinned by practices like team sports at Cambridge or "Mensur" (ritualized saber dueling) at Tübingen. Both marginalized outsiders like Jews or Indians and women. Neither attached excessive importance to the finer points of study or high intellectual attainment. Both rushed to the colors in the late summer of 1914- and died on the front in huge numbers.

After the war everything changed. Though "Cambridge Men" never stopped seeing themselves as part of a national elite, increased affluence and the better integration of female students into the university (even if the latter were still not legally "members" of it) led to a much wider range of possible life styles and expressions of masculinity. The narrow focus on collegiate life broke down, sports became less central to undergraduate life, and participation in bodies like the Officer Training Corps (OTC) became very much a minority pastime. Individualism ruled. Politically the student body remained broadly conservative in orientation but with an active left-leaning minority; there was an almost total, if somewhat hazy, consensus in favor of the League of Nations, seen as complementary to the British Empire. A rather ill-defined pacifism became fashionable. Victory stilled questions about the continued viability of parliamentary democracy which had been raised in the prewar period. The sacrifice of the war dead was honored as the foundation on which a better postwar world could be built–there was no incompatibility between laying wreaths at the College War Memorial on November 11, and voting for a motion in favor of pacifism at the college debating society the next day.

Things were very different in Tübingen. For one thing, the war did not stop in 1918; uniformed student battalions saw active service until 1920 in the domestic upheavals which wracked post-imperial Germany. An impoverished and embittered student body clung even more tightly to the traditions of the past; "Mensur" was as prevalent as ever, now supplemented by British-style athletics and team sports (which replaced the old drinking culture) with distinctly militaristic overtones. The range of acceptable discourse narrowed into an aggressive, revanchist Pan-German ultra-nationalism inhospitable to Jews and socialists alike (intriguingly, however, after an early flurry of anti-Bolshevism the main identified enemies were external ones, primarily France). Semi-clandestine military training was rife and the republic very much at a discount. The tiny minority of female students remained marginalized. The ghosts of

the war dead called for vengeance; otherwise their sacrifice would have been in vain. Although the Nazi Party came relatively late to Tübingen, its message fell on fertile ground.

Levsen paints her picture in rich detail, attentive to nuance and detail. Her overview ranges from the complex layering of patriotism in pre-1914 Tübingen (a south German university with substantial north German recruitment) and the relative absence of interest in the *Reich*'s overseas colonial ventures there to the negative fallout from the more individualistic approach to life in postwar Cambridge (ranging from complaints about student cars blocking the city center to a declining quality of student journalism now that Cambridge was no longer necessarily the sole focus of its students' lives). Given the high intellectual reputation which German universities held in pre-1914 Britain (even when reflected by Cambridge student mockery of what was perceived as a very different type of institution) and the almost obsessive German self-identification as a "Kulturvolk," it is surprising to find how culturally impoverished Tübingen student life was, even before 1914. Both sets of students cultivated an anti-intellectual style. Cambridge, however, was full of choirs and drama groups, debating societies, and coterie literary periodicals. Even at its most banal, the poetry produced to glorify athletic prowess was generally competently written. There was very little comparable student activity in Tübingen. Indeed, Levsen paints a pretty bleak picture of her Tübingen students; overweight philistines staggering drunkenly from "Mensur" to torchlight procession and back before 1914, physically fitter but more brutalized figures busily imposing "Aryan paragraphs" and preparing for the next war after 1918.

There are of course some quibbles that one could raise. The most important of these concerns the extent to which the two groups Levsen is comparing are in fact comparable. It is not clear that Tübingen held the very elite position in the more diversified university landscape of Germany that Cambridge did in Britain–indeed the rather sketchy social data she provides on her Tübingen students suggests that one reason why they were so strident in their claims to represent an elite was that they came from somewhat less socially secure backgrounds than their Cambridge counterparts. There is also the question of which students one has in mind. For Cambridge, she is looking at the whole undergraduate student body. In Tübingen, she focuses on the members of the various student "corporations." Although these institutions accounted for a majority of the student body and had a great deal of influence in setting the broader "tone" of the institution, somewhere between one-third and half of Tübingen students were not members–and Tübingen itself was unusual in the German university scene to the extent in which it was dominated by the corporations. This in turn clearly had an impact on recruitment trends. For instance, female and Jewish student numbers were well below average, especially after 1918, precisely because a university dominated by uniformed dueling corporations was unlikely to be a pleasant place for them. It may well be that Tübingen is genuinely representative of broader German university trends but a slight suspicion remains that Cambridge is being set against the most extreme manifestations of German student life and ideology.

One might also wonder whether the sources which Levsen uses, particularly for Cambridge, offer an entirely straightforward mirror of realities. She draws heavily on the proliferation of student newspapers, college magazines, and the like–sources which have little direct counterpart in Tübingen. Student publications do however have to be read with considerable care and may well reflect distorted self-images rather than reality. In fairness, Levsen is generally attentive to the discrepancies between the image of "the Cambridge Man" articulated by her sources and reality (students actually did a bit more academic work and were somewhat less detached from the grubby business of earning a livelihood than they admitted) but one does wonder if she has always managed to distinguish *topos* from reality. In particular, it is possible that her chosen sources rather underplay continuities between the pre- and postwar worlds. As she correctly notes, most of the scholarship on the intertwining of athleticism, imperialism, and militarism in the English public school and university worlds associated in particular with the name of Tony Mangan focuses on the years before 1914. Mangan and his followers have had less to say about the post-1918 university world. While it may well be the case that sport became less central to collegiate life in this period, the fact remains that it bulked far larger in the lives of students at Cambridge (and indeed Oxford) than for those at other British universities. For the broad mass of the British population the institution most readily associated with the names of Oxford and Cambridge Universities was–and still is–the annual Boat Race on the Thames.

It is also arguable that Levsen has been a little too respectful of the somewhat caricatured image which Mangan gives of pre-1914 developments. For all the imperialist trumpeting in university-related publications, Cambridge in practice produced far more country vicars and schoolmasters than army officers or imperial governors.[1] The whole issue of how far it was really pos-

sible to engage seriously in team sport and play an active role in the OTC while also doing the basic minimum work in lecture and seminar rooms deserves further examination–one could read the insistence on the inherent military value of sports like rowing and cricket which can undoubtedly be identified in the writings highlighted by Mangan as an implicit questioning of the need for bodies like the OTC (there is no evidence that the "schoolboy" whose voice rallies the ranks with the cry of "Play up, play up and play the game" in Henry Newbolt's arguably all too famous "Vitai Lampada" ever went to university after leaving his school cricket field, let alone participated in the OTC there). Levsen argues that about a third of Cambridge undergraduates joined the OTC in 1910 and that about two-thirds had OTC experience when one counted those who had been through the ranks at school. The unstated corollary is that perhaps a third dropped out of military training at university, probably the first time they had a real choice in the matter. "Playing at soldiers" (p. 127), far from being a positive assessment as Levsen suggests, has distinctly deprecatory tones. While it would be obtuse to deny that there was a good deal of parading and dressing up in uniform in pre-1914 Cambridge, these activities were perhaps a bit less salient than Levsen suggests.

On the other hand, it is surprising how little material there seems to be on how exactly Tübingen students experienced their brushes with compulsory military service. Their militarism seems to have existed in something of a virtual form, bound up with the life of their corporations. It is intriguing that none of these organizations appears to have felt tempted to recruit specifically from men who had done their military service and wanted to keep in training during their student years. Levsen has little to say about the longer history of the corporations and whether, for instance, they may have consciously looked back to the "Liberation War" against Napoleon as a validation of their innate military utility. It is surprising (and perhaps revealing of the south German orientation of Tübingen) that the post-1918 evidence she cites does not appear to refer to this period as providing a precedent for their "patriotic" activities.

Despite these marginal qualifications, Levsen paints a convincing picture of two groups on diverging paths which pulled away from each other in dramatic fashion after 1918. It is obviously a matter of counter-factual speculation to wonder what might have happened in these universities if the war had gone differently. Despite the strong similarities, Levsen's evidence suggests that even before 1914 Cambridge was a somewhat more pluralist and diverse place than Tübingen. It is however not hard to imagine that, say, antiwar activists like Bertrand Russell would have had an even thinner time in a Cambridge marked by the seal of defeat and one could easily imagine antisemitism and anti-democratic attitudes taking much deeper root there. For all Levsen's persuasive arguments about the very different psychological role of the war dead in the two universities, however, one cannot help suspecting that the real difference that defeat made was economic. Distinctly poorer than their Cambridge counterparts on average even before 1914, the Tübingen students came overwhelmingly from social backgrounds economically blighted by the war and the hyper-inflation. A German victory in the First World War might not have stopped the long-term motorization of the Cambridge student body but it is hard to believe that Tübingen student corporations would have had to agonize over the supply of toilet paper. To that extent it did matter who lost the war.

Although the Tübingen Student Battalion was deployed in the suppression of the Bavarian "Räterepublik" (and played a murky role in that affair), at first sight there does not appear to be a great deal in common between the lives of the "gilded youth" examined by Levsen and the predominantly working-class experiences in Munich and Manchester which Adam Seipp examines through the prism of "demobilization," and Seipp's relatively narrow chronological focus on the years 1917-21 precludes examination of longer-term developments which Levsen identified (had she stopped her study at 1921 the differences between her chosen universities would have been rather less clear cut than they had become even two or three years later).

Although Seipp's introduction makes a strong case for saying that issues of demobilization (military and, increasingly, industrial) were at least latent from the moment the war began, it has to be said that he does not really follow through on this insight in any detail. He suggests, for instance, that there was a surprising degree of continuity in terms of policy and even personnel in handling demobilization–related issues in Munich despite the well-publicized political upheavals the city experienced in the immediate postwar years–but does not really follow up on this intriguing piece of information. Surprisingly little space is devoted to the formal processes of demobilization and their impact on individual factories or companies. On the rare occasions when he does provide information related to this the results are surprising–Manchester Corporation in 1920 was still employing far more women in some departments than it had done in 1914 and Seipp is probably right to suspect that a certain amount of creative accounting was being done to

imply that more ex-servicemen had been hired than was really the case. In practice what Seipp has written is a form of parallel history of economic, social, and to some extent political developments in his two cities during his chosen period.

On the whole it has to be said that Seipp handles Munich better than Manchester. The Manchester chapters are somewhat rambling and diffuse and at times anecdotal. He makes considerable use of trade union sources and also material related to the tiny and marginalized antiwar movement in the region. This leads to some problems of perspective; though Seipp is well aware of just how unrepresentative the latter sources in particular are, they still bulk surprisingly large in his account. In discussing the "Khaki Election" of 1918, he focuses on the three Labour MPs (members of Parliament) returned; the fact that the other ten Manchester seats elected Coalition candidates is mentioned but pushed to the margins. It would be very easy to come away with the impression that Manchester was an almost entirely working-class city, though one served by a distinctly conservative evening newspaper. The Munich chapters, by contrast, have a much clearer story line to follow, even if the tale of demobilization and postwar economic readjustment at times vanishes behind a familiar political narrative, albeit one which stops at the funeral of the deposed King Ludwig III in 1921.

In many ways Seipp seeks to stress the common elements of wartime and postwar experience that united Manchester and Munich. There is clearly quite a bit to be said for this perspective. Both cities were geographically far from the front (though Munich was in range of French fliers dropping leaflets with anti-Prussian propaganda messages) but deeply integrated into the wartime economy. It is clear that housing issues bulked large in both cities and were central to the dreams of a better postwar world, with construction programs getting under way quite quickly after the war (only to be brought to a grinding halt by demarcation disputes between trade unions in the Manchester case). Food supply issues and the cost of living were major concerns. Fears about political radicalization and the longer-term social consequences of the combat experience could be found in both cities and it was not necessarily obvious in, say, 1920 that they would prove to be largely unfounded in Manchester. At times the parallels are a bit strained; it rather stretches definitions to put fears about a surge in violent crime and a (by contemporary standards rather ineffectual) fire-raising campaign by the Irish Republican Army in the Manchester region on the same level as the politically related violence experienced by Munich. Glasgow or even Liverpool (where the police went on strike and public order briefly broke down) might have been better comparators than Manchester, though even they were pale shadows of the Munich experience.

Despite the commonalities, there were clear differences too. Seipp argues that the British approach to industrial mobilization, apparently ramshackle and dependent on local agencies, worked better in practice than it did in theory. It allowed a degree of flexibility and local discretion, bound key organizations like the trade unions into the decision making process from the start and never quite tipped over into treating industrial or consumer protests as *ipso facto* proof of political subversion (though at times it came very close to so doing). Its very decentralized nature to some extent insulated national government from responsibility and allowed it to play the role of ultimate arbiter. These factors continued to mark the demobilization process. In Munich (and by extension throughout Germany, Seipp implies that the complex constitutional status of Bavaria in the "Kaiserreich" had little real impact on how Munich was mobilized for war) things were rather different. The state was deeply involved in industrial and even social management issues from the start, operated in a largely "top-down" manner with limited consultation, and laid claim to total competence in decision making (it is surprising that the name of Walther Rathenau does not appear once in the book). Its failure to manage what rapidly became an economy of shortages increasingly called its overall legitimacy into question. Postwar governments remained saddled with the assumption that they ought to be able to manage the economy properly and live up to the increasingly unrealistic promises of a better world after the war. When they failed to do so, the population began looking for scapegoats and found them in the tiny Jewish community.

On the whole this sounds plausible, though perhaps somewhat less original than Seipp implies. It is interesting, if not altogether surprising, to find the rhetoric of "sacrifice" which Adrian Gregory has argued was repeatedly instrumentalized as a basis for claims on the nation's sympathy and support in wartime and immediate postwar Britain being employed in similar ways in Germany. As far as Manchester is concerned, Seipp's findings are broadly congruent with those of Gregory about the tensions on the British home front in the last eighteen months of the war; tensions greatly relieved by victory.[2] The stress on endurance rather than victory, which Seipp detects in the propaganda directed at the home front in Germany, is intriguing. Although how it is to be interpreted is another matter; the aim of endurance

was surely to see things through to a final victory and at much the same time the "Deutsche Vaterlandspartei" (not mentioned by Seipp) was making noisy propaganda about how the European order should be restructured in Germany's favor after victory. As Seipp himself notes, few countries at war engage in much planning over what might happen if they lose and, one might add, few openly create propaganda on that basis.

Seipp implies that the long-term effects of wartime approaches to mobilization and demobilization were more important to postwar developments than the actual outcome of the war. This seems dubious. The victorious British may have had more problems over the demobilization of troops than the defeated Germans whose army had largely demobilized itself. This was at least in part because the British authorities knew that the war was not legally over in 1918 and needed to keep men enlisted in case a peace treaty was not signed, and retained enough control over their forces to ensure that they did not just go home. Their German counterparts would no doubt have been delighted to have an army to influence the peace negotiations. The ongoing Allied blockade hugely complicated the economic demobilization process in Germany. Above all, victory lent legitimacy to the winning side's social and political order which even the more militant trade unions were never quite prepared to challenge in the postwar era. Seipp identifies enough manifestations of social strain in Manchester (including a strand of economically based antisemitism) to suggest that things could have resulted very differently had the war ended in a German victory or even in a peace of mutual exhaustion (which, in the context of early 1918, would have looked like a German victory). As with Levsen's students, it certainly mattered which side lost the war.

The Duke of Wellington supposedly said, "Other than a battle lost, there is no more melancholy sight than a battle won." The initial qualifying phrase is all too often overlooked; it nearly always does matter who wins a battle or a war. Both Levsen and Seipp's books point to the ways in which the outcome of the First World War had long-term impact on British and German societies and suggest ways in which these consequences might have been very different had that outcome been reversed.

Notes

[1]. William Rubinstein's recent work on Oxford and Cambridge matriculants in the late nineteenth century suggests that the recruitment base for both universities was somewhat less aristocratic than stereotypes might suggest and that career patterns tended towards the traditional professions; the careers followed by his 1900 sample of Cambridge matriculants showed twenty Church of England clergymen–the home, Indian and colonial civil services and the armed forces put together accounted for seventeen. W. D. Rubinstein, "The Social Origins and Career Patterns of Oxford and Cambridge Matriculants 1840-1900," *Historical Research* 82, no. 218 (November 2009): 715-730.

[2]. Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War; British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

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: Brian G.H. Ditcham. Review of Levsen, Sonja, *Elite, Männlichkeit und Krieg: Tübinger und Cambridger Studenten 1900-1929* and Seipp, Adam R., *The Ordeal of Peace: Demobilization and the Urban Experience in Britain and Germany, 1917-1921.* H-German, H-Net Reviews. April, 2011.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=32532

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