

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

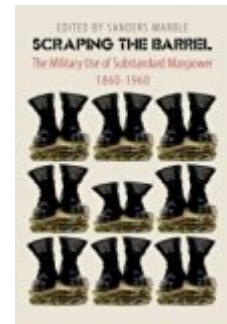


Sanders Marble. *Scraping the Barrel: The Military Use of Substandard Manpower, 1860-1960*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2012. vi + 354 pp. ISBN 978-0-8232-3977-1; ISBN 978-0-8232-3978-8.

Reviewed by Cameron Zinsou (University of North Texas)

Published on H-War (July, 2013)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



SEAL Team Six, the intrepid soldiers who killed Osama bin Laden, are eulogized in the film *Zero Dark Thirty*. Similarly, Delta Force operators are honored in *Black Hawk Down*. Hollywood evinces an obsession with the elite soldiers of the military. Scholarly work in military history often also reflects this fascination with the most highly trained of the military. However, the vast majority of soldiers are not of this mold. When conflicts lengthen, combatant nations often find themselves in need of individuals they may have previously excluded for physical, mental, or racial reasons, amongst many others. This is what editor Sanders Marble attempts to expose in his compilation of articles in *Scraping the Barrel*.

Marble's premise is that holistic treatment of the less glamorous units in militaries since the American Civil War is severely lacking in modern scholarship. While they are frequently chastised in official histories or other works as second- and third-rate soldiers, one inquires how they came to be defined as such. Marble contends that each nation holds its own standards, and excludes those who are ostracized based on those societies' interpretation of who is worthy of donning the uniform. Thus, the "scraping of the barrel" is not so much reaching for the last available men and women available to fight, but rather what each individual society will eventually tolerate.

A classic example of this is illustrated by Peter Simkins in his article on the Bantam soldiers in the British Army during World War I. Men eager to sign up for Kitchener's army found themselves too short to enlist. However, volunteers signed up in such droves that a

special division was created for them. Their performance was questionable. However, Simkins notes, they were placed in portions of the battlefield disadvantageous to their particular disability. While in 1914 the British did not yet have a manpower problem, the niche carved for these shorter soldiers provided an opportunity to serve their country.

David Glantz looks at the mobilization of men and women in the Red Army during the Second World War. Citing the staggering losses in the first six months of the war, Glantz argues it was very necessary for Stalin to adopt an all-inclusive effort to turn back Germany's invasion (p. 175). Women and penal battalions were formed, employed as a stop-gap measure to temporarily halt the German soldiers. However, the conscripts of the Red Army were uniquely prepared for the hardships of army life, Glantz contends. Life in the army was not all that different from the political system or the daily life most Soviet citizens lived.

The Waffen-SS, composed of Aryans at the beginning of World War II, had no need for *Volksdeutsche*, ethnic Germans living outside of the Reich without citizenship. Originally composed of volunteers, the Waffen-SS found quickly that it could not maintain its volunteer-only policy. Thus, according to Valdis Lumsans, the elitism of the military branch of the SS based on exclusivity began its "downward slide" (p. 205). The recruitment of men outside of the Reich for service in the Waffen-SS expanded as volunteerism declined and recruiters became less selective. During and following the disastrous results of 1943, Hitler acquiesced to the integration of non-German peoples into the SS, with less than stellar results (p. 235).

The United States plays a prominent role in this work, with several chapters dedicated to the United States' perpetual struggle to fulfill its promise of equality for all. The Veteran Reserve Corps was composed of soldiers from the Civil War who, though physically disabled from combat or other ailments, still performed menial tasks. Steven Short describes the "scraping of the barrel" of African Americans in World War I not in a physical sense, but metaphorically: they were at the bottom of the barrel in terms of equality. Their opportunities were limited and expectations reduced to a point where it affected a unit's ability to effectively perform. This is exemplified in the battlefield conduct of the 92<sup>nd</sup> Division, which when kept apart from its unit leaders, was not allowed to cohesively develop, and suffered (p. 124). Other experiments like Limited Service Manpower and Project 100,000 reflect some of the more unusual aspects of social tampering by the Army.

As with all compilations, the various narratives by different authors make for some disjointed reading. The

reader jumps from the Civil War to German reserves from 1815 to 1914, to the French system from 1871 to 1914. The scholarship is beyond reproach, with heavyweights like Dennis Showalter and the aforementioned Glantz delivering poignant and engaging prose customary of their work.

What Marble set out to do is illuminate the experience of those underrepresented soldiers who answered their country's call, regardless of how they were viewed or treated during peacetime. This commitment, whether voluntary or forced, requires a bravery just as admirable as that of the elite units we so often eulogize. As Marble notes in his conclusion, there is still much work to be done on this subject. It has endless potential. Each of these chapters could be expanded into monographs of their own, and there are hundreds of examples not touched upon in the work. What Marble did with *Scraping the Barrel* is what any good historian does: inspire questions and leave the reader wanting to investigate further.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

**Citation:** Cameron Zinsou. Review of Marble, Sanders, *Scraping the Barrel: The Military Use of Substandard Manpower, 1860-1960*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. July, 2013.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37101>



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