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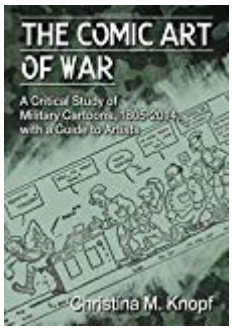
Christina M. Knopf. *The Comic Art of War: A Critical Study of Military Cartoons, 1805-2014, with a Guide to Artists.* Jefferson: McFarland, 2015. Illustrations. 252 pp. $39.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7864-9835-2.



Reviewed by Mike Hankins

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Making fun of the military has been a popular pastime among servicemen and women throughout history, but rarely have the jokes been subject to scholarly study. Christina M. Knopf has done just that in her new work, *The Comic Art of War: A Critical Study of Military Cartoons, 1805-2014*. This book examines various printed (and digital) comic strips and cartoons made by military personnel during the last two centuries from several countries around the world. But the book is actually much more than that. By showing that comics are a "safe venue for dissent" (p. 8), Knopf argues that they provide an accurate insight into military culture and the sense of identity felt by those who serve. Through a topical analysis of these comics, she is able to define that identity in specific ways. Mainly, she shows that "the military experience is that of fraternity," and under that broad level of identity are subthemes shared across cultures and times, including the ideas that "hierarchy is frustration, [defining] friends and foes depend[s] on perspective, geography is hardship, warriors are men, all wars suck, [and] civilians don't understand" (p. 154).

Key to Knopf's conception of these works is the idea of "symbolic convergence," also known as "inside joke syndrome" (p. 15). Comics tend to use a set of symbols that are loaded with meaning for viewers who have shared a certain set of experiences. For example, the ***Doctrine Man*** online comic strip often features characters wearing a bright yellow safety strap, typically worn by US Army soldiers during physical training. The fact that the straps are nearly omnipresent in the strip, even in absurd situations, becomes a meaningful symbol for those who have had to actually wear them in training—an inside joke. Knopf argues that these symbols and inside jokes combine to create a larger "rhetorical vision," or shared group identity. Although specific rhetorical visions can be linked to specific wars or circumstances, Knopf argues that the subthemes named above are part of a near-universal (at least, given

her sample size) group identity shared by militaries around the world since 1805.

Comics reveal the components of shared identities especially well because the fact that comics are intended to be funny gives them the ability to safely critique or openly mock the military, providing a safe space to express frustration and for soldiers to bond through shared experiences. In addition, these strips can be useful primary sources because they convey a sense of what military service feels like. For example, Knopf quotes one World War II veteran who said that Bill Mauldin's *Up Front* comic strip was the best way to understand what soldiers actually did.

To analyze these themes of identity in detail, Knopf divides the book thematically, examining how various cartoonists have tackled the same subject matter. First she examines military life itself. Many comic strips make fun of uniforms and grooming standards, especially the strict ways that militaries enforce these guidelines. Another frequent subject of jokes is the large amount of medical procedures that soldiers have to go through, such as frequent injections and inoculations. Some comic strips depict images of needles so large it took several men to operate, or that could go straight through several soldiers at a time. The shared experiences that all soldiers go through in this regard serves as a way of creating insider and outsider groups, reinforced by the use of slang terms or terminology—words that military comics make frequent use of, reinforcing a sense of group identity through shared experience.

Knopf refers to comics as a "release valve for frustrations with hierarchy and regulations" (p. 61). Almost all the military comics she examines depict officers as the butt of jokes. As Knopf describes, part of the "rhetorical vision" or identity of the army is "one of frustration, wherein the lower ranks, and especially the enlisted, feel put upon and disadvantaged by a broken system—an incongruous 'organized anarchy' in a culture of rigid rules and regulations, which they not only must endure but also respect, at least outwardly" (p. 72). Turning that frustration into humor is one of the most common themes of military comics. As cartoonist W. C. Pope is quoted, "The best gauge of a cartoonist's success is by the number of officers he's pissed off" (p. 66).

Most often, comics freely mock officers and the hierarchy itself, at times generating backlash. Bill Mauldin was berated by General George Patton himself for representing him in what Patton felt was a disrespectful way. Some readers may be shocked to discover that Mort Walker's strip ***Beetle Bailey***, which today is a seemingly innocuous newspaper legacy strip, was actually banned twice from publication in the military newspaper ***Stars and Stripes*** because it was seen as disrespectful of authority.

One interesting point that Knopf emphasizes is that wartime enemies are not always (if ever) the villains in military comics. Many strips rely on visual stereotypes of enemy soldiers as a way of dehumanizing the enemy, but most military comics are not hostile to enemy combatants. If such hostility does exist, it is usually reserved for enemy commanders and leadership figures, which are presented as not representative of the people themselves. Rather, the villains of these comics tend to be friendly officers, or the environment itself. The idea of battling a harsh environment or climate is more of a danger or hindrance to comic protagonists than enemy soldiers.

One of the most insightful chapters is an examination of gender in these military comics, in which Knopf argues that one key component of the military identity is hypermasculinity. Across all these strips, soldiers are depicted as manly, and women are seen as intrusive or even destructive, dangerous forces. Even present-day strips deal with this trope, such as the online comic ***Terminal Lance***, which depicts a character named Dependapotamus, a symbol for a woman that a US marine marries only to get better housing and

money, but later creates havoc in the marine's life. That character is presented as a parody of the *Star Wars* villain Jabba the Hut.

Knopf also emphasizes that normative heterosexuality and virility is tied to the aggressiveness that some perceive as necessary to be effective in battle, thus images of heterosexual desire are normal and encouraged. This is clearly evident in Milt Caniff's lesser-known (and more risqué) strip ***Male Call*** and in airplane nose art, both of which feature women that the men are expected to lust after and simultaneously fight to protect. Military comics thus reinforce and still perpetuate these gender stereotypes.

Another shared theme is that military comics tend to have a very dark sense of humor and the ability to laugh at death. For example, the Vietnam comic strip ***Incoming*** depicts a soldier with a gaping hole through his abdomen who asks his doctor, "Did the round go straight through, Doc?" (p. 132). In some instances, this ability to mock death can be interpreted as part of a coping process for dealing with the horrific experiences that many soldiers endure. Knopf also argues that it creates and reinforces part of the "rhetorical vision" that "all wars suck," and all cause death, pain, and destruction.

Because of the extreme conditions of war, a key element of all these comics is that civilians cannot hope to understand a soldier's perspective. Most of these comics feature humorous instances of civilian and military worlds colliding, such as soldiers attempting to use military terminology in the home or sailors asking the greeter at Wal-Mart for "permission to come aboard" (p. 142). The ***Doctrine Man*** comic frequently explores the idea of "reverse bootcamp" to familiarize soldiers with civilian life.

The book, despite its brevity, explores all of these themes in detail with plenty of examples. However, most of these examples are presented in quick succession and are merely described, not shown. Reading a description of dialogue or a visual gag does not have the same effect as actually viewing the original cartoon. Some original cartoons are presented, but they are far too few and far between.

Knopf does attempt to provide some sort of remedy for this via an appendix that is alternatively called a "Guide to Artists" or a "Comicography," listing all the comics she consulted. Yet, in a strange decision, not only are these comics not listed by title (instead by the authors last name), but there is also no "title" field for the listings. Thus, to make good use of the appendix, the reader has to flip from the original reference to the end notes, then to the appendix, and casual readers who want to use the appendix for reference will find it difficult to do so.

The book's introduction skillfully situates the work within the broader context of comics history and scholarship, relying extensively on the taxonomies presented in Scott McCloud's landmark work ***Understanding Comics***. Knopf rightly identifies that the comics she discusses do not fit in with the often discussed broader "ages" associated with the history of superhero comic books (such as the golden age, silver age, and bronze age), and her brief introduction serves as a useful primer for those who are more interested in the growing field of academic studies of comics.

Overall, the book is a useful examination of military comics and is succinct enough that it will hopefully serve as a stepping stone for further work. Despite the unfortunate lack of reproductions of the actual cartoons she discusses (which is possibly an editorial decision, not a decision of the author), the study is far more than the sum of its parts. ***The Comic Art of War*** goes beyond simply analyzing military comics by demonstrating what comics can tell us about the military experience, the place of militaries in society, and the ways in which historians of any field can use comics as a valuable source to gain valuable historical insight.

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