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Stephen G. Fritz. *Frontsoldaten: The German Soldier in World War II.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995. x + 299 pp. $29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8131-1920-5.

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In *Frontsoldaten*, Stephen Fritz of East Tennessee State University has chosen to tackle the tendentious and complicated issue of the "everyday life" of German Wehrmacht soldiers during the Second World War. In so doing, Fritz has not only given us a powerful account of the misery and anxiety experienced by the common Landser, especially on the Eastern Front, but he has also made a significant contribution to our understanding of the ideological roots of the German soldiers' resiliency in defense of the National Socialist state. Following in the footsteps of Manfred Messerschmidt and Omer Bartov, Fritz concludes that the staying power of the *Landser* depended in large part on his conviction that the National Socialist state had "redeemed the failures of World War I and had restored, both individually and collectively, a uniquely German sense of identity" (p. 10).

Explaining that loyalty is not Fritz's only goal. Fritz's subject is also "the nature of men at war," and he does an admirable job of conveying the individual experience of war and the soldiers' sense of abandonment to a wretched fate. Successive chapters entitled "Living on Borrowed Time," "Withstanding the Strain," "Seasons of War," and "The Many Faces of War" outline the physical and emotional discomforts of war, perhaps shared by most soldiers in most wars.

"Living on Borrowed Time" portrays the battlefield as an excruciatingly lonely place in which chaos and fear reign supreme and only death or a serious wound provide an escape. Soldiers combatted their fears with the aid of medals, alcohol, music, jokes, religion, and sex, as outlined in Chapter 4, "Withstanding the Strain." Despite those palliatives, however, the soldier's life is depicted as one of almost inescapable misery, particularly on the Eastern Front, which soldiers described as "less a place than a series of natural disasters" (p. 119). In "Seasons of War," Fritz does a masterful job of placing the reader in the hip-deep mud of the Russian spring and fall, the scorching heat of the Russian summer, and the biting winds and disorienting whiteness of the dreaded Russian winter.

And yet Fritz is not "softhearted" in his treatment of the German *Landser*. The reader is never allowed to forget these men's dual role as suffering victims and cruel perpetrators. The chapter "The Many Faces of War" is devoted in part to expressions of a pronounced "delight in destruction" on the part of the common soldiers. Guy Sajer, one of Fritz's frequently recurring witnesses to the horrors of the Eastern Front, recalls his "almost drunken exhilaration" when in the midst of a battle (p. 149). The letters and diaries of many former soldiers are characterized not just by a

nonchalance about death, but by a frankly expressed thrill in killing and in the sense of complete freedom from restraint (p.146).

The value of the history of everyday life (***Alltagsgeschichte***) does not lie in its simple recounting of the experiences of the individual, however. Fritz himself reminds the reader, citing Detlev Peukert, that "everyday history has no object of its own but seeks to legitimize the independent experiences of its subjects, to ***mediate*** [emphasis added] between individual life experiences and impersonal historical analysis, and to provide a perspective on various life-styles and differing areas of social reality" (p. 7). It is the ability of ***Frontsoldaten*** to combine the individual experience with a sense of the "impersonal historical analysis" that makes it so interesting.

By focusing not only on the everyday experience of the soldiers but also their motivations and strategies for coping with suffering, Fritz is able to clarify the importance of National Socialist ideology in sustaining the morale of the Wehrmacht. One striking oversight in the book, however, is Fritz's seeming unwillingness directly to engage the work of other historians on the subject, especially the recent work of Omer Bartov, ***Hitler's Army*** (1991). ***Frontsoldaten*** is filled with implicit links to the more "impersonal" works of history that ***Hitler's Army*** typifies. In many ways, Fritz's book is much better than Bartov's, more gripping, colorful, and intense. I sympathize completely with Fritz's concern to make his work more than simply a review of Bartov's, but by responding more directly to Bartov's theses about the "demodernization of the front," the "destruction of the primary group," and the "perversion of discipline," Fritz could have provided precisely that "mediation" between "individual experiences and impersonal historical analysis" that is the (too often latent) strength of ***Alltagsgeschichte*** as a method.

In ***Hitler's Army***, Bartov proposes that the extreme conditions at the front and the enormous casualties of the campaigns in the Soviet Union combined to prepare the Wehrmacht to be molded according to the demands of Hitler's racist and nationalist ideology. Since "primary group" loyalty and endless morale-boosting victories could no longer compensate German soldiers for their suffering after 1941, Wehrmacht officials substituted draconian punishments and liberal doses of National Socialist racist ideology in order to maintain the cohesion of their units. According to Bartov, discipline was "perverted" within the German military, so that atrocities against civilians and enemy soldiers went unpunished, whereas the slightest infractions against military regulations were liable to evoke truly homicidal responses from the military police. As a result, Bartov concludes, the common ***Landsers***, unable to mitigate their suffering in any other way, lashed out in anger and frustration against the only targets within range, enemy soldiers and civilians, transforming the war, especially on the Eastern Front, into a horrific bloodbath.

Much of the evidence that Fritz provides supports Bartov's thesis regarding the reactions of the common soldier. Though he does not share Bartov's concern with proving intent on the part of the Wehrmacht leadership, Fritz does depict a front rapidly "demodernized" by a combination of weather and mechanized battle. Fritz too emphasizes the importance of comradeship in maintaining the cohesion of the German army, and the difficulties that soldiers faced when the tremendous casualties of the Russian campaigns so rapidly destroyed the "primary groups." Fritz also describes soldiers who delight in killing and who explicitly acknowledge the compensatory nature of such destruction in ways that none of Bartov's sources do.

Yet Fritz leaves these obvious connections undeveloped through at least the first two hundred pages of the book, using Bartov's work more often as a "primary" source (quoting passages from letters and diaries directly from Bartov's book) than as a useful foil for his own conclusions. In the

concluding chapters of the book, Fritz does begin to engage Bartov especially, but not systematically or thoroughly enough for my taste. Fritz's work adds many nuances to Bartov's and corrects so many of Bartov's mistakes that a more complete analysis of the connections between ***Frontsoldaten*** and ***Hitler's Army*** would have been worthwhile.

Fritz goes beyond Bartov's account by providing better evidence, not only of the "negative" integrative effects of punishment, but also of the important "positive" effects of the National Socialist ideal of a *Volksgemeinschaft* in maintaining cohesion within the Wehrmacht. In Chapter 8, "Trying to Change the World," Fritz uncovers very strong evidence of the "responsive chord" that Nazi ideas struck within the army (p. 188). As even contemporary German soldiers acknowledged, negative ideas such as racism and draconian punishment were simply insufficient to explain the extraordinary resiliency of the German soldier. He required a "positive" ideal as well, something to fight *for*.

And that ideal was the supposedly classless, conflict-free society that was being created at the front and that would later follow the soldiers home to Germany itself. Certainly the "negative," racist and disciplinary elements were important. Russia in particular, Fritz argues, was the place "where many Landsers, previously sceptical of Nazi propaganda, confronted what they accepted as the reality of the Jewish-Bolshevik destruction of a whole nation" (p. 198). But in the "trenches" and on the battlefields of Russia, the Landser also believed that he was witnessing the positive transformation of German society into a classless one where burdens were shared by all.

There is certainly more to recommend this book, but there are also other problems with it. For example, Fritz uses letters, diaries, and memoirs more or less interchangeably to provide the reader with insights into the state of mind and motivations of the German soldier. Yet, although Fritz does occasionally refer to the implications of military censorship for his work, he leaves untouched the issue of the audiences for whom these letters and diaries and memoirs were written. Letters sent home from the front to loved ones must have been motivated by different emotions, different concerns, than a personal diary or (especially) a memoir written for public consumption. If Fritz did in fact notice a similarity among all three sources, this would have been remarkable, and it would have strengthened his argument to bring that fact more fully to the reader's attention.

Fritz even occasionally uses novels, such as Willi Heinrich's ***Cross of Iron*** (1988) and Curzio Malaparte's ***Kaputt*** (1982), with scarcely a mention of the methodological problems novels present as historical sources. Malaparte, without doubt an insightful observer of the Russian front, was not German, and his novel is full of literary devices and allegory, making ***Kaputt*** a very problematic source indeed. An over-reliance on a few published sources, notably the memoirs and letters of Guy Sajer, Karl Fuchs, and Hans W. Woltersdorf, also undermines Fritz's efforts to generalize his conclusions.

Stephen Fritz's ***Frontsoldaten*** is nevertheless a shining example of the possibilities of writing the "history of everyday life." Such history, as Fritz acknowledges, is too often "impressionistic and nonanalytical," and yet "it still touches our ability to comprehend social and historical reality.... It also says something about whether the theoretical abstractions with which historians of necessity operate are capable of grasping human phenomena made up of countless individual perceptions and actions" (p. 5).

Although he occasionally seems to hesitate in driving his "abstract" point home by actively engaging the "theoretical" work of other historians (especially Bartov), Fritz has indeed helped to explain how National Socialist ideology combined with the personal experience of war to create the

conditions in which German soldiers perservered in defense of a criminal state. By establishing the link between the personal experience of war and the theoretical abstractions of historians, Fritz has fulfilled, at least in part, the promise of ***Alltagsgeschichte***. And he has done so while telling the powerful personal story of soldiers who were both victims and perpetrators of a horrible war.