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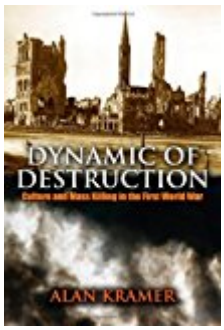
Alan Kramer. *Dynamic of Destruction: Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. 446 pp. $34.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-280342-9.



Reviewed by Kimberly A. Lowe

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Commissioned by Christopher L. Ball (DePaul University)

Drawing on a wide array of secondary literature and archival research in Germany and Italy, *Dynamic of Destruction* analyzes European cultures during the First World War. Alan Kramer provides a stimulating synthesis of many of the major findings regarding the cultural history of the war from 1914-18. By integrating other scholars' nationally focused research into his account, he contributes to a growing body of literature that seeks to examine war cultures in comparative perspective.[1] His book is also full of rich narrative details often left out of more conventional histories of the First World War, particularly in regards to German atrocities in Belgium and the experience of war on the Italian front.

Kramer argues the First World War functioned on a "dynamic of destruction," which resulted in "the most extensive cultural devastation and mass killing Europe since the Thirty Years War" (p. 5). A cultural tendency to seek total annihilation of the enemy--army, society, and artistic heritage--was primarily responsible for producing this dynamic. For example, in his first chapter Kramer uses contemporary accounts from Belgian civilians, German soldiers, and the international press to show that the German army deliberately targeted the library of Louvain in 1914. The burning of the library was not the byproduct of industrialized warfare but the result of a deliberate military policy of cultural destruction.

The concept of a dynamic of destruction builds upon the extensive work of other scholars who argue that industrialized warfare has a totalizing logic of its own: the nature of modern weaponry and the importance of economic support from the home front meant that during the twentieth century war absorbed an ever-greater proportion of a country's population and natural resources.[2] To this understanding Kramer adds the idea that the massive civilian and military casualties of the First World War were also the consequence of military culture and policy. This military culture followed the "logic of annihilation" (p. 27): it encouraged officers to equate victory with total decimation of the enemy, even to the point of destroying their own army. His narrative

emphasizes the role of German military doctrine and cultural militarism in radicalizing warfare. He describes how the same military culture that encouraged atrocities in Louvain and other Belgian towns in 1914 led, in the subsequent years of conflict, to ruthless exploitation of German-occupied territories, forced labor and deportations, and maltreatment of prisoners of war on both the western and eastern fronts.

Kramer's characterization is indebted to Isabel Hull's examination of the Imperial German Army's tendency to seek the absolute destruction of its enemies, including civilian property and lives.[3] He agrees with Hull's analysis of the German military, but is emphatic that in the First World War Germany was not the only power to follow the logic of annihilation. "Military self-destructiveness," he writes, "which Isabel Hull imputes to the German army, was far more evident in the Austro-Hungarian, Italian, Russian, and Ottoman armies" (p. 158). The Austro-Hungarian leadership saw a brutal war of annihilation against Serbia as necessary to its survival. The Ottoman military engaged in mass murder of the empire's Armenian minority. The Italian and Russian armies instituted self-destructive regimes of internal repression. In their efforts to combat German strategy the French and British also participated in a war of attrition and cultural warfare.

Adding Italy, Austria-Hungary, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire to the traditional comparison of Britain, France, and Germany highlights the myriad ways in which German military culture was part of larger trends in European life. In moving the center of attention east, Kramer joins a growing number of scholars who seek to revise our understanding of Europe's violent twentieth century and the notion of German singularity by emphasizing the widespread appeal of fascism and other authoritarian political models throughout Europe.[4] The similarities he emphasizes between the German military and the policies and practices of other belligerent countries are an important contribution to our understanding of First World War cultures.

At the same time, in calling attention to the similarities between countries Kramer does not address what are crucial differences in the war cultures and postwar development of the belligerent states. His argument about the consequences of the dynamic of destruction's pernicious mix of mass killing and cultural warfare works best for Germany and Italy, but he writes that all of the belligerent powers became entangled in the war's destructive logic. Kramer concludes that fascist regimes arose from the adoption and radicalization of the cultural warfare, mass murder, and imperialism that characterized the war. Yet, in considering the effect of the experience of war on cultural elites and avant-garde cultural production he never addresses why a minority of intellectuals (such as Werner Sombart and Filippo Tommaso Marinetti) continued to affirm the value of violence in the post-1918 years, when the vast majority of intellectuals, politicians, and even veterans came out of the war with a passionate revulsion from violence. His argument about the common origins of Italian and German fascism also does not account for the real differences in racial ideology and authoritarian control in the two regimes. Nonetheless, in its comparative approach and eastern focus, ***Dynamic of Destruction*** is a provocative and innovative contribution to some of the most enduring questions in the study of culture and twentieth-century warfare.

Notes

[1]. See J. M. Winter and Jean-Louis Robert, ***Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin, 1914-1919. Volume 2: A Cultural History*** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[2]. See Roger Chickering and Stig Förster, ***Great War, Total War: Combat and Mobilization on the Western Front, 1914-1918*** (Washington DC: German Historical Institute; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[3]. See Isabel V. Hull, ***Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany*** (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004). His argument also echoes that of Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker that the war culture of 1914-18 "harboured a true drive to 'exterminate' the enemy." See Stephane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, ***14-18: Understanding the Great War*** (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), 103.

[4]. See Mark Mazower, ***Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century***, 1st American ed. (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1999).

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