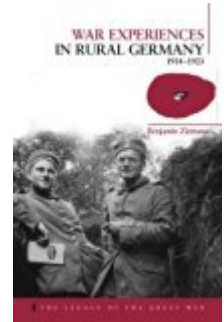


**Benjamin Ziemann.** *War Experiences in Rural Germany: 1914-1923*. Translated by Alex Skinner. The Legacy of the Great War Series. Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2007. 320 pp. \$40.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-84520-245-3.



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By and large, historians of the First World War have viewed the conflict as a pivotal event in modern history, unique both as a turning point, and in its brutalizing effects on the soldiers who experienced it. Benjamin Ziemann's *War Experiences in Rural Germany*, an English translation of an earlier monograph published in German, challenges this traditional view.[1] His work is a history of mentalities that explores the social experiences of the Great War in the districts of Upper and Lower Bavaria and Bavarian Swabia. As such, Ziemann's regional study begins by reexamining the sources utilized in earlier examinations of German wartime experience, noting that they represent the subjective worldview of elite, middle-class society. The conventional story, in other words, privileges bourgeois memories of the war, leaving out critical groups like the urban working classes and peasant farmers whose stories are central to understanding the war because they comprised the vast majority of soldiers in the German army.

Ziemann attempts to fill this gap by offering the only systematic study so far of rural mentalities during World War I. His apparent goal is to present a more nuanced analysis of social experience during the war than has been allowed by conventional stereotypes and generalizations. His main thesis thus challenges the idea that the war represented a critical fissure in modern German history: "Taken as a whole, the wartime and post-war experiences by no means led to a radical break with traditional values and perceptions," he asserts. Instead, "most people in fact fell back on the 'traditional sources of stability' within rural society, such as the peasant family, religiosity and subsistence farming, particularly during the years of crisis from 1914 to 1923, demonstrating their ongoing significance. Despite the upheaval of war and inflation, continuity outweighed change" (p. 273).

*War Experiences in Rural Germany* is divided into six major chapters that attempt to prove this larger thesis by examining the mentalities and social experiences of farmer-soldiers and their fami-

lies in southern Bavaria in the period of the inflation, from 1914 to 1923. The first chapter follows the recent historiography by challenging the myth of war enthusiasm.[2] Like the working classes of the cities elsewhere in Germany, the population of rural Bavaria reacted with dismay and pessimism to the events of the July Crisis and the early weeks of the initial military conflict. The following three chapters examine the wartime social experiences of Bavarian farmers, analyzing "military cohesion" (the reasons they were able to continue fighting in such horrible conditions), disillusionment with the war and how it grew worse over time, and the soldiers' mentalities as reflected in subjects like religion and national identity. The fifth chapter turns to the home front. It analyzes the sexual lives of the women left behind, the shifting economic roles they played because of the absence of the men, the impact of inflation on the Bavarian countryside, the political mobilization of farmers, and the increasing awareness of peasants about their place in the social order. The last major chapter finishes the story by looking at the immediate postwar years. It recounts demobilization and the return of the soldiers to the countryside, noting how the meaning behind the military experiences of the war changed with the creation of various veterans' groups and war memorials to honor the dead.

In all of this, Ziemann's most important sub-arguments scrutinize the standard distinctions drawn between the front line and the home front and our general understanding of the First World War as a brutalizing experience. It is in his analysis of the first of these questions—largely treated in his three chapters on the soldiers' social experience of the war—that Ziemann's argument is at its strongest. By his account, rural soldiers in Bavaria were able to retain many of their traditional values and contacts with their former lives. In part, this stability was the result of the "totalisation of warfare" inherent in World War I, a conflict that required "ideological legitimation" to maintain popular support and "state control of the agrarian

economy" for coordinating the war effort (pp.7-8). Because rural soldiers were needed to ensure the food supply, they were granted numerous privileges harder to win among other social groups in the army. In addition, rural soldiers were customarily deployed in the replacement army (*Be-satzungsheer*), which usually was stationed in quiet sectors, in order to "secure the agricultural labour force" (p. 40). Finally, the army granted farmers regular leave for this same reason three times a year during the growing season. These privileges reinforced the seasonal routines of the farmers' prewar lives and deepened their connection to the home front. All told, Ziemann advances a compelling case for the blurring of the lines between the home and military fronts in the social experiences of the Bavarian farmers who served in the war.

His second major contribution deals with the question of the war's brutality. His argument for a more subtle understanding of the more horrific aspects of the conflict also offers much food for thought. Here, Ziemann is most convincing in his analysis of the deployment patterns of the German army in the First World War. These included movement of troops through the three lines that made up the trenches, between dangerous and quiet zones on the front, between posts on the front line and behind the fighting, and finally back to the home front on furloughs. In each of these cases, Ziemann details how the leadership tried to shift troops in and out of the danger zone with some degree of regularity, which caused the development of "short-term alternation between trenches and rest positions behind the front" and a "longer-term rhythm of strain and relaxation" (p. 51). For rural soldiers specifically, a number of other factors came into play. They were often deployed in units that were involved in less intense military zones, being posted more often in the artillery because of their special knowledge of handling horses. They were also, as mentioned above, assigned to the replacement army more regularly, because of the need to utilize their labor in the

agricultural sector. Furthermore, the urban working classes were seen by their superiors as better suited by background to fight the technologically modern type of warfare practiced in the trenches. As a result, the number of rural soldiers killed in battle was smaller in comparison to the percentage of farmers deployed over the course of the war.

These interesting points notwithstanding, Ziemann could have strengthened the work and made it into a more coherent whole in a few ways. First, his analysis could have been reinforced by a fuller treatment of the experience of the actual fighting--treating, for instance, what daily life was really like at the front for those rural soldiers who were stationed there, or how the experience of serving in the artillery compared to combat in the trenches. Especially with regard to the latter, recent research on the French experience has suggested that service in the artillery, while not the exact equivalent of battling in the trenches, could nevertheless be a very harrowing experience for the individuals who were deployed in that wing of the army.[3] Second, his fifth chapter on the home front, "Village Communities, 1914-23," seems out of place in the larger scheme of the study. By itself, the examination of the home front is in many ways a brilliant examination of a multitude of interesting subjects: the ability of married couples to cope with separation because of the war; sexual relations between POWs and single women; the effects of the command economy and inflation on the Bavarian countryside; and the mobilization of associations formed to protect farmers' economic interests and the increasing self-awareness of peasants' place in the social hierarchy. It is, moreover, deftly supported by the same variety of sources--ranging broadly from church records to statistical and military reports--that Ziemann utilizes successfully throughout the rest of the study. Yet, the story told in this chapter is really more one of change than continuity, moving against the grain of Ziemann's larger argument. It also neglects to draw

continuous connections between soldiers' experiences of the war and their involvement at home that one would expect given his argument about the blurring of the domestic and battle fronts.

In many ways, however, these are minor criticisms that do nothing to detract from the larger value of the work. It remains, for example, one of the only works we have on rural experience in Germany during the war.[4] Its contributions in this regard and in refining our understanding of the war's brutalizing effect make it important for specialists interested in Germany and World War I. What is more, Ziemann's vantage point of the long decade of the war from 1914 to 1923 is particularly well suited for a study that seeks to emphasize continuity as opposed to the cataclysmic change usually associated with the Great War. Finally, this translation of Ziemann's original study makes the work more accessible for undergraduate courses on the First World War or for graduate readings courses in European history, where it cannot always be assumed that students have the necessary background in German to engage the original monograph. All told, these strengths outweigh the work's minor weaknesses, for Ziemann makes important contributions to our understanding of both the First World War and imperial Germany.

#### Notes

[1]. Benjamin Ziemann, *Front und Heimat: Ländliche Kriegserfahrungen im südlichen Bayern 1914-1923* (Essen: Klartext, 1997). Alex Skinner's translation is generally good, with only a few rough spots. The generality implied in the English title is nevertheless somewhat misleading, as the archival research for the work was based on primarily southern Bavarian sources. The bibliography in the original German study is more detailed than that published in the English translation, though the footnotes were updated to reflect recent developments in historiography.

[2]. The standard work on the myth of the war enthusiasm is Jeffrey Verhey, *The Spirit of*

1914: *Militarism, Myth and Mobilization in Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); the main study of the German working class and the Social Democrats in 1914 is Wolfgang Kruse, *Krieg und nationale Integration: Eine Neuinterpretation des sozialdemokratischen Burgfriedenschlusses 1914/1915* (Essen: Klartext, 1993).

[3]. See, for instance, Martha Hanna, *Your Death Would Be Mine: Paul and Marie Pireaud in the Great War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006). Hanna's fascinating study analyzes the wartime experiences and correspondence of a French peasant turned artilleryman, Paul Pireaud, who served at Verdun and corresponded regularly with his wife back home over the course of the war.

[4]. Jay Winter and Antoine Prost, *The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 165.

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