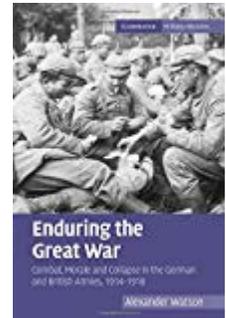


**Alexander Watson.** *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914-1918.* Cambridge Military History Series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. xv + 288 pp. \$99.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-88101-2.



**Reviewed by** Antoine Capet

**Published on** H-Albion (February, 2009)

**Commissioned by** Mark Hampton (Lingnan University)

Recent comparative studies of British and German attitudes in the period of the First World War in the wide sense seem to be the preserve of young German scholars.[1] Alexander Watson contributes to redressing the balance on the British side with a superbly researched monograph on a difficult subject, because much of it has to do with unquantifiable psychological elements like the combatant's frame of mind and the individual's will to fight and kill, as the heated debate on "brutalization" has shown.[2] This book is derived from Watson's PhD thesis, supervised by Niall Ferguson, and it is published in the Cambridge Military History series, edited by Hew Strachan--two great names in the field, of course.

The comparative approach is not an easy one, with the constant necessity of avoiding the pitfall of offering two poorly related parallel narratives rather than a meaningful analysis in which each point made for one "side" helps to understand better what took place on the other, and why. A permanent reciprocating motion between the two cases in point is essential--and overall, we have it

in Watson's work, with the glaring exception, for reasons that will appear later, of the final chapter ("The German Collapse in 1918: Strike, Mutiny or an Ordered Surrender?"), whose monographic dimension is clear from the title.

Much of the interpretative analysis of the evolution of the German soldier's morale and consequent will to fight and temptation to surrender rests on the 1920 retrospective evaluation by Walter Ludwig (who had fought on the Western Front), "Beiträge zur Psychologie der Furcht im Kriege" (Contributions to the Psychology of Fear in War)--but it is magnificently completed by a comprehensive use of combatants' diaries and letters, even though, as the author is well aware, their degree of veracity is often questionable.[3] In his appendix 1, Watson provides a very useful table of German soldiers' coping strategies compiled from a questionnaire drawn and exploited by Ludwig. On the one hand, it is, of course, a pity that there is no strict British equivalent to this capital source coming from someone who was both an insider (an officer in the German Army)

and an outsider (a professional psychologist). On the other hand, the Imperial War Museum has no dearth of diaries and letters, of which, naturally, Watson makes full use.

The dilemma over their veracity (whether they really reflected the writers' feelings) is in a way of secondary importance, since a number of useful conclusions can be derived on both sides from the image that the authors wanted these "records" to project. One interesting point in Watson's comparisons is the shared refuge in fatalism, and he also establishes from the German diaries and letters examined that, contrary to the common British view of the Germans, they also valued humor as a coping strategy, including forms seen as quintessentially British, like derision and even black humor. And, if one British soldier wrote to his mother about the nice flower garden bordering his trench that he and his pals had created, a German observer noted the presence of neat lawns kept by frontline artillerymen. In addition to the issue of veracity, one great danger—one that constantly faces the historian, but perhaps even more so the historian of war—is reading too much into the evidence with the benefit of hindsight, and Watson, who is obviously wary of it, strenuously strives to demolish the lingering nationalistic interpretations based on supposed national character. Superiority in arms does not necessarily imply moral superiority, Watson reminds us.

Why then did these men fight for so long? is a question explored in chapter 2, "Why Men Fought: Combat Motivation in the Trenches." Why did the German soldier finally collapse before his British counterpart after holding out for four years? is examined in chapter 6, the final chapter. If one discounts unscholarly explanations, like ingrained unthinking obedience versus inborn self-reliance and love of liberty, answering these questions becomes extremely uneasy. The quality of the leadership, especially the establishment of a special *rapport* by the junior officers in contact

with their men in the trenches, is, in itself, a subject fraught with difficulties. To take but one, Watson examines the accusation of "elitism" in the German Army—but the education and recruitment of their British opposite numbers was no less elitist. Worse, "amateur" officers who were hastily trained by German authorities (and only a little less so in Britain) to follow the considerable expansion of army numbers were generally less good at establishing confidence from their subordinates because they lacked the "natural paternalism" that was so effective in building up trust. Watson addresses these issues in chapter 4, "Junior Leadership: Command, Cohesion and Combat Motivation."

Another paradox (examined in chapter 5, "Morale and Military Endurance") is that one would have expected fresh, professional troops in 1914 to have higher endurance than the war-weary conscripts of 1918. This is what the *British Official History* suggests. But this common-sense expectation is belied by the facts: the actual figures given by Watson show that, in fact, the reverse is true—more surrendered, proportionately, under the German offensive of August 1914 than in the spring of 1918. The "mental coping strategies" identified by Watson, "Adaptation/Optimism, Religion and Superstition/Positive Illusions" (the title of chapter 3), did not seem to differ between the enlisted men and the conscripts, or between the British and the Germans. For Watson, these strategies were as important for making the men agree to fight during all these years as cultural traits, discipline (called coercion by some authors), primary groups, and patriotism (lowest in the priorities of letter and diary writers from either country).

In the final analysis, Watson convincingly suggests that it was not moral fiber or the supposed superiority of the Entente cause that won or lost the war—it was plain war equipment. The *Materialschlacht* (Watson rightly keeps these German expressions that cannot be translated literal-

ly, giving a faultless glossary in the appendices) was bound to turn in favor of the Entente combatants in the long run. And, unlike psychological factors, the production and availability of matériel can easily be quantified--notably the Entente's superiority in tanks and aircraft, which made resistance in the trenches useless. The officer class was percipient enough to realize that the war was lost from the summer of 1918--and surrenders were often ordered by the commanding officers, not the result of disorderly dislocation of fighting units due to insubordination on the part of the men, influenced by Bolshevik or other agitators. One leaves the book feeling that if the superiority in matériel in the summer of 1918 had been in the other camp, the same final chapter could have been written verbatim--simply substituting "British soldier" for "German soldier."

It is impossible to do justice to such an impressive study in a short review. As an instrument for further research on the subject, it is without parallel: the nine pages listing the archival sources used provide an ideal springboard for any subsequent scholar interested in exploring the field further (since this is, of course, an inexhaustible field), while the copious bibliography of up-to-date primary and secondary publications will be a great help for anyone teaching a course on the First World War. The book can also be unreservedly recommended to advanced students, if only because of the clarity of the jargon-free prose and the painstaking proofreading (not a single typo was detected, including in the complicated German compound words). Though ecologically justified, the photographs on ordinary paper (as opposed to glossy plates) are by their nature of very poor quality. The tables and graphs are a great help in visualizing the points made in the text, as is the map of the Western Front. As usual in Cambridge University Press scholarly monographs, we have convenient footnotes, not infuriating endnotes. Needless to say, they are abundant

and often provide extremely valuable complementary information--as it should be.

The only reservation that one can have concerns the price--the one-hundred-dollar academic book is now with us, inevitably and regrettably restricting access for private individuals to published research of this quality. In spite of this high price, all university libraries will want to acquire it--as well as all departments of history and departments of British, German, and war studies.

#### Notes

[1]. See, for example, recent H-Net reviews, including Antoine Capet, "The Navy as Cultural Symbol," review of *The Great Naval Game: Britain and Germany in the Age of Empire*, by Jan Rüger, H-Albion, H-Net Reviews, April 2008, <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14428>; Jeremy Black, "Showing the Fleet," review of *The Great Naval Game*, H-Albion, H-Net Reviews, December 2007, <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13403>; Antoine Capet, review of *The Great War and Medieval Memory: War, Remembrance, and Medievalism in Britain and Germany, 1914-1940*, by Stefan Goebel, H-Albion, H-Net Reviews, July 2007, <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13403>; and Florian Keisinger, review of *The Great War and Medieval Memory*, H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews, June 2007, <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=21466>.

[2]. See, for example, George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth Century Warfare* (London: Granta, 1999); and Stéphane Audouin-Rouzeau, Annette Becker, Christian Ingrao, and Henry Rousso, eds., *La violence de guerre 1914-1945: Approches comparées des deux conflits mondiaux* (Bruxelles: Éditions Complexe, 2002).

[3]. Walter Ludwig, "Beiträge zur Psychologie der Furcht im Kriege," in *Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für angewandte Psychologie*, vol. 21, *Beiträge zur*

*Psychologie des Krieges*, ed. William Stern and Otto Lipmann (Leipzig: J. A. Barth, 1920), 125-172.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

**Citation:** Antoine Capet. Review of Watson, Alexander. *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914-1918*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. February, 2009.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24067>



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