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Stefan Goebel. *The Great War And Medieval Memory: War, Remembrance and Medievalism in Britain and Germany, 1914-1940.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. 357 pp. $90.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-85415-3.

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Early in the First World War, a British cavalry private led a fearsome Prussian Uhlan he had just captured back to base. "But why didn't you put your sword through him?" asked his officer. "Well, sir," replied the private, "the gentleman wasn't looking" (p. 198). Stefan Goebel's superb book is brimming with apposite examples like this one, that sum up perfectly the differences in the way Britons and Germans constructed their memories of the war. German memory focused more on the indomitable will rather than chivalry, and while the writings of Ernst Jünger found an appreciative readership in Britain as well, not all critics there were willing to accept his glorification of trench warfare. One reviewer found little more than "reflections on the nobility of being noble and how noble it is to slaughter or be slaughtered for my country, right or wrong" (p. 187).

Before he embarks on his comparison of the two countries, Goebel lays out with exemplary clarity the interpretative highlights of the recent historiographical debates in this area. On the German side, the consensus has followed the functionalist reading of Reinhart Koselleck, who discerned a repeated politicization of the memory of fallen soldiers. This point was highlighted even more in the research of George Mosse, who seemed to be working backwards from the Nazi cult of the dead. For Britain the emphasis has lain not so much on patriotism as bereavement, with David Cannadine and Jay Winter both prominent proponents of this "grief school." Whereas the terrible human losses helped boost resentment and right-wing extremism in Germany, Bob Bushaway has shown the British cult of the fallen soldier as a force not of political polarization, but of social integration and merely moderate conservatism. In contrast to the politically significant veterans' organizations in Germany, totaling several million members, the typical Tommy showed no interest in their British equivalent, the British Legion, which encompassed no more than 10 percent of veterans (some four hundred thousand members at its height). Britons wanted to forget the war and return to their prewar, civilian lives.

After summarizing the discussion on various types of memory, communicative, cultural, and collective--and adding a category of his own, existential memory--Stefan Goebel trims the focus of this book specifically to a study of war memorials, with three dimensions: their iconography, epigraphy, and ceremonial role. Many historians have followed Paul Fussell, Modris Eksteins, and Samuel Hynes in considering the First World War a rupture with the past from which ensued the burgeoning of cultural modernity. As suggested by the book's title, Goebel takes a fresh look at the evidence and teases out an affirmation, rather than a rejection, of historical continuity, expressed in the form of an idealization not of the glory days of the *Kaiserreich* or the British Empire in the nineteenth century, but of the remote past of the Middle Ages.

In Germany, after their defeat in 1918, veterans were desperate to convince themselves and the German people that their sacrifice had not been in vain. Consequently these military men played an important role in erecting monuments. In Britain, the situation was very different, and war memorials were considered to be a tribute from the community to the soldiers, so that the initiative usually came from civilians. National symbols differed significantly. The French interred an unknown soldier on the same day as the British, but the *soldat inconnu* in Paris emphasized the defense of the republic and was accompanied on his procession through the streets by the embalmed heart of Léon Gambetta, the champion of French republicanism at the time of the Franco-Prussian War. Westminster Abbey's Unknown Warrior, on the other hand, was stylized as a "deferential Christian courtier" (p. 44). The closest the Germans got to a national memorial was situated, far from the capital, in distant East Prussia, now separated from the rest of Germany by the new state of Poland, and by its very location suggestive of irredentism and revenge. This monument at the site of Paul von Hindenburg's 1914 victory at the Battle of Tannenberg took on the appearance of a massive medieval fortress, protecting at its center the mass grave of twenty unidentified German soldiers from the Russian front. Only in 1935 was the site formally declared to be a national memorial (*Reichsehrenmal*), when it was also redesigned to focus on the mausoleum for Hindenburg, who had died the previous year. The twenty unknown soldiers were then dug up and reburied in the side chapels, though not perhaps as Goebel proposes, because Adolf Hitler "fancied himself the embodiment of the unknown soldier" (p. 38). I would suggest that the reason may have had more to do with the wish not to compete with the other group mausoleum being constructed at the same time: the Temples of Honor in Munich, which housed the coffins of the sixteen Nazi "martyrs" from the Beer Hall Putsch of 1923. The 1930s mindset considered these men the true heroes, who had paved the way for the glorious Third Reich. Goebel is certainly correct in stating that Tannenberg now came to represent elite heroism, in the form of the war hero Hindenburg, rather than the equality of sacrifice embodied in the unknown soldiers. Surely, too, the site sent a territorial message, as Hitler's plans for *Lebensraum* were unfolding. This depiction represented a bastion of Germanness against the onslaughts of the East, as a contemporary souvenir booklet in my possession has it. At the same time, the continuing vulnerability of the "bloodsoaked earth" here was emphasized. This, the visitor was reminded, was the very spot where the Teutonic Knights had vanquished the heathen foe in 1410, as marked by a giant boulder or *Findling*, deliberately reminiscent of a much earlier presence in prehistoric times. A second boulder was set up after the First World War nearby at the alleged exact spot from which Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff had directed the battle. And to press home the deep historical roots of a prehistoric "Hun's grave" even further, an even larger *Findling* was placed at the entrance to the Hindenburg crypt itself.[1] Goebel analyzes with care the Nazis' remarkable ability "to recycle

and reinvent *lieux de mémoire* for their own purposes" (p. 130). Comparing different commentaries about the Tannenberg site, he shows that, whereas in the 1920s "the east was seen as a territory which could be manipulated and colonized," by 1939 the prevailing rhetoric portrayed the East as "an eternal combat zone of racial struggle" (p. 134).

With nine million people killed during the First World War, it is only natural that religious motifs should dominate the memorialization of the dead. Military action on both sides had been justified during the war itself with religious rhetoric and biblical quotations. Few criticized this representation of a "holy" war, like Oxford's Regius Professor of Divinity, who accused fellow clergymen of acting like "mad Mullahs preaching a Jehad" (p. 84). Representations of saints had already featured in wartime propaganda. The Archangel Michael was the favorite choice of Germans, and he cropped up on German cartoon postcards, brandishing his flaming sword over Britain or British soldiers. St. George, the patron saint of England, was the most common preference for British monuments, invariably accompanied by a dying dragon at his feet. After the war, St. Michael and other saints were largely restricted to Roman Catholic monuments in Germany, as the Protestant North tended to dislike religious emblems, sometimes even eschewing the use of a crucifix on war memorials. The minster church at Weingarten in Württemberg holds striking statues of both George and Michael from 1923. Typically, they are clothed in a rather bizarre mixture of ancient and medieval dress. The very Aryan-looking, bare-chested St. George wears a Roman centurion's skirt, medieval chain-mail leggings, and a modern German steel helmet. St. Michael, wearing a simple shift, carries a pair of scales, whose purpose Goebel explains to be to weigh the souls of the dead. If that is so, then the dead soldiers do not fare too well, for the scale holding a cross is far heavier than the other, which contains a steel helmet. I am tempted to interpret this as a subtle attempt by the church to reassert Christian values over the excessive militarism that had characterized the Great War. In Britain, Christian heroism was sometimes contrasted with the ruthlessness of the enemy. Stained-glass windows depicted St. George in armor against a background of ruins or a burning cathedral, often as a reminder of the rape of Louvain. A 1919 window in the church at Swaffham Prior shows German U-boats and Zeppelins with the caption, "The Aggression and Barbarities of German Militarism." By contrast, a war memorial in Osnabrück triumphantly depicted U-boat successes and a Zeppelin bombing raid as a source of pride, with St. Michael in attendance. This delight in destruction is depicted in a number of German wartime postcards that I own. One is reminded of A. J. P. Taylor's mischievous comment: "The Allies, and particularly the British, managed to give the impression that they acted brutally or unscrupulously with regret; the Germans always looked as though they were enjoying it."[2]

In the chapter entitled "Chivalry and Cruelty," Goebel sums up revealingly the different attitudes between the two countries by saying: "The blood sacrifice of Britain's youth was tragic; Germany's redemptive" (p. 207). One might recall here Saul Friedländer's discussion of "redemptive anti-Semitism" in his book on the Third Reich, but in a chapter that begins in the First World War.[3] The German leadership was more effective in giving the public a commanding sense of purpose. In a similar context, I have always been struck by this rather plaintive remark during the Second World War from the British directorate of army education: "One great advantage which the Germans have had over us in this war, up to now, has been a much clearer understanding of what they are fighting for."[4] The search for redemption continued through to the 1940s, fueled by thoughts of betrayal. For its war memorial the University of Vienna chose a bust of the murdered Siegfried, who was stabbed in the back. Goebel points out the allusion to Siegfried again in the monument to

the dead of the Queen Augusta Guards Grenadier Regiment No. 4 in Berlin's Garrison Cemetery. The body of a soldier surmounts the tomb, completely hidden under a draped shroud, except for a clenched fist that thrusts out menacingly. Officers paying their respects at this 1925 memorial would probably have been familiar both with Richard Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* (1876) and with Virgil's *Aeneid*, which provides the quotation in Latin engraved on the side: "May an avenger one day rise from my bones" (pp. 260-261). Wagner was a frequent guest at the unveiling of German war memorials, such as Munich's "sleeping soldier" next to its Army Museum (Siegfried's funeral march), or Göttingen University's eight young nude men bearing their fallen comrade (the prelude to Act 2 of *Die Walküre* [1870], with its Valhalla theme).

Goebel calls the use of medievalist imagery "neither 'traditionalist' nor 'modernist' in the conventional sense," but part of an attempt to "accommodate the violent modernity of the war in collective remembrance" in a way that did not suggest a complete historical rupture with the past (pp. 185-186). The war memorials betray the difficulty of coming to terms with the killing. Both Britain and Germany tended to show figures in a deep and peaceful slumber, an "enchanted" sleep that diverted thoughts from the horrible dismemberment of bodies that had in fact occurred on the battlefield. A good example of this is the recumbent figure of war hero T. E. Lawrence (though he was fatally injured in a motor-cycle accident later in 1935). He lies with legs crossed, head turned slightly to one side, and one hand resting on his chest. He could be taking an afternoon nap.

Goebel's research is comprehensive and meticulous, but he gets into a frightful muddle over this magnificent effigy of Lawrence of Arabia. The monument is at Wareham, which is not, however, in the county of Devon, but in Dorset. And no pile of books is found at his feet, but rather three books are carved in stone near his head: the fifteenth-century *Morte d'Arthur* plus two anthologies of Greek and English poetry. Nor does the Tate Gallery have a cast of this Portland Stone monument in its collection, but rather a copy of a bronze bust of Lawrence by the same artist, Eric Kennington. And in fact, Lawrence's "gravestone" is not at St. Martin's Church, as Goebel assumes. Lawrence is actually buried several miles to the west in the little churchyard at Moreton, near Dorchester, where he does have an open book at the foot of the grave, inscribed "Dominus illuminatio mea." Is there a jinx on the memorialization of Lawrence? Even the British National Archives trips up over that Latin phrase, and describes it incorrectly at its Web site as the "motto" of All Souls' College, Oxford, where Lawrence was a Fellow.[5] Are no Oxford graduates at the National Archives today able to recognize that these opening words in Latin from Psalm 27 instead form the centerpiece of the coat of arms of their entire university?

My little complaint about these details does not, however, detract from my overall admiration for this elegantly argued book that forces us to rethink the dominant paradigms about the rupture of the First World War. In his conclusion, the author cautions us not to see his book as setting up a "false dichotomy between modernism and medievalism" (p. 287). The two concepts often shared space in commemorative art. And medievalism was "not primarily a nostalgic yearning for a different time, an accounting of loss, but an affirmation of continuity with a meaningful past in the shadow of a human catastrophe" (p. 287). Much food for thought is found in this excellently illustrated book for scholars of both twentieth-century Germany and Britain. I can perhaps best sum up my reaction to it by saying that I expected this to be a merely interesting book, but found it to be a fascinating one.

Notes

[1]. Hansgeorg Buchholtz, *Reichsehrenmal Tannenberg* (München: Knorr & Hirth, 1936), 2-4, 14. Goebel does not cite this particular source, but has found similar contemporary ones on the monument.

[2]. A. J. P. Taylor, *The First World War: An Illustrated History* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), 76.

[3]. Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews: Volume I: The Years of Persecution, 1933-1939* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997). This phrase is the title he gives to chapter 3, 73-112.

[4]. This is the opening sentence from November 1942 in a collection of educational pamphlets. A. D. K. Owen, *The British Way and Purpose: Consolidated Edition of B. W. P. Booklets 1-18* (London: H. M. Stationery Off., 1944), 13.

[5]. "Eric Henri Kennington," The National Archives, http://yourarchives.nationalarchives.gov.uk/index.php?title=Kennington%2C_Eric_Henri_(1888-1960)_Artist (accessed April 21, 2009).