

H-Net Reviews

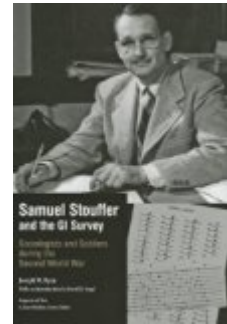
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Joseph W. Ryan. *Samuel Stouffer and the GI Survey: Sociologists and Soldiers during the Second World War*. University of Tennessee Press, 2013. 255 pp. \$64.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57233-996-5.

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



“Do you have a minute for a survey?” “May I ask you a few questions?” “Hi, I’m calling on behalf of a major retailer who wants to know your opinion.” It’s a bane of modern existence; no matter the issue, the product, or the service performed, someone is going to follow up a few days later with ten questions about how things went. On a scale of 1 to 5, how would you feel about a book that examines the World War II origins of the modern survey, and the man who made scientific polling a standard tenet of sociological research?

Joseph Ryan has produced such a book in *Samuel Stouffer and the GI Survey*, which, as its title suggests, tells two stories. An early entry in the Legacies of War series, the bulk of the work is not so much biography as a narrow slice of Stouffer’s and his subordinates’ work for the U.S. Army during the Second World War. The remainder addresses *The American Soldier*, the groundbreaking, postwar, two-volume series that presented the results of the exhaustive army surveys, and analyzes the role that *The American Soldier* has since played in the field of sociology.

Stouffer, who was the driving force behind the Research Branch, a unit within the War Department Morale Branch, is considered one of the principal forebears of modern, survey-based sociology. Ryan tracks Stouffer’s small-town Iowa youth, his education and training from newspaperman to University of Chicago doctoral student, and his early academic work in the then-nascent sociology discipline. Stouffer was brought into the War Department several months before the American entry into the war, with a broad mission to assist the Morale Branch as the army began drafting large numbers of sol-

diers. The service faced a similar problem in World War I, and relied to some extent on the work of Raymond Fosdick, a reformer who headed the Commission on Training Camp Activities (CTCA). The CTCA pursued a campaign of wholesome entertainment, exercise, and community as a means of combatting the draftees’ penchant for prostitutes, fighting, and drunkenness. Shortly after the war, Fosdick submitted a report outlining his observations of the American Expeditionary Force; among its chief findings, the conscript army had poor officer-enlisted relations as a result of the perquisites that commissioned officers were given and junior officers’ lack of a feel for their subordinates’ concerns.

The U.S. Army of the Second World War was unlike any before or since. Its conscripts were markedly better educated than the cadre of interwar noncommissioned officers leading them, and its sheer size created an amazing diversity of opinion, background, and talents. Stouffer faced the resistance typical in any large organization, and Ryan—a retired army officer—is candid in his observations on the sclerotic ways in which the army reacts to civilian advice. The Research Branch, however, had the solid backing of the chief of staff, George C. Marshall, and his imprimatur gave it the freedom to conduct useful and extremely far-reaching surveys of the troops and their attitudes. Topics included feelings about the war, officer-enlisted relations, the various branches (air corps, infantry, armor); front-line troops versus rear-echelon support units; and significant inquiry into race relations and attitudes. Ryan chronicles the growth of the Research Branch in both personnel and mission, the complexity of the surveys it utilized, and the speed with which the army implemented changes as a result. Tangible re-

sults included institution of the Combat Infantryman's Badge and other distinctive infantry insignia to bolster the morale of the troops who faced the highest casualties and generally dreariest conditions. Research Branch advice was also central to altered troop rotation and leave policies, and to the point system that determined the priority for demobilization after the war ended. Building an enormous conscript army is a monumental undertaking; doing so in a democratic country, without the tools of indoctrination and control, required a deft, flexible approach and Stouffer's work plainly aided the task.

Soon after the war, the Research Branch sociologists returned to academic and research institutions, but also began work on a comprehensive review of the enormous amounts of data they had collected. Their efforts resulted in *The American Soldier*, a two-volume tome published by Princeton University in 1949. Two volumes were added a few years later but not authored by the core team. Ryan provides a detailed analysis of the structure of the series, with chapters addressing both the pressing and the mundane issues that the army faced. The big questions included inculcating replacement soldiers into well-developed teams, minimizing what were then called combat-related psychoneurotic disorders, and the state of race relations. Prosaic topics ranged from the ability of northern soldiers to adjust to southern climes—and vice versa—to the importance of mail, exercise, and hot food to morale. The data were presented in dense prose with numerous charts and graphs, but with a careful attempt to avoid interjecting too much sociological theory into the presentation. Instead, *The American Soldier* was a landmark attempt to create a primary-source document. Its authors expected that later researchers, including histori-

ans, sociologists, and military trainers, could use the data to support their scholarship.

Ryan provides an exhaustive review of the critical reviews *The American Soldier* received. Some hailed it as an extraordinary effort; some thought it should have applied greater scientific technique through ideation of hypothesis. A few, especially Arthur Schlesinger Jr., were critical of virtually every aspect of the project, accusing the work of simply confirming much of what was already known. Many reviewers, from all points on the spectrum and across audiences, suggested that an abridged version would serve a much better purpose. At over 1,400 pages of densely packed data, it surely was not light reading.

Ryan also examines the legacy of *The American Soldier* through a bibliographic chapter that identifies numerous treatises and studies that include the work in their source materials. This literature review could have easily been relegated to the extensive notes or to an appendix, but it does not materially detract from the book.

In an era in which the trope of a ragtag bunch of civilians in uniform—whether codebreakers or moviemakers or Monuments Men—keeps getting recycled, a roomful of sociologists designing and executing surveys of millions of soldiers could easily find their place in the genre. But *Samuel Stouffer and the GI Survey* is dissertation-level scholarship, and will not particularly resonate with lay readers. For those seeking an understanding of the World War II roots of modern opinion polling, an examination of the effects the GI Survey had on wartime operations, and an analysis of the place of *The American Soldier* in the historiography of sociology, Ryan's work will be an excellent and illuminating resource.

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