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Contemporary Accounts of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars in German Central Europe

Leighton S. James has added a significant volume to the Palgrave Macmillan series War, Culture and Society, 1750-1850. Using late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century memoirs, diaries, letters, and printed sources produced by both combatants and civilian eyewitnesses of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars in German central Europe, he greatly contributes to our understanding of the wartime experiences of German-speaking Europeans and reveals the only modestly changing culture of warfare between 1792 and 1815.

Most significantly, James asserts and reinforces the most recent historiography that reassesses the impact of the wars on the development of German nationalism. As with Karen Hagemann’s 2006 article “Occupation, Mobilization, and Politics: The Anti-Napoleonic Wars in Prussian Experience, Memory and Historiography” and Ute Planert’s book *Der Mythos vom Befreiungskrieg* (2007),[1] James’s thesis is that “the diversity, intricacy and uncertainty evident in eyewitness narratives was overshadowed and overlaid by the political and moral certitude of nationalist propagandists” of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries (p. 195). During the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, military professionalism and loyalties to the particularism of specific German states trumped Prussocentric German nationalism among military men. And German-speaking civilians often suffered more from the demands of “German liberators” than from French occupiers.

James describes both military and civilian memories of the wars in German central Europe as more closely related to the horrific realism of Hans Jacob Grimmelshausen’s *Simplicissimus* (1668) and memories of the Thirty Years’ War than to the romantic nationalism of Ernst Moritz Arndt’s *Was ist des Deutschen Vaterland?* (1813). For too long, historians accepted Arndt’s views as the norm and missed quite contrary feelings regarding particularistic *Vaterland(s)* and “Wars of Liberation.”

What was new about the eyewitness accounts of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, according to James, was not evidence of new German nationalism, but the impact of the Enlightenment, which made more central Europeans literate and interested in their own and others’ descriptions of “foreign lands.” Military campaigns and even captivity in enemy hands became opportunities to examine encountered lands and peoples. Soldiers’ stories became a form of travel literature and appealed to readers of their letters and memoirs for that very reason. Of course, it was the “outlandish and exotic” costumes and life styles of eastern Europeans, especially Poles, Russians, and eastern Jews, that attracted both the attention and disdain of German-speaking soldiers and civilians. Because of the proximity of France and the linguistic and cultural education of members of higher society German speakers, encounters with France and Frenchmen tended to be more favorably commented upon. Such insights would have made later Prussocentric German national-
ists like Heinrich von Treitschke blush. In fact, he denounced such “unGerman sentiments” in his Deutsche Geschicht in 19. Jahrhundert (1879-94).

James makes excellent use of both writings from the period and the most modern historical research. Impressive, too, is his mining of the archives, not only of Berlin, Munich, Stuttgart, and Vienna but also of Warsaw. My only quibble is that James overlooks his own insights regarding German particularism when he comments regarding an obelisk erected in 1833 in Munich to commemorate the thirty thousand Bavarians who died in Russia in 1812. He suggests that the inscription “They too died for the liberty of the Fatherland” means that “in Bavaria the Russian campaign became coupled to the Wars of Liberation in a narrative of German freedom” (p. 186). In fact, the monument erected in 1833 was one that honored “Bavarian nationalism” at a time when, as Abigail Green reminded us in Fatherlands: Building and Nationhood in Nineteenth-Century Germany (2001), state building in places like Bavaria, Hanover, Saxony, and Württemberg was the real goal of governments that were attempting to use the past to shape the then present. James is to be commended overall, however, for his successful effort to historicize our understanding of the perspectives of the German speakers who survived and remembered the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars.

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