The international and multi-disciplinary conference focused on the interrelationship of race, gender, and military heroism in U.S. History from 1914 to 2014. In his introductory remarks, SIMON WENDT (Frankfurt) stressed that military heroism became a key symbol of what was regarded as a heterosexual, masculine white nation in 20th-century America as well as a major discursive battleground on which dominant notions of race, gender, and national identity were negotiated, challenged, and revised. He explained that the conference sought to probe this complex interrelationship and how it changed, focusing on the question of how military heroism helped to construct and challenge racialized and gendered hierarchies in the United States. The conference put particular emphasis on ethnic minorities and women and their agency in hero-making processes. For that reason, Wendt proposed a broader definition of heroism that goes beyond officially acknowledged war heroes and takes into account acclaim from marginalized groups, even though most forms of praise for military heroism stress soldiers’ willingness to risk their lives to save a fellow soldier or fight courageously against impossible odds. In addition, Wendt said, students of military heroism needed to take into account the history of the term “hero” and “heroine” as well as the differences between Western and indigenous notions of heroism.

The first panel examined military heroism, gender and race during the interwar period. GEORGE LEWIS’ (Leicester) presentation on “The American Legion, Americanism, and Military Heroism, 1919-1941” found that mass warfare along with post-World War I ideals of participatory democracy and an enfranchised citizenry led to wholesale reinterpretations of military heroism. On the modern battlefield, collective responsibilities counted more than individual feats of heroism, and war was widely acknowledged as hellish rather than heroic. After the armistice, the American Legion actively sublimated heroic civic service over traditional military heroism, and civic service became an avenue of rescuing strong manhood that had been eroded by modern wars’ increasing mechanization. Another shift in heroic ideals came during World War II, an era covered by ELLEN D. WU’s (Bloomington, IN) presentation on “The Invention of World War II’s Iconic Japanese American Soldier.” In her talk, she claimed that military heroism facilitated the spread of racial liberalism and the assimilation of non-whites into white middle-class America. During the war, Japanese-Americans - although labeled as enemy aliens - became a prototypical model minority through a coordinated publicity campaign that focused on heroic Nisei (second-generation Japanese-Americans) military servicemen and was launched by the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL). After World War II, the JACL con-
continued to use this heroic narrative to lobby for the nullification of discriminatory practices and for reimbursements for wartime damages. Ultimately, representations of the Nisei as embodiments of martial patriotism helped counter anti-Japanese discrimination and facilitated national recognition and belonging, although they impeded competing representations and left little room for political dissent.

Panel 2 focused on racial minorities and constructions of military heroism between World War I and the Vietnam War. Focusing on Mexican Americans, BRIAN BEHNKEN (Ames, Iowa) argued that this minority used Hispanic heroism on the battlefield to challenge their marginalization as men and as citizens. Despite their patriotic service in the two world wars, however, white Americans did not necessarily accept Mexican-Americans as masculine warriors. During the Vietnam War, a number of Mexican-origin activists came to oppose military service and related notions of military valor, developing novel ideas about affirming their masculinity through activism for equal rights at home. This revised sense of masculinity challenged racism and discrimination and became a major source of empowerment. SIMON WENDT (Frankfurt) analyzed the processes of hero-making that allowed African Americans to call for civil rights but simultaneously served white authorities as a form of social control to alleviate black discontent between 1941 and 1975. Especially during World War II, white authorities readily acknowledged black heroism in the past and the present but did so only in front of black audiences. The African American press continuously accepted such white definitions of military valor, and neither the civil rights movement nor the anti-Vietnam War movement were able to fundamentally challenge this faith in and the efforts of black commentators to conform to white definitions of heroism. MATTHIAS VOIGT's (Frankfurt) talk on the “The Making of Native Heroes during World War II” focused on the Navajo Code Talkers, and the ways in which they were praised as heroic soldiers by the Navajo, the U.S. Marine Corps, government authorities, and the American public. In contrast to mainstream American culture, there was no tradition of hero-worship among the Navajo. Navajo veterans were looked upon primarily as warriors in uniform who protected their tribe. However, since the early 1970s the Navajo Code Talkers Association created greater visibility and fused white American notions of heroism with indigenous ideas about martial valor, highlighting the increasingly hybrid nature of many indigenous cultural practices and their patriotism that is both American and Indian. Following the disclosure of the Navajo’s contributions to the war effort in 1968, the Marine Corps initiated a process that resulted in a growing interest in the history of the Code Talkers in American popular culture and ultimately resulted in their bestowal of U.S. Congressional Medals for heroism. The Navajo Code Talkers received Congressional Medals in 2001; code talkers from other tribes did not receive Congressional Medals until 10 (!) years later.

The third panel examined gender, sexuality, and heroism during the Vietnam War era. INGRID GESSNER’s (Regensburg) presentation on the commemoration of military nurses who had served in Vietnam focused on the way memory challenged dominant narratives of male warriors as protectors and women as protected. According to Gessner, Lynda Van Devanter’s memoir “Home Before Morning” (1983) became an important element in the struggle for representations of women’s war experiences, not only inscribing women into the war narrative, but also acknowledging their agency. At the same time, monuments that commemorate women’s contributions to the war, most famously Glenna Goodacre’s Vietnam Women’s Memorial (1993), highlight women’s roles, but they still remain at the margins of the memorial ensemble in Washington, D.C. STEVE ESTES (Sonoma, CA) focused on “American Heroes and Anti-Heroes in the Vietnam War” in the aftermath of the 1968 My Lai massacre during the Vietnam
War. In Estes’ reading of America’s reactions to the atrocities committed by American service-men, two figures embodied the conflicting notions of (anti) heroism: Lt. Calley, who ordered the killing of Vietnamese civilians, and Warrant Officer Hugh Thompson, who tried to save them from the bloody rampage. The American public was enraged at Calley’s conviction and condemned Thompson as a traitor and snitch for his role in the investigations and trials. By the 1990s when the U.S. reopened relations with the Vietnamese, changing notions of heroism found their expression in Thompson’s rehabilitation and Calley’s portrayal as an anti-hero. SIMON HALL (Leeds) examined the life of Leonard P. Matlovich, an Air Force Technical Sergeant and Vietnam War hero, who came out publicly in order to challenge the military’s blanket ban on homosexuals. Matlovich, a Republican and champion of traditional conservative values, was seen as an ideal test case by the gay community, but his attempts to have homosexual soldiers serve openly in the U.S. Armed Forces were ultimately unsuccessful.

Panel four dealt with continuities and discontinuities in the “heroization” of U.S. soldiers. AMY LUCKER (Newark, NJ) traced photographs of the “weary soldier” during World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. World War II produced realist images that were far less controversial than those taken during the subsequent “forgotten” Korean War, in which journalists frequently depicted exhaustion and fear. The visual depiction of the Vietnam War, by contrast, portrayed soldiers as isolated individuals and revealed the rising doubts about the war. Images of the “un-heroic” weary soldier revealed an emotional truth that raised doubts about war and challenged entrenched traditions of heroic imagery. SONJA JOHN (Berlin) examined the idea of “generational heroism” among Native American veterans, focusing on the Lakota Sioux. Her research on Native soldiers contrasted white stereotypes about Native Americans as a “martial race” with self-perceptions among Lakota veterans and how these perceptions were discussed within Lakota families. John argued that a more complex conceptualization of Native American military heroism was needed. This more nuanced approach requires interrogation of traditional values in a contemporary context, thereby countering the “warrior-to-soldier” narrative and undermining the dominant white heroism discourse. ALEXANDER BIELAKOWSKI (Leavenworth, KS) examined “Ethnic and Racial Minorities Denied the Medal of Honor.” The Medal of Honor (MoH), established in 1862, and today’s highest military award for valor, gradually rose to the top of the pyramid of military honor award by the first half of the 20th century. With the creation of an elaborate honors system, the conditions under which the MoH was awarded changed also, as did attitudes towards the medal. Several minority servicemen were denied the award on grounds of ethnic or racial bigotry, misunderstandings about the contexts of the award, or incompetence.

Panel five examined race, gender, and the heroic warrior in the 21st century. KRISTIN HASS (Ann Arbor, MI) examined representations of heroism in the Washington, D.C.-based exhibit “The Price of Freedom” vis-à-vis other commemorative war memorials on the National Mall. While minorities were increasingly represented in representations of heroism after the 1960s, “The Price of Freedom” affirms many of the elements of traditional tales about the white warrior hero. CARRIE ANDERSEN (Austin, TX) gave a talk on “Virtual Warfare: Drones and the Future of the Soldier in the Call of Duty Series.” With the increase of drones in war zones, the role of the drone pilot has changed and war has become, to some, more like a videogame. Although the global war on terror reinvigorated hegemonic masculinities and myths of heroism, the gaming industry’s representations of drone combat challenged conventional notions of masculine heroism. This represents a deviation from the heroic warrior ideal often highlighted in videogames and mirrors a larger development of soldiers being relegated...
from actual battle space into office space, further blurring the line between the military and civilian binary. AHU TANRISEVER (Berlin) traced the dominant tropes of heroism negotiated in representations of WWII, as a communal effort, and of the Vietnam War, as the moral integrity to abstain from violence, to illustrate how the ambivalent figure of the post-9/11 warrior hero rather highlights the individual soldier and transcends the traditional reluctance to kill. Against the background of socioeconomic and military shifts in the early new millennium, the warrior hero deconstructs its mythic framing by disclosing its existence in a field of tension resulting from a clash between the necessities of wage labor and the discursive idealization of a warrior identity, highlighting the growing awareness about the significance of class as a decisive parameter in shaping lived realities as well as voluntarily enlistment. In the last talk, SARAH MAKESCHIN (Passau) focused on the “The Negotiation of a 21st Century Female Warrior” as viewed through Jane Blair’s Iraq war memoir “Hesitation Kills” (2011). While Blair’s account counters tropes of women as innocent and vulnerable, she simultaneously characterizes the successful female soldier as the women who can make it as a man. Meeting masculinized “Warrior” standards, Blair becomes an integrated member of the “heroic community” of the Marines. Throughout, Blair does not question masculinized gender practices of soldiering. Blair constructs herself as a model of female masculinity, the counter-image to Jessica Lynch, the war’s iconic representative of the “woman in peril”, in whose rescue she takes an active part.

The final discussion pointed to the persistence of the white warrior hero in U.S. society in the twentieth and twenty-first-century. Military heroism frequently served as a social control discourse, yet it also maintained its fluidity and flexibility by incorporating other concepts of marginalized heroism and by constantly adapting to novel circumstances of the changing nature of warfare and American society. Yet while military heroism maintains its inclusionary and exclusionary functions, minorities could utilize the heroism discourse as a resource to challenge their marginalization.

Conference Overview:
Simon Wendt (University of Frankfurt), Introduction to Race, Gender, and Military Heroism in U.S. History

Panel 1: Military Heroism and Race during the Interwar Period and World War II
George Lewis (University of Leicester), “Service”: The American Legion, Americanism, and Military Heroism, 1919-1941
Ellen D. Wu (Indiana University), Nisei in Uniform: The Invention of World War II’s Iconic Japanese American Soldier

Panel 2: Racial Minorities and the Construction of Military Heroism from World War I to the Vietnam War
Brian Behnken (Iowa State University), Hero Street and Beyond: Ethnicity, Masculinity, and Mexican American Military Heroism from the Great War to Vietnam
Simon Wendt (University of Frankfurt), Black Military Heroism in World War II and the Vietnam War
Matthias Voigt (University of Frankfurt), Code Talkers and Warriors: The Making of Native Heroes during World War II

Panel 3: Gender, Sexuality, and the Vietnam War
Ingrid Gessner (University of Regensburg), You Were My Heroes: Remembering Military Nurses of the Vietnam War
Steve Estes (Sonoma State University), American Heroes and Anti-Heroes in the Vietnam War
Simon Hall (University of Leeds), Gays, Military Heroism, and the Perils of Patriotic Protest in the Vietnam War Era
Panel 4: Continuities and Discontinuities in the Heroization of U.S. Soldiers

Amy Lucker (Rutgers University-Newark), Displaying Heroism: Media Images of the Weary Soldier, World War II, Korea, Vietnam

Sonja John (Humboldt University Berlin), Three Generations of Lakota Veterans and the Idea of Intergenerational Heroism

Alexander Bielakowski (Command and General Staff College), Forgotten Heroes: Ethnic and Racial Minorities Denied the Medal of Honor

Panel 5: Race, Gender, and the Heroic Warrior in the 21st Century

Kristin Hass (University of Michigan), The Price of Freedom and the Problem of the American Heroic Imaginary

Carrie Andersen (University of Texas at Austin), Virtual Warfare: Drones and the Future of the Soldier in the Call of Duty Series

Ahu Tanrisever (Free University of Berlin), Whiteness, Masculinity, Class, and the Post-9/11 Warrior Hero

Sarah Makeschin (University of Passau), The Negotiation of a 21st-Century Female Warrior

Final Discussion

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/


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