
Reviewed by Richard Fogarty (University at Albany, SUNY)

Published on H-War (December, 2021)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

"What It Is Like, in War"

War changes those who experience it. That it is a cliché does not make the statement any less true. Whether the claim is that war “makes (boys into) men” and provides a context and opportunities for “glory,” as dominant narratives in many cultures and eras have held, or that war traumatizes and scars all who endure its violence and miseries, as many people in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have increasingly come to believe, the focus on the changes wrought by war is often abstract, on personalities, emotions, psyches. But war is first and foremost a concrete, physical, embodied reality, and many of the mental transformations it engenders are rooted in its corporeal effects and experiences. This is what led an American GI fighting in France after D-Day to move from a description of the profound changes to his and his fellow soldiers’ appearances, changes that made even old friends unrecognizable to each other, to a meditation on what had happened to their humanity: “I wondered how long such a life could be endured by men who had once considered themselves human beings. Would we ever regain our sense of decency?” (p. 44). In her aptly titled and keenly insightful study of the experience of combat in the Second World War, Mary Louise Roberts takes readers inside the individual and collective stories of these bodily transformations and their cultural and psychic consequences. The result, which she calls a “somatic history of war,” is a truly original account of soldiers in battle (p. 3).

In five thematic chapters, Roberts explores how WWII soldiers used their senses to make sense of the war. In other words, she does not merely catalogue the various sounds, smells, sights, tastes, and sensations of combat and everyday soldiering, but analyzes men’s reactions to the daily assault on their senses to reach conclusions about what meaning they drew from these sensory inputs. This meaning helps us reconstitute the lived experiences and what they amounted to. For
instance, coming to know the sounds of battle, especially varying sounds of artillery fire—what kind, where it was coming from, where it would land—amounted to “locating yourself on the map of fire” and, crucially, “gave you the illusion of control” (p. 17). The stench of war signified the condition and fate of bodies, one’s own and those of others. Uniformly awful food telegraphed losses of identity, home, and taste. Rations “sucked all the color and joy out of eating—just as the war sucked all the color and joy out of life” (p. 34). War even engaged the mythical “sixth sense,” often in the form of intuitions about one’s impending fate, which “transformed an endless succession of days into a narrative with a beginning and an end” (p. 37). But the meanings sensory experience created were not merely individual. They bound men together in a shared narrative, measured their sacrifices, and made them comrades in a way that separated them from both their superiors (with their “chickenshit” rules) and from rear-echelon support personnel (whose cleanliness and sensory integrity made them “sissies”): “Stinking, starving misery not only loved company; it created it” (p. 39).

Chapters such as “The Senses,” “The Dirty Body,” “The Foot,” and “The Wound” convey just how important were the various bodily indignities possible, often inherent and inevitable, in soldiering. The book concludes with an exploration of the meaning conveyed to soldiers by the presence of what war creates in the greatest proliferation: “The Corpse.” Not merely an element of the landscape of battle, the corpse “came to symbolize not only the war’s effects, but the war itself. It operated as a framework for understanding the war” (p. 125). In so doing, the dead body was made to “speak,” which can tell “us much about what the war meant to those who fought it” (p. 127). Graves Registration soldiers, who collected and disposed of the dead, were shamed and soiled by their work, in their own eyes and those of others. In contrast to the army bureaucracy, frontline soldiers honored the dead by respecting their often sparse and pathetic (in the literal sense of that term) effects. French civilians saw in dead Allied soldiers the ultimate sacrifice for freedom—the freedom of others. Combat soldiers saw in corpses the precariousness of their own lives, and in so doing “saw the meaning of their war. Forced to leave their selves behind, they fought and died as nothing more than a body, a living corpse” (p. 144).

Roberts is an eminent historian of modern France whose early works, on women and gender in particular, have had a deep impact on our understanding of that nation’s past. She has more recently turned her attention to the history of the Second World War, in France and beyond, with spectacular results. Her latest book, however, is not really a work of French history at all. Although Roberts quotes occasionally from German and French accounts, the overwhelming bulk of testimony comes from British and, above all, American soldiers. The only really sustained treatment of French perspectives amounts to fewer than two pages (on French civilian reactions to the presence of the corpses that littered the landscape as the Allies fought through the country after D-Day, pp. 137-139). A relatively small number of quotations from French and German accounts do nonetheless support her contentions about the way similar conditions and shared experiences across national identities cohere into a common story of infantry misery.

If this work is not primarily concerned with the history of France, apart from providing the setting (along with Italy) for an analysis of mostly American, and some British experiences, neither is it a comprehensive treatment of the experiences of all “soldiers in battle in WWII.” Such a history would have to devote the lion’s share of its attention to Soviet and German soldiers on the eastern front, the largest and most decisive (and arguably most miserable) theater of the war, as well as a great deal of attention to the conditions of combat in the vast Pacific theater. Yet researching and
writing such a history would be a gigantic and probably impossible task—Roberts herself notes that the “enormity of the conflict demands a limited focus” (pp. 3-4). And in fact this limited focus allows her to probe the particularities of, for example, US army infantry culture that made convincing and realistic icons of the protagonists in cartoonist Bill Mauldin’s comic strip *Up Front*: the slouching, unkempt, and cynical GIs Willie and Joe. All the while, the author makes clear that the filth, suffering, pain, and alienation that Willie and Joe gave voice to was also very much a defining aspect of waging war for everyone, everywhere at this time.

The motivating question for Roberts’s study is, “What was it really like?” (emphasis in original, p. 2). This is the same perennial question Samuel Hynes asks in another remarkable book about soldiers in battle, *The Soldiers’ Tale*, calling it “our urgent human question: what is it like, in war?”[4] These books are different, for whereas Hynes explores mostly English-speaking soldiers’ lived experiences of war across the twentieth century through published memoirs, Roberts delves more deeply into the narrower experience of battle in Western Europe in 1944 and 1945 through letters, diaries, and archival documents as well as published accounts. Yet both of these authors demonstrate an acute sensitivity to narrative strategies and the constructed nature not just of written accounts, but of memories themselves. Hynes brought the insights of a WWII veteran and accomplished literary scholar to his analysis, while Roberts is an uncommonly perceptive historian of culture, identity, and historically contingent sensibilities. This yields psychological insights that bring us closer to “truth” of past experience as lived in the body and mind, and is particularly evident when Roberts analyzes the psychic and narrative strategies soldiers used to make sense of their wounds. “Fashioning a continuous account with a beginning, middle, and end enabled these men to mend a traumatic break they experienced when wounded” (p. 104), and soldiers made use of narrative devices such as intuition, luck, larger historical contexts, and more to “control the wounding experience” (p. 105). Particularly striking are the ways both Roberts and Hynes know when to doubt the literal veracity of their sources, but to use that doubt itself as a way of gaining further insight into the psychological effects of experience and of writing about it. As Roberts notes of one man’s account, “One may doubt that Newton’s sense of control was as complete as he claimed. But while the truth of his wounding experience can never be known, how he chose to recollect it is equally important. Wounding was—consciously or unconsciously—experienced as a loss of power. Its recovery was crucial to psychic healing” (pp. 105-106).[5]

As the description above should make clear, Roberts writes with sensitivity and empathy about common soldiers, and has delved deep enough into their personal accounts to recreate their mental worlds. Military historians might object to some missteps with respect to terminology: “operational conditions” are rendered as “operative conditions” (pp. 70 and 92); “Blighty” is a slang term not for London (p. 97) but for England or Britain, from the Hindi and Urdu *bilātī*; and it is at the very least unconventional to refer to Eisenhower and a master sergeant together as “commanders” (p. 125)—the term is usually applied to general officers like the former, and while non-commissioned officers like the latter do indeed exercise command, the vast gulf that separates the two ranks makes it unsurprising that they would have different perspectives on the battlefield. And this reviewer did not find Eisenhower’s statement about the dead after the battle of the Falaise pocket to indicate an aloof attitude at all, but rather an authentic expression of horror, complete with reference to Dante (p. 126). Nonetheless, it is important to note that, overall, Roberts discusses the dilemmas of command with sympathy and understanding. If officers regarded men and bodies as abstractions, admittedly sometimes with harmful or even disastrous results, it did not mean they
were all indifferent to the suffering of their men, and Roberts clearly describes the professional and human dilemma that necessitated this attitude: “It also allowed them to send men to their death in a calculated manner. How else not to be overcome by the moral burden inherent in their power over life and death? How else to decide who would live and who would die, or when a death was justifiable?... The ultimate goal of war was to destroy the enemy, not to spare one’s men. And so it must be” (pp. 84-85). Even high-ranking officers, though still assigned responsibility for the effects of their decisions and actions, are humanized in Roberts’s account.

But it is ultimately with the common soldiers that the author's interest and sympathies lie. This fascinating book ends with a powerful, moving evocation of the infantry soldiers' humanity. In spring 1945, a US army company lost a well-liked comrade and had to leave his body abandoned by a road while the battle raged. But all of the sudden, the men decide they cannot ignore the corpse and move on, as they usually do. They take up the body in an impromptu funeral procession that not even a pusillanimous colonel can stop—one of the men urges his comrades on, “What can they do to us worse than they done? We're gonna die, you goddamn fools.... You dead men: you gonna die in the dirt while this prick sticks pins in maps” (p. 145). The men lay their dead comrade in a field teeming with red and blue flowers, watching, as one of them put it, “the innocent flowers sprinkle the stiffening limbs with loveliness” (146). As Roberts notes, the men made this gesture not because their comrade had died for an abstraction such as freedom, but in order to assert that the dead man himself was not an abstraction, that none of them were. That struggle to claim their humanity was “what the war meant to the infantrymen who fought it” (p. 146).

Notes


[5]. Hynes notes that Robert Graves, veteran of the Great War, wrote, “I would even paradoxically say that the memoirs of a man who went through some of the worst experiences of trench warfare are not truthful if they do not contain a high proportion of falsities” (p. 16), and later hints that Graves may have included one of these falsities in his memoir, “a writer, creating a metaphor for what it is like when you enter war’s world” (p. 52). But even if so, such details may still be “truthful” if not “true” (p. 16).
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
https://networks.h-net.org/h-war


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=57173

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