



David Silbey. *The British Working Class and Enthusiasm for War, 1914-1916.* London and New York: Frank Cass, 2005. x + 189 pp. \$115 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-35005-1.

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Choosing to Enlist

Few historians contest the notion that the outbreak of the First World War saw a surge of popular enthusiasm in Britain that fuelled enlistment in the Army on a massive scale. The vast majority of these volunteers came from the working classes. According to David Silbey, however, scholars have largely ignored the often complex motivations of these individuals, content to explain their uncharacteristic zeal for military service with vague references to increased patriotism, or simply dismiss volunteers as lemmings oblivious to the precipice that awaited them on the Western Front. In *The British Working Class and Enthusiasm for War*, Silbey seeks to explain the reasons behind the willingness of British workers to volunteer for military service from the beginning of the conflict until the imposition of conscription in 1916. Utilizing enlistment statistics as well as hundreds of collections of personal papers held by the Imperial War Museum and the rich but often overlooked Liddle Collection at the University of Leeds, he examines “what motivations the workers had for joining up, how they spoke of those motivations, and how they acted on them” (p. 2).

The book consists of an introduction, six chapters and a conclusion. After explaining his aims and sources in the introduction, Silbey begins the second chapter with an account of the “rush to colours” that followed Britain’s declaration of war against Germany. He challenges the view that enthusiasm for military service diminished after 1914, as well as the notion that the British recruiting system was disorganized and inefficient. Conscription, Silbey argues, resulted not from the failure of the voluntary system to produce adequate numbers, but from the

inability of the government to prevent the enlistment of workers from industries vital to the war effort. In his words, “The voluntary recruiting successfully brought an enormous and unprecedented number of men into the Army. The turn to conscription should not obscure that fact” (p. 37). A very brief third chapter provides a sketch of the geographical and class origins of those who volunteered. Silbey maintains that while working-class volunteers suffered proportionately fewer casualties than their middle- and upper-class counterparts, this was not a reflection of their lack of commitment to the war effort. Rather, it stemmed from the fact that their comparatively poor health left workers more likely to be rejected or assigned to roles behind the front lines.

Chapters 4-7 constitute the most original section of the book. In chapter 4 Silbey contends that growing literacy enabled workers to acquire information about Britain and its place in the world. Government agencies and charities affirmed their importance to British society. Thus, workers believed they had an interest in maintaining Britain’s international position. This conception made enlistment an acceptable choice in 1914. The next three chapters examine more specific motivations of volunteers. Chapter 5 considers enlistment as an escape from the drudgery of working-class life. Silbey shows that this remained an important motive for enlistment even after the horror and protracted nature of the war in Europe became evident. This was particularly true for younger workers. As Silbey remarks: “The particularly powerless position of adolescent males in working class households and a teenage sense of invulner-

ability may have led many to overvalue the adventure they would find in the mud of Flanders” (p. 81). Chapter 6 examines economic motives for enlistment, arguing that regular wages and allowances for families proved to be attractive incentives for workers, particularly in the weak economy of 1914. Even as war production boomed in 1915, however, Silbey maintains that workers volunteered in order to secure safer and more lucrative positions in the Army rather than face conscription into the infantry. Chapter 7 explores the ways that allegiances to society, geographic areas, friends, employers and family affected enlistment. While Silbey acknowledges that loyalties to family or employers could act as constraints, he argues that most allegiances encouraged workers to enlist. As he explains: “They saw something they felt allegiance to and took the path that enabled them to act in its defence” (p. 123). Throughout the book, Silbey emphasizes that rather than simply succumbing to government propaganda and social pressure to enlist, workers made their own calculations on the basis of allegiances and perceived opportunities for adventure or economic gain. As he explains, workers “felt and reacted to external pressures but the true impetus came from within themselves. They were doing what they wanted, if sometimes uncomfortable, unhappily, or doubtfully” (p. 124).

Presented clearly and concisely, Silbey’s study makes a convincing case for the agency of working classes as

they assessed the benefits and drawbacks of enlistment. In the process it provides fascinating insights into the motivations of working-class volunteers, a topic largely overlooked by many historians of the First World War. It is unfortunate that the author has not drawn upon the latest scholarship on the motivations of ordinary soldiers involved in the conflict. Ian Beckett’s *The Great War* (2005) offers an up-to-date synthesis of the literature on the motivations of British volunteers. Gary Sheffield’s *Leadership in the Trenches* (2000) sheds light on the attitudes of working-class soldiers once they joined the Army. Nor does Silbey address in detail some of the more controversial arguments advanced in recent studies. Admittedly, he swipes at Niall Ferguson’s *The Pity of War* (1998) in his conclusion. Given the depth and focus of Silbey’s research, however, one might have expected a more comprehensive assault on Ferguson’s assertions regarding the attitudes of ordinary soldiers. It would also be interesting to learn the author’s opinion of the arguments advanced by Joanna Bourke in *An Intimate History of Killing* (1999). Nonetheless, readers familiar with these studies will recognize the significance of Silbey’s arguments. Overall, David Silbey has shed significant new light on the motivations of working-class volunteers in Britain during the First World War. In the process he has added to our understanding of the conflict and the history of the British working classes.

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