



**Christof Dejung.** *Aktivdienst und Geschlechterordnung: Eine Kultur- und Alltagsgeschichte des Militärdienstes in der Schweiz 1939-1945.* Zürich: Chronos Verlag, 2006. 446 S. EUR 44.80 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-0340-0742-9.

**Reviewed by** Jason Crouthamel (Grand Valley State University)

**Published on** H-German (May, 2007)

## The “Good” Front Experience: The Impact of World War II on Swiss Culture and Identity

As a neutral country during surrounding Europe’s descent into mass violence and genocide, Switzerland has received relatively little attention from scholars dealing with the social and cultural history of modern war. In recent years, Switzerland’s role as a bystander and collaborator during the Holocaust has been the focus of work on this nation.[1] However, Switzerland’s experience with the militarization of society and its subsequent effects on gender roles and cultural identity has been largely overlooked. Because it escaped the brutality and horror that traumatized its neighbors between 1914 and 1945, bypassing Switzerland might seem understandable, as the explosion of scholarship on gender history and war has logically concentrated on societies directly decimated by the twentieth century’s catastrophes.[2] Christof Dejung’s latest volume, however, provides a useful and engaging contribution to the field of cultural and gender history from a rather unique regional perspective. Dejung convincingly demonstrates that a cultural history of Switzerland during the Second World War is essential to understanding that nation’s identity, self-image, and formation of gender and social ideals. By studying Switzerland’s experience with militarism, he broadens our knowledge of the cultural impact of the age of total war.

Dejung argues that the Second World War was a central experience in Swiss “self understanding” (p. 11). The war came to be remembered as the great era of national solidarity, harmonious cooperation between civil and military institutions, mutual support between men

and women on the combat and home fronts, and the will to resist fascism. The Swiss army and the experience of active service provided the basis for Swiss national identity and the memory of the war. The army became the “savior of the nation” and embodied the defensive spirit of a resolute society unified against invasion. This image that was so prevalent in postwar media and official memory-building, however, must be reconstructed from below, Dejung asserts, because it is fraught with complexity and contradictions barely concealed beneath the surface of the official narrative. Dejung focuses on Swiss cultural life to find that Swiss public memory is mostly a construct of official military and conservative interest groups. Most importantly, Dejung argues, the centrality of army service in Swiss memory created an intensely gendered picture of national identity, in which men and women were imagined in strictly constructed roles that persisted long after 1945. The experience of service elevated male perceptions of self-importance, and entrenched bourgeois constructions of women as “the protected,” passive at home with the family. Borrowing from Joan Scott’s work, Dejung approaches the Swiss war experience as a masculine attempt to legitimize both military and social hierarchies. He convincingly demonstrates that the Swiss memory of the Second World War was connected more to codifying gender roles than reality, and he finds much evidence from the private sphere that challenges the official, male, narrative. Relying on oral history interviews, Dejung analyzes ways in which Switzerland’s experience with the Second World War ac-

tually highlighted barely suppressed resentment between men and women, tensions between civil and military institutions, and underlying anti-democratic and even pro-fascist sympathies within the military.

Dejung organizes his book into five main sections dealing with mobilization in 1939, the army's self-promoted role as the basis for national and masculine identity, everyday life in the military, the role of war myths behind the concept of the national community, and postwar memory building. In the first section, Dejung demonstrates that Switzerland's mobilization to defend its borders against a potential German invasion was a life-changing event for men in the military. Despite mind-numbing boredom and the banal reality of daily life in the army, rituals like the oath of allegiance helped cement soldiers' identities to the nation. Further, the military created a mental universe for soldiers that reinforced a polarized sense of gender roles, with men as dominant and playing their role as defenders of the nation and home, and women in supportive or complementary roles in the domestic sphere or in auxiliary military roles, which were devalued by the military and government. Switzerland's war experience thus solidified existing bourgeois gender roles, which remained stable into the 1960s. In his second section, Dejung delves deeper into experiences in the army, which he characterizes as a "total institution" that attempted to cut men from the outside universe and control their external and internal worlds. In the process of accepting army rituals, men adapted themselves to an authoritarian world view that legitimized patriarchal gender discourse and social values. This system was not without tensions, however, as regular soldiers often adapted to "feminine" tasks of cleaning and cooking in service to officers who played "masculine" roles as organizers and decision makers.

In the third section, Dejung investigates in greater depth some of these tensions and divergent ideas about gender roles and the relationship between the army and civil society. Not all soldiers accepted the military's demand for absolute obedience and militarism and they rejected "drill life" as incompatible with their self-image as democratic citizen-soldiers in uniform. Nevertheless, the idea of "comradeship" played an important role for them. Though the term had a basis in the military's authoritarian discourse, it also had a more subversive side. Referencing Thomas Kühne's work, Dejung points to evidence of men adapting roles as nurturers of comrades in the field, showing the softer side of comradeship, which even served as a bulwark against over-regimentation and blind obedience as men created

subcultures that resisted authoritarian rituals.[3] Meanwhile, many officers enthusiastically embraced authoritarian ideals, and even "secretly or openly sympathized with National Socialism" and its racist, anti-democratic worldview (p. 165). Soldiers' jokes and even fantasies of killing German-sympathizer officers highlight the deeper tensions concealed by the official memory of the war. Relations between officers and their men had to be tempered by compromise between draconian officers and more democratic-minded soldiers in order for border defenses to function.

Despite internal tensions and contradictions during the war, official military discourse was dominated by historical myths and religious motifs that gave military service meaning, as explored in section 4. Dejung argues that these myths were used to mobilize attention away from tensions within the army and the retreat in 1940 from the original alpine defensive positions. Military and religious discourse, both sharing right-wing ideologies, marginalized three major groups from the memory of the war: women, the political far left, and Swiss Jewish soldiers. In postwar memory, these myths became even more deep-seated. Even after knowledge of the Holocaust became widespread, Swiss Jews were portrayed as "foreigners" and stereotyped as "unmanly" outsiders in the dominant Christian national community (p. 313). Dejung points to this pervasive cultural antisemitism as a reality that undercuts the official myth of Switzerland as providing humanitarian relief for Jewish refugees, which was seen as the primary task of women while their men defended the borders. Further, Dejung finds in oral history sources evidence of women and the political left aiming criticism at the simplistic construct of the "protective male" and "protected mother" as essentially fascist caricatures that concealed a much more nuanced and complex reality.

In his final section, which focuses on postwar memory, Dejung argues that more difficult and painful war experiences were pushed aside by the myth of a unified, male, defensive national experience. At the same time, Dejung points to considerable dissonance between official and private memory. Instead of emphasizing the war as an event that brought all Swiss together, Dejung finds in these private interviews a picture of refugee politics compromised by antisemitism, fascist sympathies within the officer class, and socio-economic tensions and resentments. These problems all simmered beneath the surface long before revelations of Swiss economic collaboration with the Nazis blew apart old myths in the 1980s and 1990s.

While Dejung convincingly supports his arguments with engaging evidence from “the history of everyday life,” the *Alltagsgeschichte* approach is also problematic. Dejung’s methodology is sometimes narrowly focused, and his work would benefit from broader contextualization in certain sections. While the dissection of everyday cultural life in the Swiss army presents a unique perspective on military history, the hazard of getting bogged down without assessing the larger significance is a potential threat. His discussion of the comradeship ideal, for example, could be compared to other national contexts where this aspect of the front experience served as a basis for fascist ideology. In his conclusion, Dejung might have explored further the interesting irony of a neutral country building its myths without the trauma of a war experience. At the same time, Dejung’s work is quite useful as it opens doors for scholars seeking to do comparative work on gender, front ideology, and the cultural history of militarism. The broader significance of Dejung’s work is that he demonstrates that even in nations not directly devastated by total war, the military experience created conditions that codified existing cultural ideas about gender, ultimately solidifying reactionary ideas about masculine and feminine roles and identities. What is most

interesting about Dejung’s book is that since Switzerland avoided the trauma of human, social, and economic destruction, these reactionary perspectives persisted far longer than in neighboring nations, where conservative ideas about gender were to varying degrees discredited by their connections to fascism. In this vein, Dejung’s book would be most intriguing for historians looking to broaden their understanding of the connections between military experience and gender role construction in the context of modern war.

#### Notes

[1]. See, for example, Jacques Picard, *Die Schweiz und die Juden 1933-1945: Schweizerischer Antisemitismus, jüdischer Abwehr und internationale Migrations- und Flüchtlingspolitik* (Zürich: Chronos, 1994).

[2]. See, for example, Karen Hagemann and Stephanie Schäfer-Springorum, eds., *Home/Front – The Military, War and Gender in Twentieth-Century Germany* (New York: Berg, 2002).

[3]. Thomas Kühne, *Männergeschichte–Geschlechtergeschichte. Männlichkeit im Wandel der Moderne* (Frankfurt a.M., 1996).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

**Citation:** Jason Crouthamel. Review of Dejung, Christof, *Aktivdienst und Geschlechterordnung: Eine Kultur- und Alltagsgeschichte des Militärdienstes in der Schweiz 1939-1945*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. May, 2007.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13213>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).