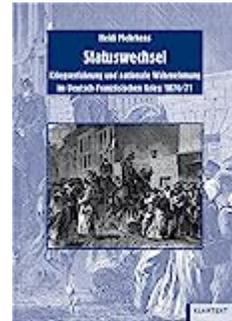


Heidi Mehrkens. *Statuswechsel: Kriegserfahrung und nationale Wahrnehmung im Deutsch-Französischen Krieg 1870/71.* Essen: Klartext Verlag, 2008. 282 S. (gebunden), ISBN 978-3-89861-565-5.



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H. Mehrkens: Deutsch-Französischer Krieg 1870/71

The Franco-German War of 1870-71 gave birth to the Kaiserreich and the Third Republic, thereby contributing to German and French national mythology. In this revised version of her Braunschweig dissertation, Heidi Mehrkens probes how soldiers and civilians on each side of the Rhine experienced this war. She asks how and to what extent their wartime experiences promoted identification with their own nation in explicit contrast to other one.

Specifically, Mehrkens examines what she calls “Statuswechsler,” people whose practical circumstances changed during the course of hostilities in ways both foreseen and unforeseen by the laws and customs of war. These people included combatants, noncombatants serving with the military (chaplains and doctors, for example), and civilians. After a chapter about the relevant laws and customs of war, Mehrkens explores status changes in three parts. The first one covers the war of movement through the Battle of Sedan. It looks at the wounded, the dead, spies, refugees, and armed civilians. The second part deals with the war of movement after Sedan. It includes francs-tireurs, auxiliary armies (the

Garde Nationale and Garde Mobile), prisoners of war, war correspondents suspected of spying, hostages, occupiers, and the occupied. The third section covers siege warfare at Metz and Paris.

We already know something about many of these topics, although Mehrkens’ discussion of the use of hostages as protective shields covers new ground, as does her treatment of French refugees and German expellees. What distinguishes Mehrkens’ study from others, however, is how she approaches each situation from four different angles. First, what happened? Second, how did the actions comport with norms at the time? Were they expected? Acceptable? Third, how did members of the military and others directly involved understand these actions? How did they communicate their ideas in their diaries and letters? Fourth, how did the press on each side understand the problem? What about illustrators? From these multiple perspectives emerges a narrative about concrete events and the sources through which we view them.

In some cases clearer nationalistic perspectives emerged in the press than among the fighting men. The

latter, for example, tended to think about dying in more individual terms than did the media, which integrated images of death into a clear narrative of sacrifice for the nation. Circumstances that led to the strongest nationalistic reactions involved armed civilians of different types, hostages used as protective shields on locomotives, and the bombardment of Paris. Germans, for instance, tended to condemn as terrorism French efforts to raise auxiliary people's armies. The German armies were also people's armies, but the men in them saw themselves as proper soldiers versed in accepted practices of war, unlike their opponents. Interestingly, Mehrkens finds no significant differences in rhetoric among the German contingents. For their part, the French condemned the German bombardment of Paris, a city that in their rhetoric evinced sacral qualities. They also criticized the German innovation of using hostages as protective shields on trains in order to guard against partisan attacks. The French considered this practice barbaric.

Mehrkens covers an impressive range of topics in nuanced fashion. The broad scope of her project, however, leads to a fundamental weakness. The book cannot cover key themes in sufficient depth. German military doctrine comes up short, for example. Bismarck makes fourteen appearances in the book, according to the index, but Moltke only makes eight. While Mehrkens accepts the testimony of jurists as the principal arbiters of normalcy in war, she does not have much to say about the corps and army commanders, who surely influenced how soldiers and even journalists experienced and wrote about the war. Also missing is discussion of the primary way in which soldiers and civilians encountered each other during mobile operations: through requisitions and quarters. The Loire campaign deserves more attention too. Mark R. Stoneman, *The Bavarian Army and French Civilians in the War of 1870-1871. A Cultural Interpretation*, in: *War in History* 8 (2001), pp. 271-93.

The book's use of changes in status as a guiding organizational principle also leads to anomalies. The problem of francs-tireurs, for instance, is separated from a direct German military response to it, the use of civilians as human shields. Between these two subjects is an account on prisoners of war and another about captured civilian war correspondents. Mehrkens puts the latter in the same chapter with the hostages used as human shields, because each group involved apparently "unexpected victims of war" (p. 171). In this case, her theme of changes in status threatens to obscure rather than shed light on wartime experiences and their reception.

What impact did the wartime discourses that Mehrkens analyzes have afterwards? Her decision to draw mainly on sources from between 1870 and 1875 shields her account from corruption by later attitudes. At the same time, however, her refusal to link her findings on national perceptions to developments in the Kaiserreich and the Third Republic is dissatisfying. See, for example, Alfred Kelly, *Whose War? Whose Nation? Tensions in the Memory of the Franco-German War of 1870-1871*, in: Manfred Boemeke et. al. (Eds.), *Anticipating Total War. The German and American Experiences, 1871-1914*, Washington 1999, pp. 281-305. While she points to the need for research that links experiences with francs-tireurs in 1870-71 and the atrocities in Belgium in 1914, she does not consider historiography that already offers some answers. Mehrkens cites Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914. A History of Denial*, Cambridge 2003. Links between the two wars: Isabel Hull, *Absolute Destruction. Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany*, Ithaca/London 2005; Stoneman, *Bavarian Army*, pp. 292f.

Still, Mehrkens considers the place of the Franco-German War in the overall development of warfare in the modern era. Observing the mixed character of the war, in which participants did not view everything through the prism of nationalism and many of their practices resembled those of eighteenth-century cabinet wars (paroling captured French officers on their word of honor, for instance), she offers this terse conclusion: "The Western world possibly already found itself 'on the road to total war' in the nineteenth century because of the nationalization of warfare and the industrialization of weapons and communications technology, but it was not yet there where the path in the twentieth century was to lead" (p. 247). Unfortunately, she does not engage the historiography associated with the title she quotes. Stig Foerster and Joerg Nagler (Eds.), *On the Road to Total War. The American Civil War and the German Wars of Unification, 1861-1871*, Washington 1997. Elsewhere she argues that we cannot call the war a "people's war" (Volkskrieg), because this term suggests a degree of popular resistance ("eine Einmütigkeit im Widerstand") that did not exist (p. 130). Here too, she does not address the relevant scholarship. While Mehrkens is right about the mixed nature of the war, she is wrong to throw the baby out with the bath water. Her study is important precisely because the war involved the participation of the French and German peoples in so many significant ways, not all of which kindled hatred and violence. See Stoneman, *Bavarian Army*, pp. 289ff.

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