



Ralph Winkle. *Der Dank des Vaterlandes: Eine Symbolgeschichte des Eisernen Kreuzes 1914 bis 1936.* Essen: Klartext Verlag, 2007. 416 pp. EUR 35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-3-89861-610-2.



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Honor and the German Iron Cross

Building upon numerous recent works that have attempted to identify and define the “experience” of soldiers at war and confront the histories of mentalities and of *Kriegserfahrungen* during World War I,[1] Winkle argues that the concept of “social honor”—defined as both tangible symbols such as medals and awards and through the moral acts of courage and bravery that they represent—offers a unique insight into the wartime consciousness of soldiers that can transcend “everyday details” of war memoirs and letters sent to friends and family. By constructing a history of the symbolic meanings behind military awards and honors, drawing in part on Pierre Bourdieu, he narrates a careful evolution of the shifting moral and political values of the Iron Cross and other war decorations that overcomes typical barriers between social groups such as class, religion, education, and background. Winkle identifies specific rituals and cultural codes of recognition and ridicule, such as formal military hierarchies, the role of charismatic individuals, the debates over how to recognize demobilized soldiers, and the ways in which rituals of dishonor-

ing were politicized or soldiers were “symbolically castrated” with the collapse of the German Empire. He uses these as analytical categories to interpret notions of “social honor” both during and after the First World War and the ways in which this honor was recognized by German soldiers, veterans, military leaders, civilian officials, and the broader public. In so doing, he “reconstructs the central experience of war participants” (p. 11) and brings a greater transparency to the history of the experiences of World War I by outlining the changing value of medals of honor.

The Iron Cross first became a symbol of German patriotism and military valor in the battles against Napoleon in 1813. During the Franco-Prussian War, it was resurrected to become a key symbol of military virtue during the *Kaiserreich*. On August 2, 1914, Wilhelm II reestablished a new version of the Iron Cross with which to honor frontline soldiers. Desire to recognize the sacrifices of soldiers in the catastrophic battles of the Great War meant that nearly one in three war participants received an Iron Cross or other decoration. In-

tended to represent the ideological values of patriotism, loyalty, and honor, these awards became political symbols that reinforced the military ideals of order and discipline for many soldiers and officers. Especially because the Iron Cross Second Class was earned by men from all facets of German life, these awards of recognition denoted the “thanks of the Fatherland” as bestowed upon a generation of German soldiers. However, as Winkle carefully shows, the perception of the Iron Cross as a positive symbol of sacrifice was not always assured. As the war dragged on and pacifist movements gained strength, for some, war decorations became symbols of a sort of dishonorable Prussian militarism, a tendency that set a precedent for later accusations of “less valued” contributions on the part of Jews and other targets of German discrimination. The notorious census of Jews serving in the German forces also collected data on the number of Jews awarded honors of distinction. Other antisemitic factions of the military questioned the value of such so-called *Judenkreuze*.

With the defeat of the German army, the symbols of (Prussian) militarism and the fallen kaiser became further stigmatized, yet a particular discrepancy emerged between the perceptions and experiences of demobilized soldiers and those of the officer class, which often clashed with the ideas of the civilian leaders of the early Weimar Republic. Veterans witnessed an inversion of their own notions of honor and military discipline in the chaos of the early 1920s, and were marginalized in a society in which their existence was both a potential threat and a reminder of defeat. Drawing on the radicalized experiences of front veterans, the Nazi Party was able to revalorize war decorations as part of a larger program to undermine the Weimar government and re-instill military values in a generation that had observed the war from the home front. The National Socialist regime also recognized—belatedly—the sacrifice of wounded veterans through new awards distributed between 1934 and 1936. However, in the antisemitic atmosphere of Nazi Germany, even decorated Jewish veterans felt the pressures against Jewish businesses and merchants. Winkle reproduces an image of Nazi brown shirts blocking entry into a Jewish store even as the owner stands in his doorway, proudly displaying his war medal as proof of the “thanks

of the Fatherland”—a futile deed in the face of the tragedy that the sons of Germany had now turned against their own fellow citizens.

Winkle’s close reading of his sources, viewed through the prism of war symbols and decorations, adds a new dimension to the history of wartime experiences, as he illustrates the changing attitudes toward and meanings of *Kriegsauszeichnungen*. Quoting from letters from the front, newspaper and magazine articles, and memoirs, Winkle makes the soldiers’ experiences of military service resound through the cacophony of artillery shells and bombardments to help us better understand how and why men from all ranks and classes of German society would commit to four terrifying years of warfare in the face of the what now seems like hollow rhetoric from the German state. Furthermore, he shows how the “moral capital” created by such sacrifices was co-opted by the Nazi party to help bankrupt support for the Weimar Republic, under the guise of restoring the honor to veterans for their service to the Fatherland.

Note

[1]. To name but a few: Jörg Duppler and Gerhard P. Gross, eds., *Kriegsende 1918: Ereignis, Wirkung, Nachwirkung* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1999); Christian Geinitz, *Kriegsfurcht und Kampfbereitschaft, das Augusterlebnis in Freiburg, eine Studie zum Kriegsbeginn 1914* (Essen: Klartext Verlag, 1998); Gerhard Hirschfeld, Gerd Krumeich, Dieter Langewiesche, and Hans-Peter Ullmann, eds., *Kriegserfahrungen: Studien zur Sozial- und Mentalitätsgeschichte des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Essen: Klartext Verlag, 1997); Marcel van der Linden and Gottfried Mergner, eds., *Kriegsbegeisterung und mentale Kriegsvorbereitung: Interdisziplinäre Studien* (Berlin: Duncker and Humblot, 1991); Thomas Raitel, *Das “Wunder” der inneren Einheit: Studien zur deutschen und französischen Öffentlichkeit bei Beginn des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag, 1996); Jeffrey Verhey, *The Spirit of 1914: Militarism, Myth, and Mobilization in Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and Benjamin Ziemann, *Front und Heimat: Ländliche Kriegserfahrungen im südlichen Bayern 1914-1923* (Essen: Klartext Verlag, 1997).

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