

Wolfgang G. Natter. *Literature at War 1914-1940: Representing the "Time of Greatness" in Germany.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999. 280 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-05558-0.



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Reading and Writing the Great War

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Wolfgang Natter's study of how the events and experience of World War I would be written and read, framed and censored in Germany both during and after the war represents an important advance in the cultural history of the Great War. His book is the fruit of an arduous task of reading hundreds of now forgotten works on the Great War from 1914 to 1945. Their bygone importance and ubiquity, incidentally, is demonstrated by the fact that these books litter so many *Antikvariate* in Germany today. The larger significance of these dusty texts is what Natter's study illuminates in decisively new and unexpected ways. Most broadly, he explores "what literature meant to the war and what the war meant to literature and its institutions" (p. 2).

Natter's project is committed to an interdisciplinary approach and a careful unpacking of the commonplaces and assumptions still current today about the experience of the Great War in Germany. His work reveals "how the German military orchestrated efforts to write its own history, what value literature and culture acquired as part of the war effort, and how the institution

of literature participated in and was altered by this cultural mobilization" (p. 1). Throughout the study Natter aims to "further contextualize an understanding of 'the text' as being the product of a host of institutions that attempted to affect their meanings and reception" (p. 122). The overarching meanings assigned to the war as it was going on and the possible redemptive significance of defeat after 1918 became the dominant renderings of the conflict and were later easily appropriated by the Nazis into an ideology glorifying war and promising restored national and martial greatness.

The study begins with theoretical reflections on how to define and understand "war literature" as a field meriting study. Where previously the thousands of nationalistic and war-affirming texts were assumed to have little merit as sources, they allow the canny reader to observe "the veiled presence of social relations and the state" (p. 6) and all those institutional and social factors mediating the expression of the message. The reading and writing surrounding the Great War, then, is revealed as part of something larger: "literature as a social process" (p. 15) involving not only readers and writers, but also censors,

publishing houses, government authorities rationing paper and publishing supplies, newspapers, scholars, propagandists, and many other individuals and institutions besides. After the defeat of 1918, there followed a literary war over the public meaning and representation of the war. A prime example of this would be the fierce polemics, centered on issues of authenticity in depictions of the front, that were unleashed with the publication of Remarque's novel, *All Quiet on the Western Front* in 1928. In the longer term, what was at stake in this "interdiscursive battle for control over the war's events, dates, and symbols" were the keys to Germany's political future. Predictably, after 1933, "the war literature sanctioned by National Socialism became a bulwark of the regime's cultural and educational politics" (p. 19).

Natter then turns to a succession of cases which all focus "on aspects of the attempts to organize public discourse and particularly reading culture during the First World War in conjunction with a consideration of their belated results thereafter" (p. 33). He first considers the establishment of lasting patterns for depicting the actuality of war in 1914, when what came to be called "The Time of Greatness" began, a national struggle inaugurated with enthusiasm. In the first months of the war, more than one million war poems reportedly were written, testimony to a remarkable spontaneous literary mobilization, which the government and military authorities would seek to channel and direct. This could be done both by censorship as well as the launching of authorized projects for depicting the war. Both of these "combined to generate a paradigm of sanctioned war representation" (p. 45). An example of such activities "within a social context of institutionally fostered authorship" (p. 46) was the *Feldpressestelle*, Field Press Office, run by the novelist Walter Bloem, already a noted writer of war books by 1914. This venture was launched in 1916 as a way of utilizing the power of the press more effectively in the interests of the war effort by coordinating army newspapers, influencing the domestic press, and contending with Allied propaganda abroad. The army solicited personal accounts of war experiences from soldiers in the field as part of this effort. As would be the case after the war, "the language of experience and authenticity employed a powerful rhetoric, one that the military intended to harness effectively in efforts to overcome an acknowledged credibility gap" (p. 58). The post of officer war reporters (*Offizier-Kriegsberichterstatler*) was established to gather further authoritative accounts. A larger conception lay behind this initiative, and this was the claim of the institutional authorship of the army's High Command, which

reserved for itself the right to produce (after a successful conclusion to the war) what was to be a definitive, objective rendering of the war as it had really been, an "ideal narrative" (p. 59) or "total history" (p. 60), as Natter felicitously calls it. Natter examines official army guidelines for the writing of the war to show how influential conventions were established and cemented.

Another textual form which was purported to tell the truth of the war in immediate and personal form was the war letter, or *Feldpostbrief*. Numerous projects were organized to collect these documents of the "Time of Greatness" even during the war. At least fifty anthologies appeared during the war, followed by dozens more after 1918. The most famous of these were the volumes of letters of fallen students edited by Philipp Witkop. Yet they were by no means neutral and unmediated artifacts, as Natter shows by examining the varieties of censorship, selection, and distortion which the published letters were subjected to as they were instrumentalized to celebrate the figure of the student volunteer as a model of individual heroism in what was in fact depersonalized industrial war. The case of Witkop, a professor of modern literature at the University of Freiburg, also shows how *Germanistik* as an institution was involved in the cultural mobilization of the war and its aftermath, as his edited volumes entered the curriculum while their central theme of war as an opportunity for education and transcendence became a powerful notion. In a methodologically exciting chapter, Natter compares different reincarnations of these volumes from 1916, 1918, 1928, and a popular edition from 1933, to show shifting emphases and marked continuities in these successive editions (and Witkop's loss of control over his own work as it was taken over by the Nazis for their own institutional uses).

The study considers other institutions which mediated the writing and reading of the war as well. Natter examines the imperatives of publishing in time of war, especially cooperation between the publishers, the army, and government ministries in matters of production and distribution. The established publishing houses marketed their own "war series" while combating often remarkably similar texts as mere "trash literature". In the heroic tales offered in such series, the fusion of themes of nationalism, technology, and war "stands out as one thread of literary modernism" (p. 130) which scholars have neglected. A physical change in publishing was the breakthrough to new cultural respectability of cheaper paperback volumes, such as those of the Reclam firm, easy to transport and carry in the field. In 1918, Reclam claimed that more than fifty million of its books had been sold

since 1914. The author later examines the history of the Cotta publishing house and its editorial policies for another institutional perspective on the framing of the war experience in texts.

Other institutions combining official sanction with private initiative were those of the military libraries (of which there were hundreds in 1918) and field bookstores (with an estimated thousand on the Western front). Natter analyzes the surviving records of one regimental library to examine the real reading habits of German soldiers. The army's determination not to leave the act of reading uncontrolled would culminate in the policies of Patriotic Instruction in the last years of the war.

Taken together, these institutions, the government, and the army all sought to capitalize on what was a veritable explosion of wartime reading in the trenches and on the home front. This image of a German nation reading the war was cherished and celebrated by German intellectuals and writers, so that "descriptions of reading experiences are nearly as common in some of the German war literature as are depictions of corpses" (p. 144). The sentimental cliché was that German student volunteers had all gone off to war with copies of Nietzsche and Goethe in their backpacks. Such idealized images were especially hopeful for participants in the prewar *Volksbildungsbewegung* tradition, the popular education movement which longed for a sense of national unity and harmony growing out of education and culture.

Once the war ended in defeat, the picture necessarily changed. Some thirteen million young German men had been mobilized, and two million had died. The institutions and authors who had shaped the terms for understanding the "Time of Greatness" would have to deal with explaining this loss. Yet this charge was often evaded, as they promised a renewed greatness to come, formulaically stating, "We had to lose the war in order to win the nation" (p. 30). Such conventions barred the way for more critical encounters with the full tragedy of the war. In his last chapter, Natter records the controversy and legal sparring over an anti-war book of the late 1920s, Bruno Vogel's *Long Live War!*. By 1933, Natter cites a "four-to-one ratio between war-affirmative and antiwar books" (p. 192), with tens of thousands of the former published since 1914. A further instrumentalization of the memory of the Great War would now commence under the Nazis.

Among the many points which Natter presents with fresh and compelling emphasis in this rich study is a more nuanced understanding of the many forms which cen-

sorship can take, apart from the sense of simple official proscription. These can also include the internalized self-censorship of authors and publishing houses, the official commissioning of works, and the dynamics of physical publishing in a wartime economy of scarcity.

Natter's study usefully reinforces an emphasis that is shared by other recent works in the cultural history of the Great War, which emphasize its cultural dimension and, in the process, the ideological content of the war, neglected in previous decades of scholarship. An example of this newer scholarship is Jeffrey Verhey's *The Spirit of 1914: Militarism, Myth and Mobilization in Germany* (2000). Contemporary sources argued that culture was at stake. German authorities and publishers together insisted that the World War was also a *Kulturkrieg*, "at the heart of which lay the mission of German culture to inaugurate a new age in European civilization" (p. 123). In this conflict, spiritual and intellectual resources needed to be marshaled and mobilized just as industry and agriculture were. The German public's "reading, far from being an innocent activity, served the war effort as part of a broader cultural mobilization" (p. 9). Natter concludes, "The First World War was a *Kulturkrieg* not only in the rhetoric of cultural superiority professed by German chauvinists, but also in the sense that the cultural sphere was an essential component that was instrumentalized for the war effort" (p. 205).

Finally, Natter's examination of war-affirming texts and their institutional contexts also yields insights into continuities across different periods of German history. The role of the prewar popular education movement in the war effort is an example. A well-known example of continuity involves the Nazi celebration of themselves as the culmination and revival of the spirit of the trenches and the "Ideas of 1914". Natter's study now provides more detail into how this continuity worked in practice and why it was so easy for the Nazis to achieve. Most provocatively, Natter argues that the terms of the "stab-in-the-back" legend, according to which German armies in the field were supposedly betrayed by a faltering home front in the First World War, can already be seen as implicit in some war books during the *Kaiserreich*, before 1914. It is also worth mentioning that Natter's volume is interspersed with illustrations from German wartime propaganda about reading and publishing in this "culture war" that are very good and useful in giving visual reinforcement to his arguments. Though this last point lies outside the scope of Natter's study, after having read it, one would like to know more about how similar patterns evolved in the other combatant countries in World War I

and what marked differences also emerged in the victorious Allied nations not burdened with the need to explain defeat following on the "Time of Greatness".

Natter's focus on the institutional context of war literature can and certainly should be extended to other national histories. One hopes that other studies will follow Natter's lead, further broadening our understanding of the cultural history of the Great War as a European event. Natter's study has done a great service in showing the

way.

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