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Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 2005. Pp. xi, 384. ISBN 978-0-8014-7293-0.

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In a wonderful, engaging, and provocative new work, Isabel Hull has provided the most wide-ranging re-visioning of Imperial German military history in more than a decade. Here's the controversial thesis: during the 1860s, the elder Moltke created a German military culture which was divorced from political considerations, devoted to risk, aggression, unrealistic planning and wars of utter and complete annihilation. Unsurprisingly, such an argument has attracted howls of "Sonderweg" ("special path") from Hull's peers. To a certain extent they are correct, in that Hull exaggerates the "uniqueness" of this history, both nationally and chronologically. Nevertheless, the research and thinking in this monograph are monumental and must be engaged. The incredible depth and breadth of reading evidenced here, coupled with the excitement of a fresh and challenging perspective, makes for a splendid book.

Hull begins her story, in Part I: "Suppression Becomes Annihilation: Southwest Africa, 1904–1907," far from the Prussian parade grounds, dropping us straight into the first genocide of the twentieth century. Immediately, Hull bucks the current colonial chic: instead of substantiating the "Arendt thesis"—that brutal and racist practices learned and performed in the colonies were transferred to Europe (Namibia to Auschwitz), she claims that what Lothar von Trotha and his German soldiers pursued in Africa, the encirclement and attempted total destruction of the Herero people, was simply a logical extension of what these men had already been trained to do back home on those Prussian parade grounds.

Part II, "Military Culture," lays out this institutional and cultural context. Already in the 1860s, Moltke created a Prussian (soon to be German) military thinking focused on radical wars of complete annihilation, without regard for international law or the welfare of civilians. Alongside this, the Prussian tradition of a military divorced from civilian control only increased. Further, the general staff spent its time perfecting an ever more grandiose "Schlieffen Plan" for an ever-growing mass army, all the time further distancing its thinking from serious economic or logistical advice. A giant, pathological monster was created.

In the book's final chapters, Part III: "The First World War," the fruits of such a development are laid bare through descriptions of the failure of the Schlieffen Plan, the treatment of civilians in occupied Europe, the genocide in Armenia (!), and finally the vainglorious *Endkampf*, the "final battle" thinking of Ludendorff and company.

My first critique and/or praise is that this book tells us much more about "European" military culture in this period than the author would likely admit. For the purposes of comparative history, France is often the most useful parallel to Germany, and that is very much the case here. It is difficult to argue that Plan 17 was less "divorced from reality" than the Schlieffen Plan. Only when absolutely forced by the horrendous human and logistical losses of that Plan did the French Army realize that it had to negotiate with its civilian gov-

ernment, and in 1915 finally allow some men to work in the very factories needed for modern warfare. Further, the disastrous and wholly unoriginal Chemin des Dames offensive two years later proved that French military culture was immune to criticism and bent solely on absolute victory, or the absolute destruction of the enemy. Hull never makes clear exactly what she means by “annihilation” in war or battle planning, for the military objective of destroying the opponent’s forces, rendering an army incapable of further action, is the goal of every military. There was nothing peculiarly “German” about possessing an incredibly offensive mindset, as French military thinking in this very era was also extremely offensive: *l’offensive à l’outrance*. Indeed, Leonard Smith’s excellent French military history of the war, *Between Mutiny and Obedience*¹ proffers a Foucauldian discourse of pervasive offensive thinking. And with regard to “Endkampf”—absurdly fighting on with no hope of victory—one need only look at Paris in 1871. My praise here is for the way Hull has so deftly described how such (European) military thinking helps us understand and explain the inexplicable, including the Somme and Passchendaele.

As for locating this aggressive “war of annihilation” style of thinking in late nineteenth-century Germany, one need only look at Prussian military history in the *longue durée* in order to see that this is too restrictive. Robert Citino’s *The German Way of War*² charts a Prussian military culture long defined by its geography. Surrounded by enemies, never able to “fall back” *à la russe*, since the 1700s the Prussian military had always entered war knowing that it must immediately and ruthlessly destroy its opponent. Neither time nor material was ever the luxury of the Germans, and the elder Moltke was only further refining an old concept.

Now we come to the need for that seemingly ever more “absurd” planning evidenced by the German general staff, but also by the French and Russian military planners. In focusing on the cultural and institutional history of German war planning, Hull neglects the overall shift in *fin de siècle* European military theory: the truly monstrous size of all continental mass armies, coinciding with the extraordinary pressure to move them as quickly as possible, necessitated incredibly abstruse train scheduling and logistical planning, schemes that unwittingly moved one ever further from an “ideal” mobilization. One cannot invoke Prussian military culture to explain what was arguably the greatest logistical fiasco of the war: the Austro-Hungarian mobilization. Because of the technological history of the war, with the incredible strain and timing of mobilization, all armies tended to operate, on a certain level, as self-perpetuating machines wholly without interest in the nuances of diplomatic negotiation. To be sure, the Schlieffen Plan was a bad plan, but any German plan was going to be both fantastically detailed and impossible to prosecute correctly and smoothly in an unprecedented environment.

The other typically useful comparative for German history is Russia. Hull does an excellent job of detailing the oppression of French and Belgian civilians under German occupation. She again attributes this to a specifically German military culture that evinced very little concern for civilian welfare. She then asserts that Germans treated civilians in occupied Eastern Europe equally nastily, but acknowledges being at odds on that score with such specialists as Vejas Liulevicius, with his path-breaking *War Land on the Eastern*

¹ Princeton, NJ: Princeton U Pr, 1994.

² Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2005.

Front.³ Yet, if the argument is to be made that Germans were uniquely harsh towards civilian populations, one must account for the Russian Army's policies of scorched earth and forced deportations! Crucially, Hull admits this in a sentence at the end of the book (322). Finally, in the only chapter that simply does not work in this book, the Armenian genocide is detailed. Hull's attempt to link a German military culture to the "in country" German assessment of the events fails, for, as Hull herself details, seemingly as many important German military officers in the Ottoman Empire objected to the genocide as condoned it. This chapter weakens the fundamental thesis of the book.

For the most part, my criticisms here have simply been to point out that Hull is telling a far larger story than she admits. Her narrow focus on Germany, a necessary national analysis that lays out in intricate detail the military culture of this period, explains much more than the specific, national story of Germany. In a short section near the end of the book (320–323), Hull points out that there exists no comparative history of these military cultures, and then briefly acknowledges the myriad ways the German military culture she describes might, at times, have been mirrored in the Allied armies. Thus, in an admirable pre-emptive nod to critics like me, she demonstrates that she is aware of these larger questions. I believe her findings do not so much explain why Germany behaved the way it did as help us better understand why Europe, *tout court*, could commit such an absurdist mass suicide, almost daily, for four long years. Simply put, this book is essential reading for all with an interest in modern history.

³ Cambridge: Cambridge U Pr, 2000.