



## *Absolute War: Violence and Mass Warfare in the German Lands, 1792–1820* by Mark Hewitson.

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Review by Katherine Aaslestad, West Virginia University (kaaslest@wvu.edu).

In this first installment of a multivolume series<sup>1</sup> on war in modern German history, Mark Hewitson, Professor of German History and Politics (Univ. College London), argues that a firm grasp of how violent conflict was experienced, imagined, and remembered is critical to understanding the “transitions from and to civilized warfare in the German lands between the late eighteenth and mid-twentieth centuries” (10). He explains how war experiences and changing perceptions of violence affected contemporary attitudes and debates on warfare.

*Absolute War* is intended for students and scholars familiar with the many Napoleonic campaigns and their effects on various German states and their relations with the French Empire. Its five thematic chapters<sup>2</sup> rely primarily on the perceptions and accounts of elites—German military leaders, publicists, and educated professionals—to investigate the new forms and consequences of warfare that emerged after 1792 in France. These sources illustrate that the boundary between civilian and soldier became less distinct as the conflicts grew longer, costlier, and ever more threatening to states and civil societies.

Conscription and the rise of mass armies engaged in a *Volkskrieg* are central themes of Hewitson’s study. The author traces the emergence of these armies in the German states, both in compliance with Napoleonic demands and in response to crushing defeats by Napoleonic forces. As conscription altered armies, soldiers’ experiences of war were transformed. On the one hand, ties between civilian society and the military became closer; on the other, militaries were conducting longer, more lethal campaigns.

Apart from a few pages on the role of the press and periodical literature in shaping German public opinion, Hewitson concentrates on the discourse of (mainly Prussian) intellectuals like Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Ernst Moritz Arndt, Friedrich Gentz, and Adam Müller, excluding accounts from different social strata. A short section on art, poetry, and theater illustrates that war had become an important and acceptable aesthetic topic. Educated elites justified and legitimized the new *Volkskriege* in national terms: “Germanness,’ for many subjects, was an affiliation and identity, although rarely the most important, not merely a geographical expression” (106). This implied acknowledgement of cultural nationalism is in line with current scholarship on the overlapping allegiances to localities, states, and “Germanness” more broadly. Hewitson, however, often refers to the “German nation”—at a time when no such thing existed—and invokes “German sentiment” in a deterministic manner strongly reminiscent of nineteenth-century nationalist literature. He claims, for instance, that Germans tried “to make sense of such troubling events” as the trauma of

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1. The others are *The People’s War: Histories of Violence in the German Lands, 1820–1888* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2017) and a forthcoming third volume.

2. Respectively, “From Cabinet Warfare to Mass Armies,” “Heroism and the Defence of the *Volk*,” “The Violence of Civilian Life,” “The Lives of Soldiers,” and “War Memories.”

war “through the values and character of ‘Germany’” (112). He does not, however, explain the different meanings of “German” and “nation” in his sources. I respect his effort to examine these wars absent the traditional narrative of nation-building. But he must be clear about the meaning and scope of German cultural nationalism, which scholars have shown to be a complex, malleable concept, adaptable to monarchical, regional, territorial, and even religious allegiances that provided the principal templates for understanding the anti-Napoleonic wars and mobilizing society against the Empire.

Hewitson evokes the civilian and soldier experiences of war, again based chiefly on the writings, memories, and insights of the educated elites. He finds that, during the Napoleonic era, civilians recognized that war and military occupation had become “defining features of existence (150),” as peace became “increasingly indistinguishable from war” (141). Unfortunately, the author fails to acknowledge fully other civilian wartime hardships: faltering economies, burdensome requisitioning and quartering, troop levies, tax increases, obligatory work for the French military, epidemic disease, and, worst of all, the loss of sons to conscription or substitution. Soldiers’ accounts focus, of course, on mundane details of their campaigns as well as their survival of horrific incidents, but also attest that the escalation and expansion of Napoleonic Wars changed their perception of war-making and its human costs. These narratives related suffering during the Russian campaign and the Battle of Leipzig, battlefield bloodbaths, deadly fevers, and horrific military hospitals to underscore that defeating the enemy did not feel like a victory. In fact, the joy after Leipzig was mingled with mourning. Hewitson differentiates the soldiers’ accounts of hardship from state accounts of triumph: “the suffering of ordinary soldiers during the campaigns of 1813–1815 entered the official and popular historical records of the conflicts, but it was marginalized by a narrative of Prussia’s, Austria’s and Germany’s heroic victory over Napoleon and France” (201–2). He concludes that the “human suffering, killing, and death of the Napoleonic Wars [came to be] portrayed as an epic, historical struggle of states, armies, and people” (203) that submerged the soldiers’ authentic experiences to extol war.

Hewitson highlights the “disparity between official and popular” recollections (204). He recognizes the widespread reactions of joy and relief in the popular celebrations that welcomed soldiers home in 1814–15. He also discusses the “politics of memory” in an overview of the cult of the volunteers in Friedrich Ludwig Jahn’s gymnastics movement (*Turnbewegung*) and in student fraternities (*Burschenschaften*)—as 1813 became both an example and a warning, since “Freedom and independence needed to be defended” (220). Both conservative and liberal myths identified the Wars of Liberation after 1815 as glorious and important in political awakening and sustaining vigilance.

Unlike Karen Hagemann,<sup>3</sup> Hewitson detects “a common rather than contested point of historical reference” (241) in the legacy of the wars. Disputes about the roles of various states and individuals notwithstanding, he asserts that, after 1819, German states took the lead in commemorating the wars as a popular point of veneration which presented warfare primarily in positive terms.

The author makes some mistakes of fact, like misdating the siege of Hamburg (162), but more concerning is his casual treatment of the relevant historiography. He considers current studies of the regional diversity of the wars to be attempts to debunk the myth of national “wars of liberation.” He suggests that studies highlighting the geographic and political diversity of German states during his target era have overlooked or rejected the broader shared military impact of war

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3. In *Revisiting Prussia’s Wars against Napoleon: History, Culture, and Memory* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2015).

on civilian life. But new analyses of the Napoleonic Wars in Prussia, the Hanseatic cities, Saxony, the Rhineland region, and the south German states emphasize regional experiences and agree on three basic points: (a) older allegiances to dynasty, region, locality, and religion remained and carried more weight for wartime Germans than the cultural nationalism popular among educated elites (even allowing for the effect of anti-French rhetoric); (b) the German states suffered exploitation and hardship regardless of their position in Napoleon's new order; (c) the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars inaugurated an era of cataclysmic upheaval among Germans and marked a watershed in civilians' relations with the state. Thus, Hewitson's study of German Central Europe confirms what many historians have proven in their regional studies.

More serious are Hewitson's distortions of the work of Ute Planert, in particular her challenge<sup>4</sup> to David Bell's designation of the Napoleonic Wars as the first "total war." Focusing on conscription and civil society, she emphasizes that the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars represented only an evolutionary step toward "total war," since conscription alone did not generate ideologically committed mass armies. She qualifies Bell's thesis by highlighting resistance to military service in the German states, evidenced in revolts, desertion, and substitution, as well as the limited role of ideology and nationalist sentiment. Hewitson claims that Planert sees in Napoleonic warfare a continuation of eighteenth-century patterns (6, 140), rather than a cataclysmic shift (249). In fact, her analysis of the south German states during the Napoleonic Wars underscores the miseries that civilians and communities suffered at the hands of occupying armies: forced tribute payments, impressments, plunder, "requisitions," conscription, extortion, rape, disease, and destroyed crops.<sup>5</sup> She convincingly demonstrates the catastrophic nature of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars in the rural south German states, where what mattered most was soldiers' behavior, not their place of origin. Given that Hewitson draws liberally on Planert's extensive archival research, he should not distort her actual arguments.

The author concludes that the increasingly participatory *Volkskriege* he discusses were unending, unsettling, sanguinary, and extremely wasteful of lives and matériel (244–45). They bequeathed two main legacies: (a) states now considered armed strength indispensable to maintaining their sovereignty, and (b) commemorations of the wars presented sanitized and glorified images to later generations. As to the first legacy, Prussia was the only German state to support peacetime conscription after 1815; as to the second, overwhelming textual and visual evidence documents that the memory of severe wartime hardships persisted throughout the Restoration era.

Mark Hewitson's expertise in mid-nineteenth- to twentieth-century German nationalism and state-building does not serve him well in *Absolute War*, but his ambitious study of German-speaking lands during the Napoleonic Wars asks the right questions and places a salutary stress on the lived experiences of war.

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4. See "Innovation or Evolution? The French Wars in Military History," in Roger Chickering and Stig Förster, eds., *War in an Age of Revolution, 1775–1815* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2010) 69–84.

5. Planert, *Der Mythos vom Befreiungskrieg: Frankreichs Kriege und der deutsche Süden: Alltag, Wahrnehmung, Deutung, 1792–1841* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2007), and (ed.) *Krieg und Umbruch in Mitteleuropa um 1800: Erfahrungsgeschichte(n) auf dem Weg in eine neue Zeit* (id., 2009).