



Physical Control, Transformation and Damage in the First World War: War Bodies by Simon Harold Walker.

New York: Bloomsbury, 2020. Pp. xiii, 238. ISBN 978-1-350-12328-1.

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“Thousands” and “millions” are the First World War’s standard units of measure. More than five million men served during the conflict from the United Kingdom’s population alone. The individual experience is easy to overlook in such a cataclysm, but amid all the diversity, “the body and the physical experience of war was a unifying factor” (2). In his new (and first) book, historian Simon Harold Walker (Univ. of Glasgow) focuses on the common experiences of assessing, conditioning, testing, clothing, feeding, regulating, damaging, and rehabilitating British men’s bodies. Generals and battle analyses are absent in this bottom-up history. Using over a hundred written and oral histories in the Imperial War Museum, Walker highlights instead the effects of drill and sport, the pride in a new uniform, the small miseries of hunger, fatigue, ill-fitting clothes, and the debilitating effects of combat. These bodily experiences illuminate the changes the “British male militarized body” underwent in service to the nation, some for the better and many for the worse.

War Bodies is not limited to personal anecdotes, however. Walker, a specialist in the social history of health and health care, argues that soldiers’ “war bodies” were the “site of conflict between the agency of the individual and the demands of the British Army” (182). He situates the British soldier’s body at the center of a struggle between individual agency over the body and the state’s impulse to control, categorize, and discipline it in 1914–18. This signaled a new level of “scrutiny, control, categorization, cultural consideration [of,] and state-level interference” (3) with the British male body. Gender analysis underlies Walker’s argument because soldiering, citizenship, and masculinity were intertwined in this period. But at root, *War Bodies* is a Foucauldian study leavened by Chris Shilling’s claim¹ that individuals exert agency via the body.

After an introduction heavy on theory and the state of British hegemonic masculinity ca. 1914, the book’s five chapters address (a) recruitment and enlistment, (b) training, (c) active service away from the front, (d) combat, and (e) discharge.² Although the thematic organization neatly groups common experiences in support of Walker’s argument, it complicates tracking how enlistment, training, and combat experiences changed throughout the war.

Recruitment and enlistment used the body to make military service seem attractive and to filter out the unwanted. Propaganda played up the handsome khaki-clad male body, targeting men via women. Posters and pamphlets encouraged enlistment by linking service to character, patriotism, and sex appeal. Enlistees faced an assessment regime that weighed, measured, evaluated, and

1. In *The Body and Social Theory* (Washington: Sage, 1993; 3rd ed. 2012).

2. Walker’s application of gender analysis to military service resonates with works such as Joanna Bourke’s *Dismembering the Male: Men’s Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (Chicago: Univ Pr, 1996), most of Ana Carden-Coyne’s publications, e.g., *The Politics of Wounds: Military Patients and Medical Power in the First World War* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2014) and, more recently, Jiří Hutečka, *Men under Fire: Motivation, Morale, and Masculinity among Czech Soldiers in the Great War, 1914–1918* (NY: Berghahn, 2020).

categorized their bodies, a process providing both public and private confirmation of their masculinity. Yet that process was malleable and fallible. Standards changed over time in response to the war's demands, and assessors' leniency varied widely. Determined men could find exceptions and exploit openings.

Upon induction, British men endured the jarring transition from civilian to soldier. Chapter 2 concerns the training camps, which “enact[ed] military domination,” over bodies (21). The training regime's strategy centered on bodies and leveraged sport, haircuts, and uniforms to drill, diet, and punishment. Walker concludes that the strategy usually produced fitter soldiers indoctrinated for military obedience, though it never erased autonomy. The author's discovery of everyday resistance, whether through direct protest or simply pilfering extra food, shows that men asserted their agency over and through their bodies, even in this most regulated of environments.

Chapters three and four explore the lived experience of active service both away from the front and in combat. Walker's most insightful analysis appears here, especially in observing the irony of the restoration and repurposing of individual agency after training to suit the military's needs. In training, military authorities regulated every aspect of a soldier's bodily experience. After training, the military worked to convince men that policing their own bodies, even in unsanitary conditions, was a martial duty—though it contradicted masculine imperatives to “soldier on” through ailments. Frostbite and trench-foot anecdotes illustrate the dilemmas men navigated and the vicious punishment cycles that could result. Walker also highlights irony in the British Army's handling of alcohol and sex, which balanced morale, morality, and physical health. In combat, men discovered a new relationship with their bodies. Faced with the Western Front's physical dangers, discomforts, and psychological strain, many soldiers constructed an “unofficial hierarchy of injury” (109). Surviving unscathed seemed unlikely. Instead, men contemplated quick, clean deaths and acceptable wounds that might send them home with their futures intact. Combat's demands also challenged military authorities' efforts to sustain discipline and encourage men “over the top.” Control methods included alcohol rations, corporal punishment, and linking a man's masculinity to carrying on despite fear and pain.

Most British soldiers' active service ended in death, discharge for wounds, other health conditions, and demobilization (chap. 5). Dead bodies became burdens and symbols to the living. Even men killed in combat did not escape the British Army's control. Most were buried near the front and in uniform with little regard for personal or religious preference. Walker's exploration of death and interment politics is both fascinating and too brief. Though wounds and various medical conditions provided a seeming exit for other men, in fact they exchanged one control regime for another upon entering the hospital system. Some discovered new exercises in agency by slowing their recoveries, thus risking corporeal deterioration, questions about their masculinity, and punishment for malingering to avoid returning to the front.

Finally, post-Armistice discharge presented new challenges to military authorities because the war's end broke the logic undergirding soldiers' submission to military control over their bodies and behaviors. In a tidy conclusion to the “soldier's journey” arc that mirrors its beginning, Walker's book analyzes a discharge process that subjected soldiers' bodies to measurement, evaluation, and categorization—this time to assess the government's financial liability to its veterans.

War Bodies is a solid work of scholarship, providing insights into the experiences of most First World War British Army personnel. Indeed, many of Walker's observations about military life ring true across nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western armies. His disciplined approach explains the many ways that soldiers subverted control, ranging from vaccine resistance and mus-taches to sourcing alternative foodstuffs and self-inflicted wounding.

The book's drawbacks include occasional overwrought assertions like the following: "The doctor stood alongside the barber and the store clerk who issued their uniforms as agents of control asserted over the bodies of civilians as they were transformed into soldiers" (88), and "[grooming standardization] was a particularly effective way of instilling total obedience to military discipline, as every hair on the soldier's body fell under the control of the British military" (49). Also, the preoccupation with "control" obscures other explanations for systems and behaviors and reduces officers to a monolithic "they" obsessed with discipline, authority, and control.

These cavils aside, Simon Harold Walker has written a discerning account of the British soldier's experience in the Great War. He has also contributed to the broader face of battle historiography by connecting gender studies and Foucauldian analysis with the physical experiences of ordinary citizen soldiers. Though jargon and specialist analysis may put off some general readers, undergraduate students of Britain in the First World War or the bodily experience of military service, will find *War Bodies* both absorbing and instructive.