
First published: http://www.ghil.ac.uk/publications/bulletin.html
LEIGHTON S. JAMES, Witnessing the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars in German Central Europe, War, Culture and Society, 1750–1850 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), xiii + 281 pp. ISBN 978 0 230 24917 2. £55.00

Leighton S. James draws on the full range of German-language ego documents that survive from the turbulent decades around 1800: letters, diaries, and memoirs. On this broad source basis, he reconstructs contemporary perceptions of the wars of the time. This applies to the entire period from the outbreak of the revolutionary wars to the end of the wars of liberation; to all locations with German-speaking actors, from Spain to Russia; and to testimonies of soldiers on campaign as well as to records left by civilians who experienced the war at home. James manages to compress this huge programme into just 200 pages of text.

And there is still space for a chapter outlining the constitutional and political framework for the disintegration of the Holy Roman Empire, thus making the book accessible to those who are not familiar with these complicated, very German structures. And there is also room for a concise chapter discussing the specific features of the various text genres and the older and more recent literary traditions that might have influenced the individual authors.

The book’s specific nature is defined by the wealth and breadth of its coverage on the one hand, and compression on the other. It is designed as a handbook that systematically covers the whole of its subject area in order to reflect the state of research. But it is intended to be much more than that. By arguing so closely from the sources, it claims to make an independent and continuing contribution to research in its own right. Its systematic coverage, however, militates against transparency and unity of epistemological approach.

To start with, the author explains his main epistemological interests, but here, too, he poses several very different questions. He asks to what extent experiences of the war were shaped by social status, gender, denomination, and literary interpretations; to what extent eye-witness testimonies reflect a changed culture of war; and to what extent the war encouraged the development of German nationalism. All three are justified and complex questions which, under the cir-

Trans. Angela Davies (GHIL).
cumstances, can only be addressed sporadically, unsystematically, and in an unbalanced way. And it remains unclear whether the overwhelmingly broad range of sources presented is based on a methodological selection and evaluation of the texts. The treatment of the sources also varies. Sometimes they are themselves the subject of an analytical reception history, when the author is investigating the reflection of ethnic stereotypes, for instance; at others, they are a medium which is used to illustrate events, for example, to tell the story of how resistance to the French occupation fell apart.

We do the book more justice, therefore, if we read it as a handbook with a pragmatically designed methodology that allows the reader to follow the voices of contemporaries through the period, while also reporting on current research and discussing it in the light of the author’s own reading of the sources. His knowledge of these allows him to bridge gaps in the debate. Given the constraints outlined above, it does this in a highly concentrated form, and in what, from a German perspective, seems like a typically English fashion, with quotations from the sources used as examples to prop up wide-ranging theses and arguments that quickly follow on from each other.

Two chapters take a military perspective, and another two a predominantly civilian one. The military chapters deal with the conditions of military service, with emphasis on the problems of patriotism. They also look at perceptions of the Other during extensive campaigns. The following chapters, conceived more from the civilian perspective, examine reactions to the French occupation and perceptions of liberation, with a stress on the participation of women. Thus they allow a rough chronological juxtaposition.

Read as a handbook, the volume spreads out before the reader a wealth of stimulating observations and references to current research which, in the end, merge together to create a remarkable panorama of the period. To this extent, therefore, the author has produced an unprecedented synthesis. At the end, he pares the fruits of his own reading down to two essential theses which will serve to stimulate further discussion. First, James wants to free his sources from appropriation by nationalist interpretations of the nineteenth century. These are, in any case, no longer taken seriously as reference texts. In this context, James points out that his ego documents reveal little patriotic inspiration, and expose highly differentiated and inconsistent perceptions of France in particular.
This also affects the author’s second main concern. Going against the grain of recent research, which emphasizes the particularity of this era, James claims to find hardly any specific features in the ego documents he examined. Rather, he mentions similarities with eighteenth-century testinomies, and even with those of the First World War. Thus the texts suggest that from the point of view of the individual, the burdens of war changed little—‘unsurprisingly’ is a word that recurs often in this context. The values and perspectives of social orders prove to be long-lived, while the undeniable political and military upheavals of the time are barely reflected in these contemporary accounts. This finding must, of course, itself be related to the status, genre, and perspective of the documents. But it is also a reason to consider the basic implications both for the range of these sources and, conversely, for the implementation of changes. Eventually, however, even these 200 pages are exhausted.

MICHAEL SIKORA is Adjunct Professor at the University of Münster. His publications include Disziplin und Desertion: Strukturprobleme militärischer Organisation im 18. Jahrhundert (1997); Der Adel in der frühen Neuzeit (2009); Zelebrieren und Verhandeln: Zur Praxis ständischer Institutionen im frühneuzeitlichen Europa (2009); Kulturgeschichte der Schlacht (2014); and, as co-editor, Gerhard von Scharnhorst: Private und dienstliche Schriften, 7 vols. (2003–14).