

Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction. Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 408 pages, ISBN 0801442583.

Hull's book makes essential reading for scholars interested in two interlocking themes: German military history of the early 20th century, and the question of continuity in German modern history. Hull presents us with convincing and eloquent arguments, using cultural theories as an analytical tool to explain the German conduct of war from 1870 through 1918. This is characterised with what Hull calls 'institutional extremism', the doctrine and warfare of annihilation (*Vernichtungskrieg*) exercised in its extreme by the Imperial Army in its African campaign of 1904 against the Herero insurrection, and increasingly during the First World War. The German army, as Hull establishes, came to develop a uniquely violent and genocidal military culture, unrestrained by the civil authorities who were themselves taken by 'double militarism'. This culture eventually became unrealistic, dysfunctional and self destructive. Unfolding the story and role of this military culture, the decisions taken by the German leadership, both military and civil, the differences dissolving as the Great War continued, Hull makes a powerful argument for German *Sonderweg* and raises an important contribution to Fritz Fischer's claim on the many links connecting the *Kaiserreich* with the Third Reich.

The book is divided into three parts. The first portrays the campaign in Southwest Africa (now Namibia) between 1904 and 1907. In this campaign the army embarked on a policy of exterminating the rebellious Herero. Ever since the wars of unification, the German army came to define victory exclusively as the annihilation of the enemy's forces; this would be best achieved in a single, decisive battle of annihilation. In accordance with this rationale, the extermination of the Herero people, not just the warriors, became a 'military necessity', allowing the soldiers to expand the killing to captives, women and children, and eventually to drive the Herero to the desert. Hull estimates that 50-70 percent of them died as a result of the German campaign.

The second part of the book is the most interesting, original and thought-provoking. Hull employs theories of culture and organisational culture to explain what drove the German army, narrowed its frame of thought, determined how it conceptualised warfare, and made some military solutions more desirable (and later the sole acceptable answer) than others. In her cultural account, Hull's analysis encompasses the civil authorities and governments, the Reich's constitution, laws and politics as well as the army, since these were inseparable and affected each other's development. In an escalating process, Germany's leaders subdued political guidance and primacy in setting the goals of war to the military ones. The army itself inclined ever more toward extreme warfare, and while other European armies with much the same inclinations were halted by their governments, the German army was left (and even encouraged) to devote itself completely to its cultural characteristics: risk taking, the endless pursuit of annihilation battles, the reduction of strategy to meticulous operational and tactical planning, the trust in fighting spirit and 'qualitative superiority', ruthlessness and an exaggerated drive for action.

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All these would prove fatal in the First World War, as Hull elaborates in the third part of the book. In a gradual process the army alone came to define what 'victory' and the ultimate goal of war is. This goal was reduced to a tactical formula (annihilation) which turned means to ends, as the Schlieffen plan so clearly demonstrates. A realistic assessment of Germany's situation, resources, capabilities and needs, was not to be found; nor was it demanded or appreciated, since the military leadership was overwhelmingly confident that victory would be achieved should the army be granted the freedom to conduct the war according to its demands and best decisions. This freedom was granted, and the path was thus opened for the catastrophes that followed. Once the Schlieffen plan failed to realize a decisive battle and the war turned into a slow, total, all-consuming struggle, the military leaders stressed the exigencies of 'military necessity', facilitating once again a ruthless and destructive occupation, this time in Europe, while futilely trying again and again to wage that final decisive battle or create the conditions that would lead to it. Eventually, driven to self-destructive extremity, they were willing to accept Germany's own destruction in a final last battle (*Endkampf*), and preferred it over 'humiliating' surrender.

Hull's argument, however powerful, is not without flaws. She ignores the ideological component of warfare at the expense of the cultural one: Germany's policy was not devoid of ideological convictions as to Germany's place under the sun, which encouraged and propelled both its African campaign and its decisions during the July 1914 crisis. Ideology is a powerful motivator, indeed sometimes more powerful than previous cultural constructs, and it can thus challenge the cultural explanations and motivations presented so convincingly in the book. Hull addresses this issue only briefly in her conclusions. A further discussion on public opinion and parliamentary objection to the army's demands prior to the First World War (mainly the SPD and its voters) could have enriched the explanations of 'double militarism' and avoided a one-dimensional analysis of the phenomenon.

However these questions do not undermine Hull's achievement - shedding new light and offering a comprehensive explanation to this complicated chapter in German history. Hull presents us with a well-established explanation as to why and how Germany was swept into the disasters of the Great War, and suggests interesting links between the unification and colonial wars, and the World War that followed. It is a highly recommended book and a valuable contribution to the research of German history.

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