An Intimate History of the Front – Masculinity, Sexuality and German Soldiers in the First World War

In his classic thriller Greenmantle, first published in 1916, John Buchan describes his hero Richard Hannay’s first encounter with his adversary, the German officer Colonel Ulrich von Stumm, in a fashion which hints at a hidden strain of sexual deviance within the German armed forces:

We went up a staircase to a room at the end of a long corridor. Stumm locked the door behind him and laid the key on a table. That room took my breath away, it was so unexpected. A thick grey carpet covered the floor, and the chairs were low and soft and upholstered like a lady’s boudoir... At first sight you would have said it was a woman’s drawing-room.

But it wasn’t. I soon saw the difference. There had never been a woman’s hand in that place. It was the room of a man who had a fashion for frippery, who had a perverted taste for soft delicate things. It was the complement to his bluff brutality. I began to see the queer other side to my host, that evil side which gossip had spoken of as not unknown in the German army.(1)

In his original and informative study of the inner life of German soldiers in the First World War, Jason Crouthamel both complicates and deconstructs clichés such as these, throwing an important new light on questions of gender and sexuality in the German military. Using a rich variety of sources, from soldiers’ private diaries and letters home to trench newspapers and military court records, Crouthamel’s sensitive analysis aims ‘to illuminate the world of German men in the Great War, [... revealing] how front soldiers perceived ideals of masculinity, expressed love and other emotions, found intimacy, and experienced sex’ (p. 2). In particular, he is interested in recording their struggles to live up to the pressures of what he terms the ‘hegemonic masculine ideal’ of the ‘steel-nerved ordinary front soldier’, which not only formed a staple of wartime propaganda, but also contributed to forging the postwar myth of a ‘New Man’, fired in the horrific crucible of the trenches.

Broadly speaking, Crouthamel defines this prevalent masculine ideal as a dominant paradigm constructed by elites, which did not necessarily resonate with ordinary soldiers’ experiences and expectations. Instead, he believes that we should portray these men’s inner world in terms of a diverse, nuanced model of ‘multiple
The work is therefore divided into six main chapters – many of which overlap to a certain extent – each exploring various facets of soldiers’ self-construction, and their engagement (whether overt or covert) with questions of sexuality and gender.

The first chapter, ‘The ideal man goes to war’, explores in detail official propaganda and policy which promoted the image of the ‘good comrade’, sexual restraint, and idealised relations between soldiers and women on the home front. At first, the war was seen as an excellent opportunity to expunge male decadence – including heterosexual and homosexual promiscuity; only later, with the rise of the VD crisis and the explosion in prostitution, did civilian authorities (including priests and medics) begin to realise that sexual and moral corruption might also be a consequence of war. In this context, the ideal masculine image was regularly defined in opposition to demonised countertypes, such as the neurotic, the homosexual, the dandy, the Jew, or the emancipated woman; articles and cartoons in official newspapers and army periodicals upheld traditional gender roles and stigmatised those, such as homosexuals, who deviated from them, fuelling fears of a supposed crisis in sexual behaviour – whether due to working-class ‘degeneration’, or aristocratic decadence. In contrast, the bourgeois male was imagined as ‘a pillar of rational sexual control’ whose will was strong enough to resist the irrational instincts of feminine passion, and hence to uphold the national community as well as traditional moral values. In similar vein, women on the home front were portrayed as inhabiting a parallel universe in which sexual abstinence, self-control and self-sacrifice, as well as providing long-distance moral support for their menfolk, could form an equal contribution to the war effort. Meanwhile, women who approached the front too nearly were seen as a dangerous distraction from military duties; particularly females from occupied nations, who could always play the role of seductive saboteurs or filthy whores, against whom the soldiers’ wives and girlfriends – as German Madonnas – could shine the more brightly.

By January 1915, at the height of the VD crisis, during which syphilis and gonorrhoea had rendered over 50,000 men incapable of fighting (i.e. the equivalent of an entire army corps!), the gulf between idealised images of fighters ‘so focused on the nation’s survival and final victory that [they] did not require the solace or escape of sexual pleasure’, intended to reassure the home front that the sexual instincts of their menfolk could easily be sublimated through focusing on battle, and the sordid reality, created an ever-widening schism between the military command and adherents of moral and religious organisations (p. 29ff.). In response to the military authorities’ attempts to take control over soldiers’ sexual lives, clamping down on prostitution and providing sex education and cheap condoms, the moral crusaders attempted to push for complete abstinence, mobilising media campaigns which promoted the abstinent warrior over the selfish brothel-visiting debauchee, and berating the military for its hypocrisy in providing men with prophylactics and sanctioned bordellos which could only encourage promiscuity. This led to some calls for action which seem almost stunning in their naivety, such as that of Dr. Aufhauser, a military chaplain writing for the Catholic periodical Allgemeine Rundschau, who called not only for massive expansion of the Sittenpolizei (vice police), but also for the closure of all bordellos and for beer to be banned from soldiers’ quarters: ‘To replace them, he suggested Christian reading groups and lemonade’ (pp. 33–4).

The second chapter, ‘Masculinity in crisis: sexual crime, dislocation, and deprivation’, continues to explore the increasing contrast between the official image of the abstinent war hero and the reality of the war’s brutalising effects. Many soldiers bitterly resented the home front’s expectations that they should remain abstinent, and some also seem to have turned to homosexuality in the face of the sexual and emotional deprivation and unbearable stress which they experienced. In addition, Germany experienced a steep rise in sex crimes committed by soldiers on leave, including sexual violence and rape of girls under 14. However, even in the case of repeat paedophile offenders (as well as in instances of bestiality and homosexual rape), the courts tended to see good front-line performance as a mitigating circumstance and evidence of excellent character, which would very often result in reduced or derisorily short sentences. The idea that there might be an intrinsic link between soldiers’ experiences at the front and an escalation in sexual violence at home was not one which the military authorities were ultimately prepared to countenance.

While Klaus Theweleit’s Männerphantasien painted a portrait of a world of the trenches in which men felt
brutally, joyously unconstrained, released from any need or wish for feminine comfort – or even female contact, Crouthamel’s third chapter, “‘Don’t Think I’m Soft’: the masculine image presented to the Home Front in soldiers’ letters’, stresses the increasing emotional dependence with which soldiers often relied upon communications with their womenfolk. Despite the incalculable experiential divide between those suffering at the front and those left at home, unable to comprehend the war’s horrors or the physical and psychological impact of mass violence, which could lead to simmering resentment or even a widening chasm between some couples, others grew closer through the intimacy of their correspondence. *Feldpostbriefe* could even become a kind of confessional in which men could reveal their emotions, their fear and despair, escaping the official ideal of self-control and stoicism and escaping into ‘an alternative world filled with love and compassion’ (p. 66). Thus, for instance, Fritz N., writing in April 1917, constructed an elaborate fantasy with his fiancée Hildegard about how she might join him in his billet:

"I must explain to you how you can find me! We could meet in a shack in a deep-cut trench. You must be quiet, very quiet, because there are so many people everywhere. Radio operators, telephone specialists and other soldiers – I’m not alone in my bedroom: the captain lies next to me and he’s such a light sleeper!! And it’s so terribly cold! You must firmly cuddle me. And it would be nice if we could have breakfast together!..." (Letter from Fritz N. to Hildegard, 20 April 1917, Bd. 65, Württembergische Landesbibliothek Stuttgart, cited on p. 87.)

Other soldiers, meanwhile, apparently found a different form of escapism in embracing their feminine side, letting off steam in the context of satirical creative writing or theatrical revues in which they could explore what it might be like to take on a female role, rather than having to live up to official male expectations. In the fourth chapter, “‘I Wish I Were a Girl!’ escaping the masculine ideal in front newspapers’, Crouthamel depicts such dabblings in more ‘effeminate’ desires and emotions as a fantasy of gender transgression which reflected disillusionment with the emotionally stifling masculine ideal; a reaction to the melodramatic propaganda in more censored, propagandistic military papers which prescribed how the ideal soldier should behave. Following Thomas Kühne’s lead, Crouthamel points to the ways in which the concept of male *Kameradschaft* (comradeship) came to embrace both masculine and feminine traits, filling the vacuum of care and nurturing created by the absence of women at the front.(3) As an example, he cites an article in a trench newspaper which depicted the metamorphosis of that most paradigmatically masculine object, the *Stahlhelm* (steel helmet) into a utensil for various traditionally feminine tasks: a wash basin, cooking pot, or shopping basket (p. 102).
Chapters five and six – respectively entitled “‘We Need Real Men’: the impact of the front experience on homosexual front soldiers”, and ‘Coming home: postwar sexual chaos, disillusionment, and battles over masculinity’ – focus to a greater extent on the impact of soldiers’ front experiences on post-war society. Particularly among homosexual groups such as the Gemeinschaft der Eigenen, the war was seen as an opportunity to ‘contest the exclusively heterosexual nature of militarised masculinity’ (p. 121), and to prove homosexuals’ patriotism and integration into the social fabric of German society. Rejecting Magnus Hirschfeld’s construction of homosexuals as a ‘third sex’, many members of these groups presented themselves as hyper-masculine warriors; a militant fighting force in the crusade against homophobia – often using the imagery of the battle front to fuel their post-war struggles for emancipation. In so doing, they themselves castigated more ‘effeminate’ homosexuals in order to counter moral criticism, thus endorsing the mainstream militarised ideal of manliness, at least in part. Meanwhile, even returning soldiers who were not perceived by German society at large as homosexually deviant were suspected of being immoral, hedonistic and a danger to the social fabric – indeed, debauchery on the battle front was also blamed for Germany’s ultimate defeat; a sexual variant on the stab-in-the-back myth. In turn, the returning soldiers themselves were often intensely disappointed by the circumstances which greeted their homecoming; the domesticity which they had idealised for so long seemed both stifling and insecure, and comfort was not always to be had from one’s emotionally distant (and at times shockingly emancipated) womenfolk. Instead, it could seem easier to turn for solace to a sentimentalised idealisation of Kameradschaft, glorifying in the exclusively male bonds created by trench warfare.

Despite some repetitiousness in style, and a certain proliferation of gender-studies jargon which can occasionally grate, Crouthamel’s study is generally readable as well as informative and illuminating – and it has the virtue of being concise enough to devour in a single sitting. My only pressing question would be how far the phenomena which he discusses here can be considered representative, and whether there were actually more soldiers than he gives credit for who remained at least partially convinced of the value of the ‘hegemonic masculine paradigm’ to the bitter end – as did the subjects of Theweleit’s study. In particular, the evidence discussed in the fourth chapter feels a little thinly-spread; arguably, soldiers cross-dressing in theatrical revues or indulging in blue humour in trench newspapers need not necessarily be living out complex transgender fantasies. It might also have been helpful if the author had included in his introduction a brief sketch of the life of rank-and-file German soldiers (and the ways in which this differed from the more familiar experience of their British or American counterparts) – which would have helped to clarify questions of how far these men’s training and treatment by their superiors might have contributed to their brutalisation, how often they were entitled to escape the rigours of the front on leave, and so forth.

However, in conclusion, it is fair to say that the material which Crouthamel has brought to light certainly allows for a fascinating investigation of masculinity ‘from below’, and that his book constitutes a useful addition to the growing body of literature exploring the cultural history of ‘experience’ in the Great War. It is only to be hoped that his work will open up further studies of this fascinating and under-researched body of evidence.

Notes

2. Even before the outbreak of the Great War, the Eulenburg scandal had rocked German society with its purported revelations of licentious homosexuality in the most exalted military and imperial circles – cf. e.g. Norman Domeier, Der Eulenburg-Skandal. Eine politische Kulturgeschichte des Kaiserreichs (Frankfurt am Main, 2010). Back to (2)

The author is happy to accept this review and wishes to thank the reviewer for her close analysis of my arguments, use of sources and conclusions.

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