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Review of Peter H. Wilson, *Iron and Blood:  
A Military History of the German-Speaking Peoples since 1500*

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## BOOK REVIEWS

PETER H. WILSON, *Iron and Blood: A Military History of the German-Speaking Peoples since 1500* (London: Allen Lane, 2022), 976 pp. ISBN 978 0 241 35556 5 (hardback), £40.00; ISBN 978 0 141 98888 7 (paperback), £18.99

Peter H. Wilson's monumental military history of the German-speaking peoples opens by quoting Otto von Bismarck's famous 1862 remark that the great questions of the day would be decided not by speeches and majority decisions but by 'iron and blood'. This phrase epitomizes the primacy of the military over the political and already features in the titles of various German and English books on the wars of German unification,<sup>1</sup> the *Kaiserreich*,<sup>2</sup> and the First World War.<sup>3</sup> And indeed, Wilson's book is a military history and not a general history, as the subtitle of the German translation, published in 2023, misleadingly suggests.<sup>4</sup> Wilson's main aim is to 'defrost German military history' (p. xlv), which means to liberate history from narrative patterns such as a German '*Sonderweg*', a 'German way of war', or any Borusso-centric teleology that culminates in the violence of the Nazis. 'German history should not be read backwards from it [i.e. the Holocaust] as a teleological 'Special Path' deviating from a civilized norm' (p. 753). A German author would probably not have chosen this perspective for an examination of the *longue durée*; the debate is more likely to be found in the historiography of the *Kaiserreich* (albeit sometimes in a new, methodologically

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<sup>1</sup> Christoph Jahr, *Blut und Eisen: Wie Preußen Deutschland erzwang, 1864–1871* (Munich, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Katja Hoyer, *Blood and Iron: The Rise and Fall of the German Empire, 1871–1918* (Cheltenham, 2021); German: *Im Kaiserreich: Eine kurze Geschichte 1871–1918* (Hamburg, 2024).

<sup>3</sup> Sönke Neitzel, *Blut und Eisen: Deutschland im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Zurich, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Peter H. Wilson, *Eisen und Blut: Die Geschichte der deutschsprachigen Länder seit 1500* (Darmstadt, 2023).

innovative form, as in Isabel V. Hull's *Absolute Destruction*).<sup>5</sup> After the cultural turn, the *Sonderweg* debate tends to appear in the guise of a German 'military culture', which is somewhat paradoxical in epistemological terms, since cultural history tends to tear down such narratives. Wilson's socio-historical approach does much the same critical work, by repeatedly drawing parallels with the armies of other European powers. In this sense, the book is characterized less by a pointed thesis than by a kind of *histoire totale* that dispels distortions and myths.

Wilson tames the vast material into five chapters, each covering one hundred years between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries. While the headings 'Balancing War and Peace' (sixteenth century) and 'Accepting War as Permanent' (seventeenth century) tend to oversimplify the first two centuries, the narrower categories of processes in 'Professionalizing War' (eighteenth century), 'Nationalizing War' (nineteenth century), and 'Democratizing War' (twentieth century) provide a more accurate summary. Each chapter follows a similar structure: the first part summarizes the causes, courses, and outcomes of most of the major wars in which German-speaking actors were involved; this is followed by a second part on the organization of warfare, based on command structure, general staff, recruitment and enlistment, promotion, armament, and units and weapons such as infantry, cavalry, artillery, fortifications, and naval forces. The third part then examines social history under categories such as knowledge, violence, motivation, religion, gender relations, and the impact of war on the population and economy. This approach has clear advantages: it allows comparability between centuries and makes historical change visible without overemphasizing it. The reader can thus construct their own history of military, religious, or gender relations over five hundred years.

However, this approach also reveals a fundamental structural ambivalence. A modern and up-to-date social history in the best sense of the word is juxtaposed with a more conventional political history of battles and treaties, but the interplay between the two is easily lost. Given the necessary brevity of the individual sections, this division of labour means that, for example, the Nine Years War is covered in

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<sup>5</sup> Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practice of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca, NY, 2005).

one-and-a-half pages (pp. 149–50) and Wilson's account of it remains inevitably superficial. But the history of events does not have to be more conventional than social and structural history. Battles, for example, are complex formations of practices that have always given rise to critical historiographical reflection. In other words, the way in which the chapters are divided leaves it up to the reader to decide how they wish to link the violence, the characters, and the events.

Wilson is reluctant to commit himself to established historiographical categories, mostly because they are too one-sided and do not stand up to empirical evidence; nonetheless, the 'military revolution' appears here and there, as do 'social militarization' and 'small group cohesion'. From a German academic perspective—not that of a general readership—one might expect a little more theoretical reference in a major research contribution, which the book undoubtedly is, without immediately turning it into a cultural-theoretical treatise. In terms of social history, however, Wilson's particular focus is on the numbers, be they army size, army expenditure, debt, wages, or population loss. The socio-historical perspective also prompts the question of the actors' agency. In Wilson's case, this is rarely attributed to individuals, be they simple soldiers or stubborn generals. Iconic diarists, such as Peter Hagedorf, a German mercenary soldier in the Thirty Years War, or Ulrich Bräker, a lower-class Swiss writer, are mentioned, but remain on the periphery of the analysis of groups and numbers. It is striking that the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, despite the large number of testimonies, seem to have hardly any comparable 'prominent unknowns' to offer, although we are introduced to Wilhelm Voigt (the *Hauptmann* or 'chief' of Köpenick) and Anton Schmidt (a German soldier who saved Jews during the Second World War).

Wilson's almost encyclopaedic approach demands some patience, but the reader is rewarded with a consistent, balanced consideration of often marginalized elements, which also offers the connoisseur some new information and insights. Two aspects stand out for me: the treatment of the naval history of the premodern German-speaking territories, and the integration of Swiss and Habsburg history. Given the enormous amount of research literature that has been carefully processed here, it is a pity that there is no bibliography, as scholars will find it difficult to access the seventy-three pages of cramped endnotes.

What is the overall picture that emerges after more than 750 pages? Prussia loses its hegemonic status as a military power, both socio-historically and historico-philosophically, as the determined father of a united German nation state, and is replaced by Austria's Habsburg Empire—a larger, more aggressive, and sometimes more innovative military state (p. 751). This is of interest, among other things, in relation to the thesis of the Baroque historian Peter Hersche, who attributed a 'positive backwardness' to Catholicism when it came to military matters.<sup>6</sup> This is, in my view, an implausible thesis, and here we have the opportunity to consider compelling counter-evidence. The decentring of Prussia demonstrates the particular strength of the comparative social history approach, whereby some apparent peculiarities are shown to be due more to the general trends of the times.

As a defensive alliance, the premodern Germany of the old empire loses the character of a necessarily belligerent German culture. The history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is different, as the formula of blood and iron becomes more dominant. Nevertheless, similar to the decentralization of Prussia as a hegemonic part of the German military culture, the German army of the *Kaiserreich* and the Nazi regime also fades in significance in terms of, for example, technology, mobilization, leadership, and success. The fifth and final chapter brings an explosion of thematic complexity, as tanks, submarine warfare, air forces, bombing, and nuclear weapons gain in importance, while war now exposes the population to greater risks, mobilizes larger parts of it, and further increases its significance for the continuation of military operations. A recurring motif in German military history is the belief in quick and decisive blows, although this may have been due as much to ideological processes of reception as to real-life scenarios in which opponents were perceived as overpowering. What kind of image of war and the military is created? The book is characterized by a sober perspective on military professionalism. It neither ignores nor glorifies the suffering associated with war.

It is a welcome surplus when the leading British expert in early modern German military history publishes a magnum opus in both

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<sup>6</sup> Peter Hersche, *Muße und Verschwendung: Europäische Gesellschaft und Kultur im Barockzeitalter*, 2 vols. (Freiburg im Breisgau, 2006), i. 27.

English and German. This is a real treat for both audiences, who can enjoy the insights and perspectives in their native language. For German speakers, it is a wonderful opportunity to deepen their understanding of their history through the lens of a foreign expert. I am sure many readers will be delighted to find a comprehensive account of German military history written from a long-term perspective. For English-speaking readers, it might be particularly interesting to see how the author challenges many of the stereotypes that are often associated with this topic, and offers a perspective that is more grounded in social history. Overall, Wilson's book is a significant achievement that will serve as a benchmark for future comprehensive histories.

A last word on marketing aesthetics: the cover of the book shows the uniform of Prince Oscar of Prussia, complete with his spiked helmet (*Pickelhaube*), but without his face. The spiked helmet has become a controversial symbol of the second German Empire. Historians such as Hedwig Richter have recently distanced themselves from this iconography, albeit with the effect of whitewashing the *Kaiserreich*.<sup>7</sup> In this respect, the helmet rightly adorns a book that focuses on Germany's military history and violence; but the Prussian uniform, together with Bismarck's words, also plays into the very stereotype that the book seeks to combat. Sometimes, exorcising spirits can result in their manifestation, albeit in symbolic form.

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<sup>7</sup> See e.g. Marcel Schütz, 'Ein Reich in Bewegung', *sozialtheoristen.de*, 29 Mar. 2019, at [<https://sozialtheoristen.de/2019/03/21/ein-reich-in-bewegung>], accessed 27 Aug. 2024.

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