Ziemann, Benjamin: *Contested Commemorations. Republican War Veterans and Weimar Political Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2012. ISBN: 978-1-10702-889-0; 315 S.

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Once upon a time it was a commonplace of interwar European history to speak of the 'brutalization' of men who fought or served in the First World War. The violence of the Great War seemed to give many veterans a lust for blood and conflict that came to be satisfied by the radical-right movements and groups of the twenties and thirties. Old soldiers were certainly conspicuous in the ranks of fascist and right-wing extremist groups across Europe; and the process of 'brutalization' added heuristic appeal was that it seemed to reveal close connections between the violence of the first and second world wars. The 'brutalization' thesis, conceived by German born American cultural historian George Mosse, surely remains relevant, but its considerable salience, and the more general fascination with fascism and the European interwar right, has cast a pall other important legacies of the Great War and other very different experiences of former soldiers. Now a significant interpretive shift is taking place in the cultural history of the First World War in Europe, marked by an emphasis on the pacifist and liberal leanings of the vast majority of war veterans and their contribution to democratic political culture in the interwar period.

And so it is with Benjamin Ziemann's meticulously researched and original monograph on republican war veterans in Weimar Germany. Ziemann's research draws on archives across Germany, memoirs, journals, publications, and, of course, the vast body of secondary literature on Weimar Germany, to reconstruct the stories of the men of the Reichsbund and Reichsbanner, two national veteran associations committed to republican politics and upholding the institutions of Weimar Germany. Simply that these were two associations drew in the largest number of ex-soldiers in the fledgling German state makes them important objects of study, but Ziemann's monograph approaches republican veterans qualitatively rather than quantitatively: he is interested in the symbolic investments they made in the new state, or, more broadly, „how the moderate German left tried to turn the social and cultural legacy of total war into symbolic capital that could strengthen their overall political stance" (p. 10). This is offered up against the reductive arguments that German veterans in largest part embraced the revanchist Dolchstoß myth – so beloved of the interwar German right – and that Weimar itself was unsupported and irresistibly assailed from the beginning by hostile forces coming at it from the right. A far richer and more complicated picture of Weimar's short-lived democracy emerges from Ziemann's study, one in which a plethora of groups and individuals fought for prominence in the state's public spaces and fought to assert their own symbolic investments over the national culture, especially with regard to the war and its meaning; these are precisely the 'contested commemorations' of the title.

Ziemann's approach is thematic over chronological. He opens with an analysis of popular booklets and brochures, mostly published during 1919–1922, which place blame for the German defeat squarely at the door of the Wilhelmine elite, and thus effectively reject the Dolchstoß myth. He moves on to a close analysis of the commemorative activities of the Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold and a study of the individual recollections of 'ordinary' Reichsbanner members (chapters two and three); an outline of public rhetoric and war remembrances employed by both the Reichsbanner and Reichsbund (chapter four); the unsuccessful attempts of republican war veterans to rally together behind a single national commemorative symbol (chapter five); the republicans' critiques of official war historiography (an historiography that tried to shift blame for the defeat away from the imperial general staff, chapter six); and literary and artistic representations of the war produced during 1928–1933 (chapter seven, in which, understandably, Remarque's novel 1929 All Quiet on the Western Front, and Lewis Milestone's 1930 movie based on Remarque's novel feature prominently).

Something must be said about the weight

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of research and the originality of argument in this work. Ziemann is taking on not just the 'brutalization' thesis of European war veterans, but also the decades of scholarship that has depicted Weimar and its institutions a stillborn and therefore doomed. Ziemann's interpretation does not bend under all this weight; he assuredly and throughout his text challenges a number of the prevailing interpretive frameworks. He addresses himself primarily to scholarly debates and discussions about Weimar itself, some nods towards a 'comparative' dimension are made, but these are largely restricted to France and Great Britain. How, then, do Weimar's difficulties compare to the many other failed democratic projects of the interwar period, the successor-states of eastern and central Europe; or the collapsing democracies in southern Europe, Greece, Spain, Portugal? The drastic singularity of the National Socialist regime seems to have warded off serious comparative discussion between Germany and these other cases, but Ziemann's book suggests many pertinent comparative questions: most of these countries had been through the war and had to deal with the demands of demobilizing soldiers; in many cases the democratic institutions in these states were new and untested; and in many cases there was considerable initial support for liberal national institutions, support that nevertheless gave way to authoritarian temptations. Ziemann's book has drawn Weimar out of the teleological orbit of the Second World War; there are surely lessons to be applied elsewhere.

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