REVIEW ARTICLE

Images as Documents in the History of War

Peter Paret

Landsknechte und Reisläufer: Bilder von Soldaten. By Matthias Rogg. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh. 2002. Pp. x + 457. €46.80. ISBN 3-50674-474-7.

Krieg und Militär im Film des 20. Jahrhunderts. Edited by Bernhard Chiari, Matthias Rogg, and Wolfgang Schmidt. Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag. 2003. Pp. x + 654. €49.80. ISBN 3-48656-716-0.

The continuing expansion of the interdisciplinary approach to history, a progressively easier accommodation of one area of specialization to the perspectives and methods of another, are exemplified by the two books under review, which are about war—and much more. They are the product of two parallel processes: the blending of the history of war with social and cultural history; and the systematic use of the arts—specifically of graphics, paintings, and film—as historical documents. That a professional military entity, the *Militärgeschichtliche Forschungsamt* of the German Bundeswehr, is the sponsor of these publications is a particularly strong indication of the degree to which interaction between seemingly remote areas and methods of research has become the rule. For generations, official military history in the United States and elsewhere tended to minimize the civilian dimension of war, emphasizing instead—often with a service-oriented, didactic purpose—unit and organizational history, and the tactics, operations, and strategies of specific campaigns. Other elements were not entirely ignored, but official historians always reserved their closest attention to combat and generalship. The deployment and use of armed force, central as they are to war, certainly deserve intense study—as do a country's political, social, economic, and cultural elements, which largely determine how a war is fought, and in turn are affected by its course, character, and outcome. The concentration of official history on campaign narrative tended to obscure important

Central European History, vol. 38, no. 2, 269–274

https://doi.org/10.1163/156916105775563689 Published online by Cambridge University Press

elements of the subject and not coincidentally had a narrowing impact on the treatment of war by academic historians in general.

Since the Second World War, a gradual change in outlook has marked the research and publication programs of official history sections throughout the world. Probably the most striking are those of France and Germany. The *Centre d'études d'histoire de la Défense* has been particularly enterprising in posing and exploring theoretical questions and in applying the methods and findings of social history to military issues. By contrast, overtly theoretical analyses are less prominent in the extensive and diverse publication program of the *Militärgeschichtliche Forschungsamt*. Even if expressed more pragmatically, however, the integrative process is just as much in evidence. The introduction to the second of the works discussed here states a guiding principle: "Basic to [our] considerations is the recognition that modern military history has departed once and for all from the traditional, lesson-oriented history of war, and that by asking new kinds of questions, it has significantly expanded such classical fields of study as operation history. Modern military history conveys knowledge of the social and political totality, of which the armed forces are a part" (p. 2).

Matthias Rogg has written a stimulating, important study, *Landsknechte und Reisläufer: Bilder von Soldaten*, the fifth volume in the series *Krieg in der Geschichte*. By analyzing an extensive body of primarily sixteenth-century images, he attempts to come closer to the reality of the fighting man in Central Europe from the late Middle Ages to the last years before the Thirty Years' War—his values, his place in society, his relations with women, his life in camp, on the march, in battle, his ways of fighting, and also the institutions in which he fights and exists. Rogg does not claim to have located every picture relevant to the subject, but he discusses or refers to approximately four thousand images, far more than any scholar before him. His emphasis is on works from Switzerland and southern Germany. For comparisons, he draws on material from Italy, Spain, and the Low Countries.

The book opens with brief accounts of the state of scholarship, the sources and methodology of the work, and the historical and art historical context. An analysis of the images follows, divided into six main thematic parts: the artists' depiction of dress, weapons, and emblems of the soldiers; the "realism" of the scenes of everyday life; soldiers shown in relation to other social groups; soldiers in images with an ideological, moralizing, or political purpose; and soldiers as symbolic figures in sophisticated compositions, but also as such utilitarian design elements as supporters of a coat of arms or playing-card figures; soldiers as subjects of caricature. A brief discussion of two types of images—autonomous, and parts of a sequence or series—and a concise summary conclude the study, which is supported by an extensive bibliography, 2,243 endnotes, and—counting the multiple panels in some plates—more than three hundred illustrations

https://doi.org/10.1163/156916105775563689 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of illuminated manuscripts and chronicles, drawings, prints, paintings, glass paintings, tiles, and sculptures.

It is a significant achievement to have assembled, classified, and compared this mass of contemporary material. Previous analyses were handicapped by the narrow sample on which they were based, a limitation regretted more than once by John Hale, whose elegant, insightful articles on soldiers and art in early modern Europe, culminating in his masterly monograph *Artists and Warfare in the Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990) were an inspiration to the author. Rogg's book helps place the study of the reflection of war in the art of early modern Europe on a firmer basis. Generalizations can now be formulated with greater assurance, and the extensive material makes it possible to identify and trace developments, draw comparisons, and raise new questions. An example are the many panoramic scenes of sieges, which depict troops in camp, and, incidentally, indicate the interest that affluent town dwellers—the principal buyers of graphics—showed in the life of a dangerous, socially mobile segment of the population. The author suggests that, unlike the fragmentary written record, these detailed images of the way troops were quartered and fed, of the care of the sick and wounded, the activities of camp followers, and of the arrangements and location of kitchens and latrines represent "an outstanding source for the study of the daily life and social history of armies in the early modern period" (p. 86). But the reach of these panoramas extends further. As camp scenes become more orderly and regimented, they not only point to the increasing professionalization of war, but mark developments beyond the military realm: social change and the expansion of princely authority.

The images serve not only to complement or disprove contemporary texts; they may record situations treated barely or not at all by authors of the time—an example being the soldier's departure from and return to his family. Other neglected themes include the fate of veterans, the wounded and crippled, and the relationship of soldiers to prostitutes—this, in particular, is the subject of powerful interpretations by such important artists as Urs Graf and Niklaus Manuel Deutsch. Why, the author asks, can we find no images of women in camp and on the march before the end of the fifteenth century? He answers the question in a characteristic passage:

> The noticeable emergence of the subject coincides not only with the "loss of individuality [*Vermassung*]" in war, but also reflects the socio-economic change from knightly to mercenary armies. The gradual replacement of feudally-bound fighters by mercenary units of a more or less communal character also necessitated . . . more flexible logistic arrangements. To meet the increasingly complex demands of supply, the armies needed more cheap labor. Women seeking work were particularly welcome . . . Not only the limited [literary] sources, but also the social and military historians' noticeable

https://doi.org/10.1163/156916105775563689 Published online by Cambridge University Press

lack of interest in the women of the supply train, demand a more intensive study of contemporary images (p. 45).

To unlock the documentary potential of sixteenth century art and develop interpretations of such breadth calls for more than the selection of appropriate illustrations for a historical narrative. It demands close study of the contents of the image, its reportage, and symbolism; a comparison with images of related subjects; an analysis of the work's formal elements and its place in the art of the time; the identification of the work's purpose; and the role of the market or the demands of the patron. The interdisciplinary approach, which leads to an informed reading of the image as historical document, the primary purpose of Rogg's study, has the further and perhaps unintended result of bringing about a deeper understanding of the image as a work of art.

Rogg concludes that in the sixteenth century, mercenaries were among the most popular subjects of non-religious south-German art, and cites both political developments and psychological reactions for their ubiquitous presence—among them the perceived danger posed by the Turkish advance through the Balkans, which stimulated wide interest in the armed segment of European society. He finds valuable information in the depicted details of dress, arms, emblems in prints, and other images. Generally they hew more closely to reality than do panoramas of battles and camps, which are often idealized, even schematic, representations. They, too, however, may be enlightening, not only in their reflection of new ideas and of the basic military and political change from late feudal warfare to more firmly organized and standardized forces. They trace the conversion of the fighting man from an individual to a cog in the newly disciplined military system. These and similar findings and hypotheses are related mainly to social and cultural history, but they are given additional heft by their implications for, and links to, other areas of study.

Matthias Rogg is one of the editors of the second work under discussion, a collection of twenty-six essays by twenty-four military and civilian authors on *War and the Military in Twentieth-Century Film*, volume 59 in the series *Beiträge zur Militärgeschichte*. The present review can refer only to a few contributions to this broad-ranging, informative work. It is divided into a historical and methodological introduction, and five sections, each with a comprehensive introductory essay: war films in interdisciplinary context; U.S. and Soviet war films; war films during the First World War and the Weimar Republic—the subject of two enlightening comparative studies by Martin Baumeister; the Luftwaffe in national-socialist propaganda films; and war and the military in East and West German films after 1945. The emphasis is on German film. Films of other countries are drawn on for comparisons; in a few essays they also form the principal subject—Andreas Etges studies the changing interpretation of the Second World War in American cinema from "The Best Years of Our Lives" to "Saving Private Ryan;" Beate Fieseler discusses the difficulty the subject of invalids

https://doi.org/10.1163/156916105775563689 Published online by Cambridge University Press

posed to Soviet film from wartime into the 1960s: "Unlike Hollywood, the Soviet cinema rejected the radical representation of the war damaged. It showed neither young men as invalids, nor the blind, nor people who had lost more than one limb." Physical and psychic consequences disappeared in the "one-dimensionality of the official remembrance of war" (pp. 217–18).

In his introduction, Gerhard Paul summarizes the historical and theoretical study of motion pictures and proposes concepts and categories to guide the book's discussion of film and war. The medium has always claimed a special relation to reality, a claim, he notes that often was fictitious, and remains so today. Combat is difficult to film, even when one is prepared to show people being killed, and from the beginning, filmmakers combined reality and fiction in documentaries and newsreels. Paul sees film as a powerful but complex historical source, since a motion picture does not simply reflect an event, accurately or not, but itself becomes a historical force by shaping views of the event. Every film discussed in this volume—whether propaganda film, newsreel, or feature—was made to influence its audience, directly or indirectly. Films may also affect how some people imagine and think about the past, and recorded reality is not necessarily more persuasive than retrospectively invented dramas: "Our image of the First World War is formed more by fictitious representations from the Weimar period than by films produced during the war itself" (p. 13). These are important points, although hardly unique to film. Most images, in whatever medium, possess the potential of present and retrospective influence. Sixteenth-century woodcuts or engravings of mercenaries usually express a particular social perspective, and not a few advocate ideologically or politically well-defined programs. The art of the past certainly helps or misleads us in forming our image of the past. Historical paintings, like historical films, reflect fantasies as much as knowledge of the past, and their message—whether commentary or advocacy—is inevitably and intentionally addressed to the present.

In the Weimar Republic as well as in the Third Reich, the age of Frederick the Great and the Napoleonic era were as desirable a subject for historical films as was the First World War. In their treatment of the more remote period, Prussia stands for an idealized Germany, the German opponents of Frederick and the German allies of Napoleon rarely appear, and the films of both the Republican and National-Socialist periods convey very similar messages of past heroism for a noble cause, which by implication justifies more recent German history. Although Goebbels was certainly interested in the dramatic exploitation of twentieth century war, one of the most expensive productions he authorized, *Kolberg* (1945), a film not discussed in this work, once more returned to the Napoleonic age, and its account of a small town's continued resistance against great odds turned Kolberg into a model for all of Germany to follow, even as its cities were shattered and the country was overrun.

Filmmaking is, of course, a highly collaborative activity, although here, too,

https://doi.org/10.1163/156916105775563689 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the difference with other media is hardly absolute. A single painting or woodcut may result from the interaction of the artist with assistants, patrons, gallery owners, publishers, and others; but the large teams, perhaps representing more than a single point of view, that are engaged at every stage of film production are rarely part of a painting's genesis. Interpreters, too, often ignore this aspect, and assume a single vision that may never have been dominant. Despite the rich contents of the volume, this issue is not extensively treated—presumably because the sources were not available. At least Gerhard Weichmann traces the production history of an East German film that combines stories of "courage, love, and faith" as the publicity has it, with the glorification of the DDR's air force. His informative contribution shows the unintended directions a plot and its representation on the screen may take, even if the people in charge agree on what they want the film to be and say. That a film is a historical document is certain. How far each twist and turn of script, acting, direction, and cutting sends an ideological message remains an open question.

The contributors to *Krieg und Militär im Film* pay more attention to the institutional context of their subject than the author of *Landsknechte und Reisläufer* pays to his—reflecting the difference between twentieth-century production teams embedded in massive financial/technical structures and the more solitary artists of five hundred years ago. Nevertheless, both books address the same basic question: What can images tell the historian? We may feel that images are no more complex than other types of documents, but they possess their own kinds of complexity. Many of these are revealed in the two books reviewed here, some in the theoretical discussions, many more and more fully in the books' narrative and analysis. Both works make significant contributions, and in more than one area: in early modern and modern German history, in the history of military institutions and war that sees its subject as more than combat, and in the science—and art—of finding historical meaning in images.

THE INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDY

https://doi.org/10.1163/156916105775563689 Published online by Cambridge University Press