

FRITZ, *FRONTSOLDATEN*

STEPHEN G. FRITZ. FRONTSOLDATEN: THE GERMAN SOLDIER IN WORLD WAR II. LEXINGTON, KY.: UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY PRESS, 1995. PP. X + 242. CLOTH \$29.95. ISBN 0-8131-1920-0

FRONTSOLDATEN

1--Guy Sajer in his autobiography, *The Forgotten Soldier*: "Generals have written accounts (of battles), ...summarizing in a sentence, or a few lines, the losses, but they never, to my knowledge, give sufficient expression to the wretchedness of soldiers abandoned to a fate one would wish to spare even the most miserable cur. They never evoke the hours upon hours of agony. They never mention the common soldier, beaten and defeated...confounded with murder and degradation.

14--Karl Fuchs underwent the transition from the Hitler Youth to the Labor Service, and in a letter to his parents left a picture of a taxing military-style routine:

We have to get up at five o'clock every morning. After reveille, we have fifteen minutes of morning calisthenics. In half-an-hour I have to be washed, rest, and have my area cleaned up. It is very difficult for me to make my straw bed in accordance with military regulations. If the bed is not made properly, the supervising officer simply throws the whole thing on the floor and you have to start all over again.

23--Sajer describes the famous Harteubung (hardness training) the Wehrmacht had to endure which was almost continuous. We were put on thirty-six hour shifts, which were broken by only three half-hour periods...There were also false alarms, which tore us from our leaden sleep and forced us into the courtyard fully dressed and equipped.

Sometimes a fellow would drop from exhaustion obliging his comrades to get the fellow onto his feet again, slapping him and spraying him with water. Nothing ever affected the routine. Captain Fink simply carried on, in total disregard of our bleeding gums and pinched faces, until the stabbing pains in our heads made us forget the bleeding blisters on our feet.

37--Life at the front (for the Landser) meant living on the edge of unimaginable horror and suffering. "I have lived through hell," Harald Henry remarked of an experience in October 1941 which he termed "inconceivable"; in another letter he spoke of combat as "agony without end." "Hell is seething in all its caldrons," he opened a letter a few days later, referring to "we tormented humans" who cannot bear the suffering much longer. "Yet the last hell," he concluded, quoting Brecht, "is never the very last."

64--Although a Landser might realize rationally that the quicker the evacuation, the better his chances of survival, the actual process of being sent to the rear could itself bring excruciating pain and suffering...A hospital train offered scant improvement. Hans Woltersdor recalled being among wounded men who were crowded together like sardines in the cattle car. There were moans, groans, and whimpers in that car; the smell of pus, urine, stomach and lung wounds, and it was cold. We lay on straw, each of us covered only by a woolen blanket. The train waited for hours on sidings.

94-5--Landers found without the proper documents or suspected of desertion also became victims of these summary trials. For maximum deterrent effect, those executed

FRITZ, FRONTSOLDATEN

were normally left dangling from trees or poles with placards attached to them, warning others of the consequences of any perceived dereliction of duty. Max Landowsky recalled such sights during his westward flight from Danzig in January 1945, remembering particularly that many of the hanged had been accused of "cowardice in the face of the enemy."

As he put it, "There was no mercy." Reporting to Wehrmacht authorities in Cottbus, Landowsky saw in front of the headquarters building "an executed Germany soldier (lying) on the grass, and he had a large placard on his chest and on it appeared: 'That's how it goes for one who is a coward.'" Erwin Losch recalled a similarly "horrific picture" in Danzig: "On the trees along the street hung German soldiers, ropes around their necks.

Some were barefoot and almost all had a sign on their chest on which 'coward' appeared. Not a few had decorations on their field uniforms. It took our breath away." And sixteen-year-old Hans-Rudolf Vilter still never forgot the picture of chaos in Berlin, especially "the deserters and apprehended soldiers that one saw hanging on the lampposts and trees with the sign: 'I hang here because I am too cowardly to defend my fatherland.'" (RK: Anyone who refused to die for Germany was killed).

95--One Landser recalled with bitterness that in the fall of 1944-armed German officers gave his unit no choice but to attack enemy lines. The other option was clear: be shot by your own leaders. Some units even established special formations whose instructions were "to make immediate use of their weapons in order to enforce obedience & discipline." As Helmut Altner wrote caustically, the situation many Landers found themselves in was devilishly simple: "There were only two possibilities. Death by a bullet from the enemy or by the 'thugs' of the SS." (RK: See PATHS OF GLORY).

97--As early as the end of 1941 one German division was taking steps to ensure discipline by instilling the fear that Ivan was less worrisome than the consequences of cowardice: "Lance-Corporal Aigner...was sentenced to death by court martial on the charge of cowardice," ran the special order. "Although he had seen his unit marching forward, he entered a house, drank a bottle of schnapps...and fled to the rear without cap or weapon. Every case of cowardice will be severely atoned for with death."

(Rk: The "sin" is not to wish to fight and die for Germany, to be separate from the nation. The Jews had to *atone for their sins*. The German god punished them). RK: THAT IS THE KEY PHRASE, IN HITLER'S ORIGINAL DECLARATION OF WAR: Either you will devote yourself to the state, be willing to be "heroic," and to die when the nation asks you to. Or you are a "coward," one who refuses to suffer in the face of the object, who refuses to express masochistic devotion, AND THEN YOU WILL HAVE TO ATONE, BE PUNISHED BY THE OBJECT (the mother) WHOSE WILL YOU HAVE ATTEMPTED TO EVADE.

99-Siegrie Knappe had "become fatalistic about death and assumed that eventually it would happen to me and there was nothing I could do to prevent it. I did not wait for it to happen...but I knew that I was going to be killed or badly wounded sooner or later...I accepted my eventual death or maiming as part of my fate."

FRITZ, FRONTSOLDATEN

100--Willi Huber valued the fact that "this war, even as gruesome and atrocious as it is, has given us once again splendid examples of decent and upright men who sacrifice themselves." Trapped in Stalingrad, exhausted by the bitter fighting and lack of food, and nearing the end of his resistance, Lieutenant H. H. could still assert: "To maintain your loyalty with death before your eyes is a service that must prove us worthy," and Captain H. claimed to be "extremely proud to have participated in this unique heroic epic of history." Sacrifice, then, was seen as noble, especially because "individuals die, while the Volk lives on." After all, as many Landers had been told, sacrifice was natural, because "an individual called to heroic death was 'thereby furthering life itself.'"

100-1--This existential anguish, these "cries of damned souls," as Pabst put it, betrayed an almost desperate desire to believe, to give the war some sort of meaning. With frightening directness, Bernhard Beckering in his last letter confronted this loss of faith. "It is a lingering farewell. The gods have abandoned me. I have a frightful understanding of what a central problem is the experience of being deserted by the gods." Within the week, Beckering was killed. When, as Harry Mielert declared, "anger roars through all the cracks in the world," it was a rage based on fear that the war had no purpose. (RK: This is rage led to the Holocaust. The experience of being deserted by the gods, realizing that Nazism had no purpose.)

114--Even routine tasks such as eating, bathing, and relieving oneself assumed monstrous proportions when undertaken in the midst of a biting Russian winter. "One man drawing his ration of boiling soup at the field kitchen could not find his spoon. It took him 30 seconds to find it, but by then the soup was lukewarm. He began to eat it as quickly as he could...but the soup was already cold and soon it would be solid."

Gnawing hunger threatened constantly, and to the average Landser seemed more than merely disagreeable. "Something must be cooked," noted Claus Hansmann in his diary, "even if it's only a pot of water."

115--For many Landsers, getting enough--or anything--to eat was a constant struggle. "Food was our most difficult problem," asserted Sajer. "Our eyes gleamed, like the eyes of famished wolves. Our stomachs were empty, our mess tins were empty, and the horizon was devoid of any hope."

116--Even while the supply system was functioning, the quantity and quality of rations brought many Landsers close to despair. "The supply situation is again normal," wrote Harry Mielert in August 1943. "Unfortunately the water is still polluted. The coffee tastes like piss." Likewise, Prosper Schucking complained in November 1943, "War & action by no means make you as tired as the strain of this uncomfortable foxhole, in which you cannot properly lie or sit, with lice and filthy blankets...and each evening potato or cabbage soup, for which you still must be very thankful."

Still, as the war wound down in the autumn of 1944, the quality of food deteriorated further: "Cellophane sausages stuffed with soybean puree, one for every two men. It goes without saying that these were cold." During the retreat back into East Prussia, Sajer witnessed "towns overflowing with starving refugees. People with the faces of madmen were wolfing down the flour, which was the only food distributed to them. Soldiers also had to stand in interminable lines, to receive, finally, two handfuls of flour apiece, and a cup of hot water infused with a minute portion of tea." Little

FRITZ, FRONTSOLDATEN

wonder, then, that many Landers often complained they had "too much food in order to die, but too little in order to live."

117--Relieving oneself at the front in winter proved at best irksome, at worst deadly. "The blizzards and the bitter cold seemed to stop our natural functions," noted a Landser. We had had, in that first year, also many cases of cystitis and the inability to urinate quickly as well as the intense burning sensation during the act." "Any desire to piss," Sajer remembered, "was announced to all present, so that hands swollen by chilblains could be held out under the warm urine, which often infected our cracked fingers." Indeed, General Heinz Guerian recorded that, as a result of the cold, "many men died while performing their natural functions."

A byproduct of the cold, the inability to bathe and get clean clothing, led to incredibly filthy conditions, which inevitably resulted in a plague of lice.... Ironically, as Knappe noted, "Although we were freezing, we still provide enough warmth for the lice that fed on us. We had become, quite simply, frozen and exhausted men who were being constantly tormented by vermin. We felt like livestock rather than human beings. I tried to imagine what it would be like to stand under a hot shower. The image was maddening."

137--Some Landsers failed in this struggle to preserve their inner spirit, glimpsing, as did Kurt Reuber, only anxiety, fear, and terror, a life without return along with terror without an end." "The heart is overwhelmed," as Gerhard Meyer put it, at the unbearable thought that "the smell of dead bodies is the beginning and end and ultimate sense and purpose of our being."

137--Harry Mielert wrote that, "I must sit here in this unsurpassed filth, this abhorrent cruelty, this psychological strain. One must wait, sit, plan, and do the worst, act mechanical and hard, look at and watch the inhuman, without flinching."

156-7--Willi Heinrich, himself a veteran of the eastern front, summarized well in his novel *The Cross of Iron* the mixed emotions of many German soldiers: "The Landser is the unluckiest invention of this twentieth century of ours...Flesh is patient. It will suffer anything that is put on it. It can be used; it can be abused. And it has suffered abuse because it has been lured with the bait of so-called ideals."

161--To serve a Volksgemeinschaft, to live a life of camaraderie, to believe in the German people and Hitler as the German Fuhrer--these were ideals pressed into the minds and souls of German youth. "Our freedom was service": this line from a Hitler Youth song reflected the ideal of devotion to the community--even to the point of death; as Grupe acknowledged, hardly any song sang by the youth of the HJ did not celebrate death in the service of the community. "Laugh, comrades," one such song proclaimed, "our death will be a celebration." And why? "Germany must live, even if we die," went the refrain, "We dedicate our death to you as the smallest deed."

166--The very intensity of their suffering welded LANDSERS together in a community of fate without parallel in civilian life, for this was a group bound by a common effort to endure the unendurable...In May 1943 Harry Mielert claimed, "The front is like a homeland. There is a 'solidarity of fate' that probably exists in the closest relationships, between lovers or friends."

FRITZ, *FRONTSOLDATEN*

168--Trapped by Russian forces in the autumn of 1943, Guy Sajer remembered, "We had to attack, or die. At that time, there was no question of captivity. As always after a hard knock, we rediscovered a kind of unity, and seemed to be held together by tighter bonds. What provoked the sentiments of generosity which brought out the last cigarettes, or the chocolates so rare they were usually devoured in secret?"

The source of these deep bonds puzzled even one so reflective as Sajer, but behind them lay an intense human desire to share the suffering and hardships of war...The constancy of their misery hammered the Landsers into a community of suffering, creating a compassion and affection for those (on their side) who had to endure the same horror.

183--Friedrich Crupe recalled being overwhelmed by the idealistic dream that a new vision of life based on comradeship might form the basis for a new society. After the war he wrote, "The front soldiers, purified through the great experience of comradeship in the face of death, will decisively undertake the fashioning of the National Socialist Germany and life in the Reich.

You, the true Volksgemeinschaft, who have lived in distress, will be called first to be a model and example for the Volk." The experience of comradeship in the trenches thus proved an intoxicating force, leading many to believe that the Frontgemeinschaft could be transferred to a genuine Volksgemeinschaft.

200--Trapped in the Stalingrad pocket, Lieutenant P. G. wrote on the first day of February 1943--the last day of German resistance--that "National Socialist Germany has never been taken so seriously as now...We live in a time whose value will be recognized only many years later. Here it is no longer a matter of the individual but of the whole."

207--The outbreak of the Great War illustrated the intoxicating power of the idea of Volksgemeinschaft. With the so-called Burgfrieden (domestic truce) of 1914, Germany seemed to have overcome class division & internal disunity, as people from every segment of society came together in a profound wave of national enthusiasm.... In August 1914 many Germans believed they had achieved just such a synthesis (of might and mind, of might and spirit--Thomas Mann).

Here, finally, was something to be worshipped. "A god at last," wrote Rainier Maria Rilke in the heady first week of war, later referring to the magical feeling of spiritual unity and idealism as "a creature invigorated by death." Similarly, Stefan Zweig noted, "Thousands and thousands felt what they should have felt in peacetime, that they belonged together."

The war, for many Germans, merged personal duty with communal demands to create a powerful sense of shared destiny. This mood deeply affected Adolph Hitler, the ultimate outsider at this point in his life; he claimed later that World War I made "the greatest of all impressions" by demonstrating that "individual interest could be subordinated to the common interest."

The trenches of the Great War thus proved a breeding ground for a new idea, the notion that the front experience had forged a community of men in which all social and material distinctions disappeared. (The need to belong together as one people, that was the mythos that appealed—it had to do with the capacity to “make history”—the

FRITZ, FRONTSOLDATEN

Holocaust was the beginning of the end of the fantasy of "history," the idea of "world historic meaning," omnipotence, Beethoven, etc.).

208--How disillusioning the postwar period must have been for those Germans imbued with the spirit of 1914, with its political paralysis, social fragmentation, economic dislocation, interest-group squabbling, and nation humiliation.... The war kindled in Germans a restlessness, a desire for a restored sense of community to replace the lost unity of the war.

The secret of Nazi popularity lay in understanding this & reviving the passions of 1914. National Socialism as an organizing idea owed its existence to the war, to the model of "trench socialism" that Hitler held so dear. As Walter von Brauchitsch, commander-in-chief of the army, noted in 1938, Hitler simply "recast the great lessons of the front-line soldier in the form of National Socialist philosophy." The Nazis thus promised a national community that would restore the lost sense of belonging and camaraderie.

209--Hitler speech of 1942--"Out of this war will emerge a Volksgemeinschaft established through blood, much stronger even than we National Socialists through our faith could convey to the nation after the World War. The twin pillars of the new VG would thus be the party and the army, as the Hitler Youth, Labor Service, an Wehrmacht worked to create and reinforce specific values important to the Nazis: camaraderie, sacrifice, loyalty, duty, endurance, courage, and obedience.

211--VG became a kind of leitmotif for many soldiers. Proclaimed Hermann Witzemann in June 1941, "I would gladly die for my people and for my German Fatherland," adding almost metaphysically, "Germany was always my primary earthly thought.".. Martin Poppel noted in his diary, "Our joy in living and lust for life are stronger now than they've ever been, but each of us is ready to sacrifice his life for the holy Fatherland. This Fatherland is my faith, and my only hope."

212--A Lander insisted in late summer 1944: "We have recently been frequently debating over the present war and have realized that it is the greatest religious war, for an ideology is the new stamp for the word religion. I draw faith from Nazi ideology that the struggle will end in a victory of our beliefs." Following the German conquest of Poland, Wilhelm Pruller exulted, "It is a victory of sacred belief."

213--Gunter von Scheven--"We are fighting in the belief that the noble & the best must prove their worth anew in the struggle with the ghastly appearance of materialism. I see the whole nation in a recasting process, in a stream of suffering and blood that will enable it to win new heights."

The "greatness" of the German soldier, claimed Heinz Kuchler, lay precisely in going "unbowed as a sacrifice to a new world order." In 11/44, Mendelssohn-Bartholdy insisted that he was happy "to be one of the nameless in the greater community who takes on every sacrifice for the war in order to serve a future that we don't know and yet in which we still believe."

The future was manifest to Klaus-Degenhard Schmidt, who exclaimed in December 1944, "The development of the nation is for me the goal of this struggle. Only

FRITZ, FRONTSOLDATEN

with this premise can every sacrifice be demanded. To me my nation is an earthly law. I believe in its holy purpose & goals, in its reality as divine providence."

214--The Landser often embraced the notion of the VG with a startling passion, seeing in it the justification for his own sacrifices. "With us soldiers, whoever excludes himself from the comradeship doesn't belong to us and would be disowned and publicly denounced before the entire company, and you (at home) should do it as well," admonished Private W. P. Trapped in Stalingrad, another LANDSER ASSERTED, "I do not begrudge the fate that has placed me here. The harsh difficulty, which could still last for months is to us merely a requirement of a higher fulfillment of duty, a higher service to the community."

215--Claimed a Landser in 1941: "We know what the Fuhrer is fighting for & we don't want to stand in the rear, but rather to be constantly endeavoring to be faithful followers! And should fate also demand sacrifice of blood and property from us, then we will grit our teeth and with determined brow, defiance on our tongue, say: I'll do it. Long live the Fuhrer and his great work!"

HUMAN BEINGS REFUSE TO UNDERSTAND THIS RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN IDEALISM AND WAR, VIOLENCE AND DESTRUCTIVENESS. "BETTER RED THAN DEAD."

217--After the war, unrepentant soldiers such as Hans Werner Woltersdorf clung to the "tried and tested nationalism of the community." "My generation was brought up to believe that no sacrifice was too great for the VG," remembered Ulrich Luebke. "The philosophy we were taught was that Germany must live even if we had to die for it."

226--Alfons Heck concluded that despite their enthusiastic support for Hitler, his generation filled the role of victim as surely as those cruelly murdered by Nazi aggression: "Traditionally, now, we are the other part of the Holocaust, the generation burdened with the enormity of Auschwitz. That is our life sentence, for we became the enthusiastic victims of our Fuhrer...I and with me millions of Germans turned to Hitler as the Fuhrer, willingly fought and died honorably for him."