

Book Review: Landsknechte auf dem Weg ins Dritte Reich?

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Landsknechte auf dem Weg ins Dritte Reich. Zu Genese und Wandel des Freikorpsmythos. By Matthias Sprenger. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh. 2008. Pp. 242. Cloth €38.00. ISBN 978-3-506-76518-5.

The Free Corps (*Freikorps*), which had a fairly brief existence between November 1918 and January 1920, left behind a broad and colorful body of fiction and memoir that created a powerful political myth both important and heavily contested in the Weimar and Nazi periods. A comprehensive study of this myth of the Free Corps has long been a desideratum. This study does not go all the way toward filling this gap, but it does provide a first step.

The book analyzes 104 “*romanhafte Erinnerungen ilber die Freikorps Zeit*” published between 1919 and 1945, plus four historical monographs on the Free Corps published between 1933 and 1945 (Berendt, v. Oertzen, Thomée, and Schmidt-Pauli), and eleven regimental histories of imperial army units that built the Free Corps at the end of the war. In sum, seventy-four authors are included. One-third of the works were published before 1933, two-thirds under National Socialism. The bibliography is substantial and thorough, yet not exhaustive. The decision not to include writing published after 1945 leads to the omission of very important works such as Gerhard Rossbach’s *Mein Weg durch die Zeit* and Ernst von Salomon’s *Fragebogen*. Indeed, a truly comprehensive study of the Free Corps myth would really demand an extension of the research well into the 1960s, and include the works of historians.

Six “*Teilmythen*” are identified within the Freikorps literature and build separate chapters: the first examines elements of continuity from earlier periods (largely “myths” dealing with World War I); the second looks at myths revolving around the varying ideas of “*Landsknecht*” “mercenary,” or “political soldier”; the third discusses the antipodes “brutality” and “romanticism”; the fourth dissects the concept of “the act” (“*der Tat*”); the fifth concerns the notion of struggle or battle (“*Kampf*”); and finally, the last chapter gives a look at some of the central symbols and rituals of the Free Corps movement. The book is a revised and expanded version of the author’s 2007 dissertation from the Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz under Sonke Neitzel.

The introduction and conclusion are both quite strong, and the author must be commended for finally giving attention to a neglected topic. His idea of treating the Free Corps myth as myth and analyzing it as such is extremely promising and necessary. Yet the book is clearly a revised dissertation and contains a number of weaknesses (some minor) that undermine its importance. In discussing the authors of the memoirs and novels that built the myth of the Free Corps, Sprenger uses a three-part division into those authors who were formed in the German empire, those representing “soldierly nationalism,” and those who were “close” to the NSDAP. This is promising, but in the end, the categories are not flexible enough to do justice to the multiplicity of ways the Free Corps literature was “spun” depending on the political moment, and it does not do enough to acknowledge changes over time even by individual authors. In particular, it

fails to grasp how many Free Corps veterans and authors who had not previously been close to the NSDAP felt left out after 1933, and produced works that sought to make an argument for their inclusion in the division of the spoils after the Nazi seizure of power. Thus, more attention to the precise historical context of the writing of the Free Corps literature would have made the book much more convincing. Surprisingly, Theweleit, for all his problematic interpretation of sources, is largely unaddressed. Gender is also largely omitted as a category of analysis (despite reminders that the writers of the Free Corps literature were all male), and the issue of homosexuality and homoeroticism is avoided.

In the end, much more remains to be said on the topic. Sprenger provides a largely internal critique of the Free Corps literature, which inevitably leads to a certain tendency to overdetermine it. He ignores how the myth was received and why it was created in the first place. Crucially, there is no mention of how post-World War II historians have perpetuated the Free Corps myth. But the larger problem is that in the end, the book vacillates between describing and analyzing the myth of the Free Corps and attempting to disprove that myth based on the historical record. While there is inevitable overlap, these are two very different goals, and the conflation of the two leads to some lack of focus, and neither goal is fully achieved. Still, for all its faults, this book will be an indispensable starting point for those studying the topic in the future.

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