

Sammelrez: Feldpost im Zweiten Weltkrieg

Didczuneit, Veit; Ebert, Jens; Jander, Thomas (Hrsg.): *Schreiben im Krieg - Schreiben vom Krieg. Feldpost im Zeitalter der Weltkriege*. Essen: Klartext Verlag 2011. ISBN: 978-3-837-50461-3; 538 S.

Cape, Ruth (Hrsg.): *Youth at War. Feldpost Letters of a German Boy to His Parents, 1943 to 1945*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing/New York 2010. ISBN: 978-1-433-11109-9; 234 S.

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Personal correspondence has been viewed by scholars as an important contribution to the understanding of key historical figures and intellectual movements for centuries. But with the rise of social history over the course of the last one hundred years, letters have become instrumental in the exploration of „the lives of the poor and powerless in society“.¹ More recently, an academic tug-of-war has ensued as scholars attempt to determine exactly where the boundaries of the genre lie. Much of the debate centers around Feldpost letters from World Wars I and II, which may be able to provide insight into a period of history with which society still struggles to comprehend. „Schreiben im Krieg, Schreiben vom Krieg“ is a compilation of essays exploring a wide variety of topics related to Feldpost letters from the First and Second World Wars. The topics range from the importance of studying letters, to the unique challenges they present, to what can be learned from their content; each author has his or her own ideas about where and how Feldpost letters fit into current research and themes in modern European history. Although the edition hardly offers a consensus among academics as to how exactly wartime letters can or should be best interpreted, many of the ideas it presents complement one another, while still others offer different perspectives or even contradictions. The scope of the material and the sheer wealth of information the edition contains insure that it is a gold mine for scholars interested in the many applications of Feldpost letters in the field of

modern history.

The overall purpose of the edition is to highlight the increased usefulness of Feldpost letters to modern research as access to eye-witnesses dwindles (p. 12). The greater purpose, however, extends beyond their meaning to research and into their meaning to humanity: „Ob wir aus der Geschichte lernen, hängt maßgeblich von unserem verantwortungsbewussten Umgang mit ihr ab“ (p. 12). The book begins with several essays on the history of Feldpost in Germany and is then divided thematically into five major sections: theoretical questions, international perspectives, gender-specific writing, Feldpost in literature, art and media, and, fifth and finally, practical illustrations and case studies. Each section contains between five and twelve essays that explore themes such as Feldpost letters as objects of public reflection or the wartime experience of German soldiers stationed in France during World War II (p. 383, 511).

Many contributors focus on the important role Feldpost can play in modern historical research in spite of the challenges the genre presents. Michaela Kipp identifies Feldpost as a rich and irreplaceable supply of commentary on soldiers' perceptions of world, situation, and self (p. 458). Using the letters of two German soldiers stationed in the Soviet Union, Kipp demonstrates that the systematic evaluation of Feldpost letters can in fact shed more light on the psyche of the German soldier, and in turn help answer the larger questions surrounding research on national socialism. In his article on Feldpost and narration, Christian Heuer discusses Feldpost letters' relevant functions as Ego-Dokumente in historical didactics, including acting as sources of information on everyday routines at the front and at home, the mental and physical impact the war has on individuals, and linguistic patterns of interpretation. He views letters as documents of communicative and cultural memory and as sources of the retrospective history of certain groups and communities (p. 66). However, he places emphasis on the fact that letters do not necessarily

¹ Miriam Dobson, Letters, in: Miriam Dobson / Benjamin Ziemann (eds.), *Reading Primary Sources: The Interpretation of Texts from Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century History*, New York 2010, p. 59.

provide insight into the „reality“ of the past, but rather into the way that historical subjects construct their own narrative identities (p. 72). Ingo Stader emphasizes the importance of Feldpost letters from World War II in determining the effectiveness of the Nazi propaganda campaign (rather than any „real“ insight they may offer into the wartime experience of their writers), drawing a comparison between Feldpost and modern social media.

Elke Scherstjanoi takes a critical stance on the genre of Feldpost, delving deep into the genre's limitations with references to the published World War II letters of Heinrich Böll. She raises a crucial point when she reminds the readers that Feldpost research should avoid taking the polarized „perpetrator-victim“ point of view (p. 119). Such a view accomplishes little and fails to answer key questions, such as why the writer shares specific information with the recipient, what he or she may have consciously omitted, or what kind of function the exchange of letters played in society (p. 124). She cautions strongly against the overestimation of Feldpost as a genre: „Feldpostforschung kommt ohne andere Quellen, darunter andere subjektive (Tagebücher, Berichte, Erinnerungen), und ohne strengste Quellenkritik nicht aus“ (p. 122).

In spite of the challenges they face when working with Feldpost letters, most contributors to the edition choose to focus on what can be learned from them, rather than what cannot. The objectives, approaches and ultimate findings of the authors vary considerably; for example, an essay on Feldpost as a medium of social communication by Clemens Schwender presents a case study that uses letters to investigate the psychology of gossip (p. 127). He tests his thesis using the nearly two thousand items of correspondence between a husband and wife from World War II, identifying the material as authentic insight into the mood of the couple (p. 131). From a methodological standpoint, Schwender's contribution is outstanding, as it provides a detailed explanation of his process of random sampling, including corresponding data tables (p. 132). Other popular topics in the study of military history are included in this edition, including articles on the experience of the „foreign“

as well as war as an adventure or positive experience as reflected in soldiers' letters (p. 178). Kerstin Wölki focuses on letters written by German soldiers stationed in France during the Second World War and explores the idea that many behaved as if on vacation, as they were neither at home or completely integrated into their new surroundings (p. 519). Her essay provides valuable new information to this area of research and draws not only upon Feldpost letters but also diary entries, demonstrating the close relationship between these two types of primary sources.

Another new addition to the current study of Feldpost is *Youth at War*, a bilingual edition of preserved letters written by a fifteen year old boy whose childhood was cut short by Germany's need for more manpower in World War II. The editor, Ruth I. Cape, examines the letters as historical sources and bases her interpretations of them on the biography of their writer, Gerhard G. Gerhard served in the war from 1943 to 1945, first as a member of the student anti-aircraft artillery, then in the compulsory national labor service (R.A.D.), and finally in the German navy on the pocket battleship Admiral Scheer. In 1945, he spent three months in an American prisoner of war camp and then returned to his home of Bühl, which was located in the French-occupied war zone. The one hundred and forty letters were found in his home shortly before his death in May of 2008, tied neatly together and arranged chronologically.

That their author is so young and that almost every letter he wrote home was preserved make the letters particularly unique. By publishing the edition, Cape attempts to „provide a close and, in many respects, unfiltered look at a specific historical and social environment“ (p. 3). Whether or not a collection of letters can actually accomplish such a task is open to debate, a fact which Cape herself recognizes: „Obviously, they cannot be interpreted as an objective and complete description of war reality. Rather, they are selective and a mixture of war experiences, rumors he might have heard, his assumptions about future events, and conscious or unconscious omissions“ (p. 17). But even while taking such limitations into consideration, she refutes the position that Gerhard's

letters merely represent letter-writing conventions of the times, instead stating that, „in their frankness they present an abundance of information, genuine human feelings, concerns, and hopes that allow the reader to look into the heart and mind of this boy, who might very well represent the sentiments of many other young soldiers who served in the Second World War“ (p. 17).

Upon examination of the letters themselves, they do appear to reveal more than just the superficial correspondence of a child to his parents. Alongside the expected mundane descriptions of daily military life and laundry lists of requested items, Gerhard also writes, with a startling sense of maturity, about how it feels to spend Christmas away from home, and how he regrets having taken his mother's „thoughtful care“ for granted while living at home (p. 46, 65). Because the collection seems to be almost entirely complete, it is possible to observe changes in Gerhard's personality through his writing style. Most remarkable are his growing sense of awareness of what is happening around him, and his developing understanding of what home means to him (p. 80, 101).

Cape's introduction offers a wealth of ideas about ways the letters can be interpreted. She answers many of the questions that surround a collection of German letters from World War II; for example, questions regarding censorship (both internal and external) and the writer's possible identification with Nazi ideals. She also provides useful background statistics, such as that there were „approximately 400 military post offices with eighteen workers per office who handled around 40 billion letters during the six years of the war“ (p. 11). The structure of the edition is simple, with a lengthy introduction followed by the transcribed letters first in English and then in their original German.

One major strength of the edition is Cape's inclusion of a variety of suggested approaches for further study of this particular collection of letters. She purports that they could be used to explore sociological themes like „family and friendship dynamics during war times,“ or the cultural history of a nation (p. 17). Her emphasis on asking questions rather than answering them gives the reader

a chance to consider his or her own ideas about how Feldpost can contribute to modern historical research. In a brief departure from strict academics, she even suggests that Gerhard's letters could serve as the basis of a piece of literature, diary, or short epistolary novel: „A reader with an interest in creative writing may use his Feldpost as the basis for composing letters to which Gerhard might have responded. What is written in the mail sent to him is a question that constantly arises while one reads his lines“ (p. 19).

In the introduction, Cape outlines her principles of translation, stating that she seeks „to be as literal and exact as is consistent with readable English“ (p. 20). But many of the translations are rather disconcerting in their directness, preserving German punctuation even where incorrect in English (p. 30, 40, 76). Knowledge of the German language is helpful for getting a feel for Gerhard's style in the translations; someone without that knowledge might find the odd word order and strange punctuation distracting.

Despite the occasionally dubious translations, the English section of the edition makes for an interesting read at the very least because of its numerous explanatory footnotes. The footnotes contain helpful clarifications for abbreviations, places, people, and especially unclear situations that arise in the letters. In one letter, Gerhard alludes to a situation involving Russian prisoners of war, telling his parents they can draw their own conclusions from the incident (p. 69). In the corresponding footnote, Cape clarifies the meaning of the exchange, concluding that, „As a member of the student anti-aircraft artillery (in German, Luftwaffenhelfer or Flakhelfer) one was ranked below those Russian voluntary assistants“ (p. 123).

Both „Schreiben im Krieg, Schreiben vom Krieg“ and „Youth at War“ offer extensive information on the current stance of research regarding Feldpost letters and can guide readers to a better understanding of this challenging but exciting genre of primary sources. While recognizing the limitations that Feldpost letters present, the editors of both volumes generally emphasize their role in the study of the wartime experiences of common soldiers in World Wars I and II. Few would

argue today that Feldpost letters are truly authentic accounts of individual lives. Ultimately, however, it is critical to remember that every collection of letters may be examined within the greater context of the genre, but must be evaluated on an individual basis. Certain letters may only be able to reflect the effectiveness of propaganda or the letter-writing conventions of their times, while others may hold the potential to become „partially a mirror of a historical time period“ (Cape, p. 6). And because of their mystery, their banality, and above all their possibility, Feldpost letters will likely remain a heavily debated genre among historians and academics in the years to come.

HistLit 2011-4-120 / Kaci McAllister über Didczuneit, Veit; Ebert, Jens; Jander, Thomas (Hrsg.): *Schreiben im Krieg - Schreiben vom Krieg. Feldpost im Zeitalter der Weltkriege*. Essen 2011, in: H-Soz-Kult 17.11.2011.

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