

PETR WOHLMUTH, *Krev, čest a hrůza. Historická antropologie pevnostní války na příkladu britských deníků z obléhání pevnosti Bergen op Zoom z roku 1747* [Blood, Honour and Horror. Representations of Siege Warfare in British Journals During the Siege at Bergen op Zoom in 1747], Prague 2017, Scriptorium, 476 pp. ISBN 978-80-88013-49-5

Blood, Honour and Horror is a rare book. It is rare not only in the decidedly – I would even say shamefully – limited context of Czech historiography of warfare; it is rare even in the wider context of studying war in contemporary historiography in general. It is rare as it more or less successfully combines several approaches from the field of so-called “new military history” with anthropological analysis, all applied to very specific sources that enable it to achieve excellent insight into the “face of battle” (or “the military mechanics”, as the author puts it) of siege warfare in its most perfected form as practiced in the mid-18th century. The author, who is very well steeped in the existing secondary literature, dissects what is sometimes stereotyped as an era of gentlemanly warfare, looking beyond the thin veil of rituals and customs into the violent nature of contemporary combat in its almost modern, “total” form. He does so using three siege journals as his main sources, all written by British officers who participated in the siege of the fortress at Bergen-op-Zoom in 1747, during the final phase of the War of Austrian Succession. An edition of one of the journals is included as part of the book. These journals, different in their approach from their more technical and “scientific” French counterparts, represent a contemporary narrative of the events during the siege, and are an invaluable source of insight into the culture and practices of mid-18th century warfare, and Petr Wohlmuth puts them to great use to support his analysis.

It is by no means chance that the author has chosen the 1747 siege of Bergen-op-Zoom as a case study for his analysis, as it is a glaring exception to the highly ritualized and formalized practices that ruled 18th century sieges, construed in such a way that the decisive majority of all sieges – so-called “regular sieges” – were predictable affairs that both made sure that the fortress would, eventually, fall in the face of the enemy’s technical and engineering skill, and that the de-

fenders, if keeping to the unwritten code of honour, would be allowed to retreat to safety. Instead, at Bergen in 1747, it took sixty days of gruelling and uncharacteristically vicious combat before the French were able to launch a desperate and successful surprise charge that stormed a breach in the walls and led to a three day rampage of murder and rape throughout the town, an event that was seen as both shocking and also perfectly legal (and legitimate) by the contemporary observers all around Europe. In attempting to answer the essential question – why? – the author closely follows the circles of escalating violence, noting its decidedly performative character and retracing its bloody steps all the way back to the very beginning of the siege. He sees the moment of initial communication between the two armies, when the Allied command refused the French side's traditional offer to capitulate bluntly and without the usual courtesies, as the key to a "failed ritual": it meant that the parties were unable to settle upon a common symbolic understanding of the levels of violence to be used. Typically, a successful opening ritual precipitated ritualized methods of violence, as well as a ritualized conclusion. Failure in the initial contact, caused by the respective parties having ascribed different importance to the ensuing battle and the fortress itself, stripped away the culturally imposed limits of violence, and enabled it to quickly escalate into a Clausewitzian "absolute form" limited only by victory.

Using the exceptional circumstances of the fateful events at the walls of Bergen, the author goes on to analyze the contemporary "military culture" or, perhaps more precisely, "culture of war". Steeped in the field of historical as well as cultural anthropology, he borrows basic methodology from the likes of Clifford Geertz, whose "thick description" is the key to his use of source material, and Max Weber. He also consciously subscribes to the analytical approach in his anthropological outlook. It sets him apart from most previous anthropological studies of war, which have taken inspiration more from the holistic approach practiced by authors such as John Lynn and, from a more anthropological perspective, R. Brian Ferguson. Instead, Petr Wohlmuth sees the culture of war as "a dynamic concept" that does not exist "in a unity given to a given era, territory or campaign" and is not "an essential holistic continuum": "It is a dynamic configuration, based on a momentous configuration of variables (...), of various conditions, contexts and relations" (p. 87). While we may question his overt inspirational reliance on such flawed works as John Keegan's *History of Warfare*, or some of Curtis David Hanson's more problematic efforts to push the cultural concept of "a Western way of war" down the millennia of European history, it has to be admitted that the author succeeds in adhering to his chosen method and that his understanding of "military culture" as a re-composition of numerous variables

translated into violence in a given time and space helps him greatly to avoid the minefield of ahistorical generalizations, in which those authors got stuck.

As a result, the text presents the reader with a clear picture of how the 18th century culture of war reflected and influenced the practice of war, the attitudes and resulting behaviour of historical actors. He sees a number of key, dynamically changing variables that may well serve as an interesting case study counterpart to John Lynn's generalizing conclusions that 18th century warfare was a reflection of a contemporary culture of reason, honour and forbearance. First, in Wohlmut's case, we see the notion of "them and us" as defining the way combat (and its narrative in the sources) was structured based on shifts in the concept of the opposition (from the opposing engineers to the "cultural other" to war itself). Second, we see the all-important notion of honour, itself a thoroughly gendered concept, heavily influencing the way opposing commanders understood the siege, with one group seeing it as a routine engineering feat to prove their expertise, and the other as a gendered all-out battle to defend the "virgin-fortress" of Bergen-op-Zoom. Third, the author also emphasizes the importance of "military skill" meaning pure and simple bravery as shown not only as part of aristocratic, "gentlemanly" honour, but also in the behaviour of the rank-and-file soldiers. And finally, fourth, he identifies important shifts in "the performative quality of violence" from mechanistic, almost modern "total war" conditions towards more archaic, even primitive forms unrestrained by technology or any other limits. He identifies several moments when these shifts occurred back and forth during the battle, based on the momentous situation and changing attitudes of specific groups of participants – such as when the ultimate cultural "other" of the battle, the two participating regiments of Scottish Highlanders, were employed, or, vice-versa, when communication was established for a moment, briefly restoring some of the ritual characteristics of combat, before it broke down and the violence escalated again.

In following these variables throughout the battle itself, the text actually never leaves the battlefield and Petr Wohlmut more than succeeds in bringing to life what he somewhat pretentiously calls "the military mechanics and dynamics", which is in fact a self-confessed (and highly effective, lively, and even horrifyingly fascinating) take on John Keegan's "face of battle" approach that encompasses all the physical realities of siege warfare – the mechanics of combat, institutions, logistics, practices such as tactics and operations, and military architecture. While we may agree with the author that it is indeed necessary to distance any true cultural analysis from the oversimplifying notion of an objective "reality of war" as employed by John Lynn in his model of war-culture interaction, it seems perhaps too much a game of semantics to tamper with some of

the well-established terms. Whatever we call it, it remains depressingly true that for the participants on the ground, the mechanics of combat, i.e. the framework in which all the variables and cultural concepts are played out and dynamically interacted with, all-too-often quickly translate into a lived, instant, physical experience *felt* to be *real* – and that is the experience that Petr Wohlmut succeeds in conveying through his text. The “face of siege” he presents in all its gruesome detail goes a long way towards remedying some of the traditional (and often justified) criticism of many works in the field of “new military history”, namely that they all but ignore combat only to focus on cultural constructs and social contexts, therefore distorting the historical image of what warfare really is. Here, we see that marrying cultural analysis with more traditional approach to military history may produce a fascinating tapestry that shows us warfare in several interconnected layers, from “what it was like” to “what it meant” in the “webs of meanings” that is culture.

When taken in its entirety, Petr Wohlmut’s analysis not only shows war as culturally conditioned, using the example of a failure in intra-cultural communication that led to extreme violence as culturally imposed limits disappeared; he also proves that violence is a form of communication by itself. In its escalating dynamics, particularly apparent during prolonged intensive combat such as the sixty-four day long siege of a fortress, it is the violent actions of the participants, in their various forms (including, for example, the much debated use of heated cannonballs) that communicate *meaning* to the opposition as well as to those carrying them out. This simple revelation is one of the book’s strongest points and shows the strength and importance of cultural analysis when it comes to the history of warfare, as it may be invariably useful in furthering our knowledge of the “elephant in the room” of “new military history” – combat itself.

Speaking of proboscideans in enclosed spaces, in his introduction, Petr Wohlmut points to one when he calls military history the “dark matter” of academic history in the Czech Republic. While I agree with his view in general – although, when it comes to metaphors, I still prefer the noisy and extremely visible elephant to depict war – it is sad that even in 2017, historians self-described as “military” still feel the need to begin their texts with the same lament they did decades ago, in full knowledge of the fact that – at least in Czech historical writing – the situation is perhaps even worse than it was in 2000 when Ivan Šedivý identified a methodological gap between scholars specializing in history

of warfare and everyone else.¹ In his introduction, Petr Wohlmut addresses the issue with a fresh, albeit brief reflection upon its origins, quoting missing institutional support, cold-shouldering by mainstream scholars of those who decide to pursue their career in the field, and subsequent personal and methodological “ghettoization”, along with the overall depressing, decidedly “unsexy” nature of the subject, as the main problems. In what seems to be a telling expression of military historians’ position in the contemporary historical profession, he even ends up exonerating himself from all the “sins” that are still apparently ascribed to military historians as a group: “I do not participate in re-enactment, I do not engage in sword-fighting (...), do not own any uniform, (...) and I do not see war as an attractive stuff of bloody romance” (p. 19). It is almost as if he feels the need to excuse himself for his field of interest. On the other hand, with *Blood, Honour and Horror* we can be optimistic that it is indeed possible to introduce fresh methodology into the history of warfare while still following its essential interest in combat. And that there is, after all, hope of bridging the gap that separates history of warfare from the historiographic mainstream in the Czech Republic.

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1 IVAN ŠEDIVÝ, *Česká historiografie vojenství 1989–2002* [*Czech Historiography of Warfare 1989–2002*], *Český časopis historický* 100/2002, pp. 868–901.