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Reynolds on Nowowiejski, 'The American Army in Germany, 1918-1923: Success against the Odds'

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Reviewed by Mark Reynolds (University of California Riverside) **Published on** H-War (November, 2022) **Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air University)

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Dean A. Nowowiejski's thorough institutional history of the US Army's Rhineland occupation following the First World War provides a much-needed update to the scholarship on the war's consequential aftermath. Several important works have emerged, some marking the recent centennial, that have emphasized escalating cultures of violence unleashed by the conflict, setting the stage for a destructive sequel.[1] What has been slower to emerge from this energetic resurgence in scholarship, however, are investigations into the particular means of stabilization during the heady ends of war. Nowowiejski's recent work broadens our understanding of the contingencies of peace by recovering the story of the American Forces in Germany (AFG), the army's occupation force following the armistice. In doing so, he revises older studies of the Rhineland occupation, specifically Keith L. Nelson's 1975 *Victors Divided: America and the Allies in Germany, 1918-1923*. Rather than retreading the grounds of inter-Allied diplomacy, Nowowiejski offers a uniquely "national" and "organizational" perspective through a comparative methodology (p. 8).

The author's own four decades of experience within the US Army organization informs the work throughout, from the selection of sources to the analysis and conclusions. The AFG is thus presented as somewhat of a narrative underdog, a scrappy organization that met significant challenges with equally significant success. The failure of the United States Senate to ratify the Treaty of Versailles generated a crisis of legitimacy, leaving the American occupiers with considerably less power vis-à-

vis their British and especially French and Belgian allies. By viewing the situation in the Rhineland through an institutional lens, as well as by highlighting the experiences of leadership and common soldiers alike, Nowowiejski argues that these challenges demonstrate an “achievement” and the “missed opportunity” to generate lasting peace in Central Europe (p. 214). He observes the overall story of the occupation as a significant contribution by the United States to international security. The insider perspective to the book’s institutional framework provides unique opportunities as well as particular shortcomings. In this way, Nowowiejski’s study offers a necessary, if imperfect, reassessment of the US Army’s place within the longer story of the Great War.

The American Army in Germany’s institutional focus presents an opportunity to reclaim the contingency of peace following the armistice. Much of the American historiography of the war seems to take peace as a given—as the natural outcome of four long years of bloodshed. Nowowiejski corrects this notion, proposing that peace, order, and stability required work. As he reminds us, the armistice was only set to last thirty days, with no absolute guarantee that hostilities would not continue thereafter. The American Expeditionary Force (AEF) thus established a potential line of attack, positioning several elite units in the event of a renewed German offensive. Considering the ad hoc political violence breaking out across Central and Eastern Europe following the armistice, including the Allied intervention into the burgeoning Russian Civil War, peace no longer appears as guaranteed. Instead, a close reading of the AFG’s training documents reveal that further advancement beyond the Rhineland were a very real possibility, highly contingent on the work of preserving peace. In this way, the author’s analysis is augmented by an intimate familiarity with the organization.

Chapters 1 and 2 introduce the reader to the AFG, its organization, and the confluence of conditions that led to its establishment and position, both in relation to Germany and the other Allied occupations. The seemingly bottomless tomes of military reports are, in Nowowiejski’s hands, translated into a dramatic razor’s edge of possibility, as well as an overall success story. Despite the previous months of grueling battle experienced by the AEF, he argues, “Army leaders led their soldiers effectively in the mission of maintaining order in their sector while keeping a force of a quarter-million trained, ready for resumption of hostilities, healthy, entertained, and out of trouble” (p. 40). The perspective offered here is often silenced by triumphalist narratives that present a natural progression from violence to peace, as well as by those tragic narratives that observe the particular insufficiencies of Versailles, insisting that violence inevitably begets further violence. The author’s own experience helps to highlight the organizational work behind demobilization, retaining the contingencies inherent to the ends of war. Peace then becomes a question rather than an answer determined ahead of time.

Moving beyond the armistice, chapters 3 through 7 flesh out the inner workings of the AFG. One of the primary interventions this work makes is recover the story of Major General Henry Tureman Allen, the leader of the organization. Nowowiejski introduces readers to the dynamic General Allen (chapter 3), adding a new name to the growing pantheon in a war with (relative to the civil war or Second World War) a dearth of national heroes. The success of the occupation was due in part to Allen’s effective stewardship, as well as his diplomatic navigation of tricky inter-Allied politics. As a result of the failure to ratify the Treaty of Versailles, the US occupation government was reduced to an informal advisory position among the other Allies. Losing face in the Rhineland as well as in an increasingly cold, disinterested Washington, Allen was able to retain American influence through his

own navigation of unofficial and social channels. While the majority of social and cultural history has moved away from the deeds of so-called great men like Allen, Nowowiejski does not offer praise without critique. He argues that part of his skillful handling of Rhineland politics was by his participation in the class hierarchy as an officer. He had access and influence as a gentleman-officer, influence he wielded to secure American interests following the war. We are also reminded of Allen's racial prejudice as a member of the aristocratic officer class, as racialized propaganda—the so-called Black Horror Campaign—sought to undo the Allies' tenuous bonds. It seems that he again wielded a particular class consciousness in order to walk the thin line of inter-Allied politics. What this study does that most overcomes the antiquated “great man” analysis is present a chapter on the common soldier's occupation experience.

Chapter 7 tells the interesting and unexpected story of the raw recruits selected for the occupation. The AFG pivoted to training these young men in the Rhineland, rather than continuing the use of the overworked and overwhelmed, battle-hardened soldiers. What results is an interesting window into life in the shadow of tremendous violence. As Nowowiejski argues, this was an “idyllic existence, especially against the backdrop of postwar prohibition and labor disputes in the United States” (p. 187). The book's argument that the occupation represents both an “achievement” and a “missed opportunity” hinges largely on these two varying stories, the skillful maneuvering of the aristocratic Allen and the orderly work of peace maintained by the common occupiers themselves.

The book's institutional framework presents its own unique set of challenges and shortcomings. Throughout the book, Nowowiejski is dedicated to preserving an image of benevolent isolationism, a framework that his primary sources no doubt espouse and is parroted by the older secondary scholarship. Yet social and cultural historians, particularly those who study US empire, have largely done away with this exceptionalist narrative over the past three decades. The seeds of doubt are even planted in the author's own analysis. As he argues, the army formed its occupation policies “on the fly as it marched into Germany,” despite previous experiences with occupations, “in post-Civil War Reconstruction, in Cuba, and in the Philippines” (p. 32). This narrative of benevolent occupation silences a continuity of occupation by giving only a few select examples. Silenced are the occupations in Panama, Veracruz, Haiti, Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, and elsewhere. Were those experiences unknown to the AFG, or somehow deemed irrelevant? As Nowowiejski even points out, General Allen himself had previously been military governor of one of the Philippine islands, as well as a founding member of the Philippine Constabulary. He is referred to as “no isolationist,” reflecting these various other global interventions (p. 44). Although it had been two decades since the initial phase of the Philippine-American War, several of the aforementioned occupations were either concurrent with or immediately preceded that of the Rhineland. Collapsing those experiences into a teleological progression from prewar “isolationism” to global power helps frame General Allen and the AFG as reluctant and exceptional, rather than as part of a longer history of occupation. Yet the addition of too many exceptions begins to break down the meaning of the rule. At worst, this book is inconsistent on the issue, acknowledging some of these various occupations while simultaneously trumpeting the myth of isolationism. Such a close focus solely on the organization obscures other ways of understanding this history—ways that are conventional enough now that they cease to be considered cutting edge.

Highlighting this understudied history need not necessarily recycle outmoded, exceptionalist arguments. Instead, looking into the messiness is often more productive than searching for a

flattering reflection. Qualifying the success of the AFG occupation would not make its herculean task any less impressive or instructional, nor would it diminish its impact on the occupation following the Second World War. *The American Army in Germany* is a useful, entertaining, and well-written introduction to the United States' first occupation of Germany. Despite its flaws, it should be required reading not only for military historians and world war buffs but also for anyone looking to better understand both the contingencies and the work of producing peace in the aftermaths of war.

Note

[1]. See, for example, Alan Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction: Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2016); George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); and Daniel Pick, *War Machine: The Rationalisation of Slaughter in the Modern Age* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993).

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