

Verdun and the Somme

Harro Grabolle

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Reviewed by Ian Wallace, Bath

With its blood-letting on a previously unimaginable scale the Great War of 1914-18 left a deep and lasting scar on the psyche of all those caught up in its horrors. Two names which continue to resonate down the years with undiminished power are Verdun and the Somme, both of which were scenes of particularly senseless savagery on the western front in 1916. Pat Barker has given memorable expression to the significance of the Somme for British culture: “The Somme is like the Holocaust. It revealed things we cannot come to terms with and cannot forget. It never becomes the past.” It may well be, as Harro Grabolle argues, that German interest in the Great War is today less pronounced than this, but equally the immediate impact on Germany of defeat at Verdun should not be underestimated either.

Grabolle’s study (originally written as a doctoral dissertation for Eötvös Loránd University Budapest) focuses in its first part on the way in which the brutality of Verdun is treated in German prose fiction published before 1939, and in its second part on representations of the Somme in British prose fiction during the same period. This division is by no means arbitrary, since it can be convincingly demonstrated that, in terms of its traumatic effects, Verdun was for the Germans what the Somme was for the British. Works in German which are singled out for particular attention are Fritz von Unruh’s *Opfergang* (1919), Werner Beumelburg’s *Die Gruppe Bosemüller* (1930), Josef Magnus Wehner’s *Sieben vor Verdun* (1930), and Arnold Zweig’s *Erziehung vor Verdun* (1935). On the British side, those works selected for detailed comment are Alec John Dawson’s *Somme Battle Stories* (1916), Alan Patrick Herbert’s *The Secret Battle* (1919), Arthur Donald Gristwood’s *The Somme* (1927), Frederic Manning’s *Her Privates We* (1930), and David Jones’s *In Parenthesis* (1937). One goal which Grabolle sets himself is to help draw renewed attention to fine literary achievements from both countries which he believes have undeservedly been forgotten by all but the specialists - works such as von Unruh’s *Opfergang* (“an outstanding example of German Expressionism”, sadly marred by the opportunistic and inconsistent way in which the author converted the first, nationalistic version of his text into “a document of peace and humanity”) and Jones’s *In Parenthesis* (“a masterpiece of Modernism”). Not all of the works which are treated here deserve this kind of

high praise, of course, but they remain fascinating as documents of an almost compulsive attempt to come to terms with a deeply disturbing historical catastrophe, the effects of which are still felt today across Europe. There are some obvious differences between the German and the British texts (the view of war as an elemental, mythical force is predominant in von Unruh and in *völkisch* writers like Beumelburg and Wehner, for instance, while the British writers - and Zweig - see war as man-made), but parallels and continuities also emerge which would deserve further study.

In addition to a full bibliography, the study contains a set of appendices: biographical sketches of the major writers dealt with in the main text, a collection of cartoons and maps etc., and a helpful list of often little-known texts dealing with Verdun and the Somme.