

H-France Review Vol. 7 (July 2007), No. 83

Stéphanie Dalbin, *Visions croisées Franco-Allemandes de la Première Guerre mondiale. Étude de deux quotidiens: la Metzger Zeitung et L'Est Républicain*. Bern and New York: Peter Lang, 2007. xii + 396 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. 68.50 € (pb). ISBN 978-3-03911-250-0.

Review by Martha Hanna, University of Colorado at Boulder.

As Stéphanie Dalbin reminds us at the outset of *Visions croisées Franco-Allemandes de la Première Guerre mondiale*, French frontline soldiers of the First World War rarely held the press in high regard. Henri Barbusse was by no means the only man in uniform to scorn the journalists who made their way to the safest sectors of the frontlines, enjoyed escorted tours of uncharacteristically quiet combat zones and then returned unscathed to their editorial offices whence they described in imaginative detail the comfortable living conditions and patriotic enthusiasm of frontline soldiers. So reviled was this journalistic blither—contemptuously dismissed as *bourrage de crâne*—that French troops came to mistrust the very profession of journalism itself. As Marc Bloch would recall several years later, “The prevailing opinion in the trenches was that anything might be true, except what was printed.”[1]

Yet newspapers mattered to the men of the frontlines and to their families at home, more than this scathing judgment might lead us to believe. However frequently soldiers warned their wives or parents to take what they read in the local paper with more than a grain of salt, soldiers and civilians alike read newspapers, dissected articles purporting to describe major battles in honest detail and engaged in ongoing, albeit unpublished, debate with the journalists and editors who produced national and regional newspapers. Newspapers, whatever their shortcomings, operated at the very center of national wartime discourse and everyone knew it. It is the very centrality of newspapers to national wartime culture that prompted Dalbin to undertake her comparative analysis of two regional newspapers, one French, the other German, published on either side of the frontier that had divided Lorraine since 1871: *L'Est Républicain*, published in Nancy, and its German counterpart, the *Metzger Zeitung*.

Dalbin's study, a revised version of a dissertation completed in 2003, is influenced by and indebted to the new cultural history of the Great War. This scholarship seeks to merge the insights of seminal national studies of civilian and combatant society—one thinks, first and foremost, of Jean-Jacques Becker's *The Great War and the French People* or Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau's *Men at War, 1914-1918*--with the more recent impulse to examine the war from a transnational and comparative vantage point.[2] Moreover, the new cultural history of the Great War stresses the emergence throughout combatant Europe of a “war culture” that whatever its nationally idiosyncratic characteristics nonetheless served the same end: the cultivation of a spirit of national resolve and patriotic sacrifice. Inspired by both the comparative imperative of contemporary Great War scholarship and its fascination with “war culture,” Dalbin concentrates her attention on the press of wartime Lorraine. This decision has much to commend: given the fraught history of Lorraine in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the province's strategic location and direct exposure to combat, and the symbolic significance, for Germans and French alike, of this contested region, the cultural mobilization of French and German Lorraine merits close attention.

Dividing her study into three sections, the first of which is a general introduction and the second and third of which focus on the specific content of the two newspapers' wartime coverage, Dalbin analyzes both what the papers told their readers about frontline combat, political and diplomatic developments, and economic challenges caused by the war, and how they contributed to the cultivation of patriotic

sentiment in their respective communities. Censorship certainly affected what each newspaper could say about the day-to-day developments, civil and military, of the war but, as Dalbin's review of critical events in 1917 makes clear, censorship was not the only factor determining what was printed and how it was presented. Calculations of national interest also mattered enormously. Thus the French press paid close attention to the debates and deliberations that preceded the United States' declaration of war, but the editorial office of the *Metzer Zeitung* gave these events scant mention, preferring instead to focus on the outbreak of revolution in Russia. Unlike *L'Est Républicain* which ignored the street demonstrations of late February (March 8, according to the calendar used in Western Europe) that would ultimately force the tsar from power, the *Metzer Zeitung* followed these early developments closely. Dalbin contends that German journalists, like the nation's military commanders, correctly perceived in the earliest evidence of political unrest the promise of Russia's incipient military collapse. And she faintly criticizes the French press for believing that "the consequences of the Russian revolution would be minimal for France" (pp. 110-112). Yet it is surely only in retrospect that one can deem the German calculation the more astute. In March 1917, a month before Lenin returned to Russia, there was no more reason to believe that Russia would withdraw from the Entente (as the Germans optimistically predicted) than to believe that the alliance would hold fast (as the French ardently wished). Without doubt, *L'Est Républicain* intentionally misled its readers more than once, but not, I think, on this occasion.

Dalbin's analysis of how the two newspapers reported military and political developments closer to home reveals that editors usually conveyed less than their readers might have wanted to know. French and German editors skewed evidence from the battle of Verdun to overstate enemy losses and understate their own (p. 195). When it became obvious by April 1916 that German advances had not secured the decisive victory expected in late February, the *Metzer Zeitung* devoted less and less space to the battle. Constrained by military censors who prohibited detailed or probing analysis of military developments, the editor of *L'Est Républicain* had little of substance to say about the ebb and flow of this (or any other) battle and thus satisfied himself (but perhaps not his readers) with patriotic sermonizing. None of this is very surprising. It is noteworthy, however, that the French press was more likely than their German counterparts to romanticize the soldier's experience of combat; the *Metzer Zeitung* "never idealized the life of the front-line soldier" (p. 259). Thus the "bourrage de crâne" that earned the civilian press the undying enmity of most French soldiers was not replicated in Germany.

The third part of the book analyzes how the two newspapers voluntarily contributed to the "war culture" of their respective nations by defining what was at stake in the war, why victory was essential and how true patriots should conceive of the enemy. French readers of *L'Est Républicain* were offered a steady diet of images of German barbarism, Teutonic aggression and Wilhelm II's mental instability. The Kaiser emerged (not surprisingly, I think) as the symbol of German evil incarnate. In Metz, German readers, once reminded that the Reich had many enemies, were nonetheless encouraged to think of France as the "hereditary enemy" and August 1914 as the most recent instance of a long-established pattern of French aggression and hegemonic ambition. France had precipitated the war--whatever the timetable of mobilization might have suggested otherwise--and had to be defeated if Germany were to survive.

Some noteworthy conclusions emerge from this comparative analysis: the French were readier to demonize Germany, and especially the Kaiser, than the Germans were to focus their enmity exclusively on France. Raymond Poincaré and other prominent leaders of French Lorraine were not the compelling bogeymen for German readers that the Kaiser clearly was for France. But the analysis presented here makes much of issues that, all things considered, are hardly surprising: however regrettable it might be, the demonization of the enemy is, surely, not unusual in a nation at war. Thus belaboring the point that the two newspapers exploited national stereotypes of the evil "Other" is not terribly illuminating. What is interesting and could well have been more closely examined is that the regional newspaper in Nancy seemed unaware of or not persuaded by much of the nuanced debate that characterized cultural

mobilization in Paris. Leading Parisian academics debated at great length and with considerable intellectual sophistication the possibility that there were in fact “two Germanies,” only one of which was aggressive, militaristic and “barbarian,” while the other was cultured (without a capital “k”), cosmopolitan and enlightened. Moreover, the scholars on the left who made the most of Germany’s cultural dualism did so because they hoped that after the bloodletting and the tragedy of war, a genuine and lasting rapprochement between France and a demilitarized Germany might emerge. No comparable debate or optimistic assessment emerged in the columns of the Nancy paper. Indeed, for all its republican and anti-clerical credentials, *L’Est Républicain* came to sound more and more like a right-wing rag that appropriated much of the ideological venom of the neo-royalists and ultra-nationalists. It was, after all, the Action française polemicist, Léon Daudet and his Catholic admirers who made much out of tracing Germanic barbarism to the Reformation and Luther. To come across a similar argument in the pages of *L’est Républicain* (p. 291) is both striking and worthy of further analysis.

Without doubt both regional newspapers “did their bit” for the war effort. They excoriated the enemy, defended national honor and reported every sign or mere suggestion of imminent victory. Did readers rally to the national cause because of what they read in the patriotic pages of *L’Est Républicain* and the *Metzer Zeitung*? This we do not know because Dalbin limits her analysis only to what was reported. She does so, in part, because this is what her sources tell her. But she also contends, less persuasively, that newspapers were the “sole vectors of information” available to, and directed at, the civilian population (p. 369). If this assertion is true—and much archival evidence suggests that it is not—then newspapers played a uniquely influential role in educating civilian readers and cultivating their patriotic sentiments. Insofar as they understood the war, rallied to its support and accepted the sacrifices that it imposed upon them, they did so because the local newspaper had informed them, inspired them and encouraged them to persevere.

Yet this is to give undue credit to the educative and persuasive power of the wartime press. Certainly citizens of Metz and Nancy depended on the local press for news of international developments: whatever they knew of Senate debates in Washington and street riots in Petrograd they knew only from reading the local newspaper. But the published and unpublished correspondence of French and German troops, the illuminating records of postal censors and prefects’ reports (especially rich for the first month and last two years of the war) reveal that civilians (in France, at least, and until late 1916 in Germany, too) often knew a great deal more about the war than newspapers were willing (or allowed) to tell them. Soldiers on leave or recuperating from wounds often shared with their civilian confidants their direct knowledge of conditions at the front. It probably does not matter that the newspaper in Nancy said nothing about the mutinies of 1917, for soldiers everywhere in France talked about them when they were home on leave. Some even braved the censors and sent home letters describing the episodes of indiscipline that disrupted the French ranks.[3] Nor does it matter, in one regard at least, that *L’Est Républicain* “minimized the problem of food provisioning” (p. 118) that confronted citizens of Nancy and its environs in April 1917. The women who stood in line to secure unpalatable bread and their husbands and brothers at the front who read their regular laments in daily letters knew this regardless. Neither civilians nor their frontline correspondents needed to seek confirmation of such indisputable facts in their local paper.

But if civilians did know more about the war, its military horrors and its material inconveniences than they could ever have gleaned from even the most careful reading of their local newspaper, this surely does matter more than Dalbin’s analysis would lead us to believe. Armed with ample evidence that contradicted what was printed in the daily press, civilians as much as soldiers had good reason to doubt the reliability and, indeed, the responsibility of their newspapers. It is distinctly possible that civilians in France and Germany supported the war effort and subscribed to the “war culture” that called for their stoic resignation in spite of what they read in the regional press, not because of it.

NOTES

[1] Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft: Reflections on the Nature and Uses of History and the Techniques and Methods of the Men who Write It*, intro. Joseph R. Strayer, trans. Peter Putnam (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), p. 107.

[2] Jean-Jacques Becker, *The Great War and the French People*, intro. Jay Winter, trans. Arnold Pomerans (New York and Oxford: Berg, 1985); Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, *Men at War, 1914-1918: National Sentiment and Trench Journalism in France during the First World War*, trans. Helen McPhail (New York and Oxford: Berg, 1992).

[3] Fernand Maret, *Lettres de guerre 14-18* (Nantes: Siloë, 2001).

Martha Hanna University of Colorado at Boulder Martha.hanna@colorado.edu

Copyright © 2007 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Review Vol. 7 (July 2007), No. 83

ISSN 1553-9172