

***The Ordeal of Peace: Demobilization and the Urban Experience in Britain and Germany, 1917–1921.*** By Adam R. Seipp. Farnham, Surrey and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009. 306 pp. \$114.95 cloth.

By choice they made themselves immune  
 To pity and whatever mourns in man  
 Before the last sea and the hapless stars;  
 Whatever mourns when many leave these shores;  
 Whatever shares  
 The eternal reciprocity of tears.

These last lines of Wilfred Owen’s “Insensibility” articulate an important feature of British—and indeed European—First World War culture: the moral indignation of those who did the fighting toward those at home who stood to benefit from that effort without bearing an equal share of the physical or emotional cost. The breakdown in relations between soldiers and civilians, or what Owen terms the “reciprocity of tears,” has served as one facet of a “mythic” paradigm through which the experience of the war has been viewed by millions of Europeans, and, indeed, by many scholars, especially since the publication of Paul Fussell’s *The Great War and Modern Memory* in 1975. Owen’s death one week before the end of the war—his parents received the news on November 11—has also underscored, in mythic fashion, the way the war seemed to create a chasm between pre- and postwar life. In recent years, however, social and cultural historians have sought to move beyond these mythic dichotomies in order to get at the overlap between soldiers’ and civilians’ war service and the continuities between prewar, wartime, and postwar Europe. Books such as Susan K. Kent’s *Aftershocks*, Nicoletta Gullace’s *The Blood of Our Sons*, and Deborah Cohen’s *The War Come Home* have helped to revise our understanding of the experience of the war and its role in the re-shaping of postwar Britain and Europe more generally.

In examining key elements of the tumultuous transition from war to peace, Adam Seipp’s well-researched and thought-provoking book continues in this vein, arguing that, contrary to the received myth, the war did not end with the Armistice; as he writes, “the ending of the First World War was not an event, but rather a process” (2). Throughout this process, the language of “reciprocity”—which he defines as the expectations of people that the state would provide for a better world after their sacrifices during the war—“framed debates about the transition from wartime to postwar social order” (3). As with Cohen’s book, Seipp’s comparative approach is in line with recent transnational trends in First World War studies begun by Jay Winter and others. Conceding that such approaches can be daunting to undertake, Seipp narrows his scope to the processes of demobilization as experienced in Manchester and Munich; examining the interplay in

these two cities between local/regional institutions, civil society, and the state serves as the “lens” through which Seipp analyzes the experience of demobilization (23).

Demobilization for Seipp refers not only to the disbanding of largely conscript armies but also to the gradual curtailment of food rationing and legal restrictions on speech and behavior that characterized the political transition from war to peace through 1921. Seipp’s point that demobilization actually began to take shape late in the war is essential to his understanding of the postwar social and political upheavals in Manchester and Munich, for discussion of demobilization was used by authorities to bolster popular support for, or at least acquiescence to, the war, especially in its grimmer later stages. As he writes, “national and civic leaders felt the need to discuss the postwar world in order to suggest a better future to societies whose continued cooperation was far from certain” (19). This process is analogous to the ways soldiers often fortified themselves during the war with idealistic visions of a postwar world only to be disillusioned later, as we see in texts such as veterans’ organizations’ journals and Ivor Gurney’s poetry. As citizens were increasingly asked to sacrifice for the war effort, their expectations of reward were dramatically heightened. And, after the war, as they ultimately came to see little reward for such sacrifices, in both Britain and Germany blame was assigned—primarily to “Bolsheviks,” profiteers, and Jews (though Germans tended to conflate these categories more often than the British).

Seipp convincingly argues that Britain experienced less upheaval and violence—despite the state’s ad hoc approach to mobilization and then demobilization—because its citizens never fully lost confidence in the ability of state institutions to address problems associated with the war and its aftermath. The Soldiers’ Strikes in France and Britain in 1918-19, a key flashpoint for citizen dissatisfaction with demobilization, represented to authorities a frightful possibility that “Bolshevism” had infected the ranks. But with changes to how the decommissioning of millions of men was to proceed, including the appointment of Churchill to oversee the transition and the institution of a “first-in, first-out” system, the state showed the kind of responsiveness that preserved the frayed bonds of reciprocity between citizen and state. Germans, on the other hand, came to see their government as unable to address such problems—which spurred some to challenge the legitimacy of the state itself and led to sporadic outbreaks of mass violence (especially the violent suppression of working class militancy by the Freikorps) and tumultuous shifts in government. The sudden accession of the Socialists in the wake of the abdications of the Kaiser and the King of Bavaria, the right-wing Kapp Putsch, and the birth of the Nazi party and Hitler’s political career were all incidents, according to Seipp, that stemmed from the breakdown in the reciprocal relation between citizen

and state caused by the state's inability to provide for its people during the rigors of war.

Seipp's book should prove to be important reading for historians and literary critics of the First World War era. In its transnational approach, and its clear sense of the war's relation to the postwar as a dialectic rather than merely a progression, it provides a useful guide for further study of these issues and problems. Because of the rather broad scope of *The Ordeal of Peace*, it is perhaps inevitable that some parts of the story receive rather short shrift—the role of veterans' organizations, particularly in Britain, in reshaping Britain in the wake of the war could do with more excavation, particularly as Seipp emphasizes the pervasiveness of the rhetoric of sacrifice in demobilization negotiations between citizens, civic groups, and the state. This point also goes for the role of the Manchester Regiment in the mobilization and demobilization of that city (perhaps its most famous member, Wilfred Owen, is not mentioned by Seipp). Lastly, it is a shame that numerous typographical errors distract from the eloquence and clarity of Seipp's argument. But clearly *The Ordeal of Peace* should find a place on many scholars' bookshelves, as should the books Seipp writes in the future.

#### **Works Cited**

- Cohen, Deborah. *The War Come Home: Disabled Veterans in Britain and Germany, 1914-1939*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2001.
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