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TEXT

- 1 In the main, my dissertation strives to answer three questions: (1) What characteristics were attributed to members of the German Air Force during the First World War so that these men could satisfy a need for national heroes? (2) What criteria were used to identify the men as “Stars of War”? (3) What role did the media play in creating these heroes and in sustaining their image, especially in remembrance literature? After all, it was important to clarify which images, patterns and intentions should be conveyed in the aviation literature¹.
- 2 In order to address these questions, the dissertation’s modus operandi was to create a representative group consisting of fifty members of the German Air Force during the First World War, relevant from a historical perspective. In so doing, it was especially desirable that the men selected were important figures of their time, based upon their personal eyewitness accounts and/or their literary, cinematic or remembrance contributions to history between 1914 and 1945. This group was then examined with regard to its perception, representation and presentation in two hundred works of aviation literature published between 1914 and 1945. A number of inherited estates and three contemporary films also complete the analysis. The structural analysis of aviation literature resulted in the creation of categories. These categories were created according to the frequency of certain statements and themes in the literature that was analyzed, as well as from the already existing topoi and attributions, which surrounded the members of the German Air Force in the First World War.

- 3 Firstly, it was initially shown that the authors of contemporary aviation literature writing about such men as Oswald Boelcke, Max Immelmann or Manfred von Richthofen orchestrated a cult that above all proclaimed German World War One fighter pilots to be folk heroes, whose charismatic and extraordinary character made them stand out from the mass of soldiers. At the same time, those heroes were presented as role models for the youth, especially in publications after 1933.
- 4 Secondly, the study delves deeper into what constitutes the “Stars of War” and is thus able to clearly illustrate the diverse forms of admiration that strongly parallel the adoration of today’s music or film stars. In this context, the role of “fans” and “fan mail” is also examined. The authors of aviation literature at the time mostly interpreted this then-new phenomenon of star cult as a positive effect in their works.
- 5 The fighter pilot hero type is extensively analyzed in the dissertation, which in aviation literature is associated with a whole range of character, physical and mental attributes. This results in the perceived image that in many cases represents the ideal German fighter pilot of the First World War. Accordingly, he was a technician and a daredevil. He was always humble and reserved, he had an athletic physique, possessed nerves of steel and behaved chivalrously towards his opponent. Last but not least, these attributes enabled him to fulfill his duties to the utmost. But the examples of Max Ritter von Müller and Max Immelmann demonstrated that the hero narrative did not always match reality. Thoughts expressed in their wartime correspondence to family members are often at odds with these ideals, as is revealed in the dissertation.
- 6 In connection with the ideal German fighter pilot concept, it was repeatedly made clear in many publications after 1933 that the German youth served as what we would today term a “target audience”. Writing in 1940, the example given by psychologist Paul Robert Skawran in his “Psychology of the Fighter Pilot” showed his attempts to base the aforementioned attributes upon scientific principles in order to use them as a framework for his work. These supposed connections were without solid scientific basis and reflected the oft-flawed NS theologies during the Third Reich.

- 7 In the further course of the analysis, key topics in aviation literature are addressed and examined using the categories that had been created. Thus, chivalry, which supposedly characterized air battles of the First World War, could be considered analogous to medieval chivalry and the bourgeois duel. In order to present the flying heroes to the reader as an honorable and respectful soldier in aviation literature, these duels were described primarily as “man versus man” combat, each using the same weapons. In reality, this was, of course, not always the case. Due to continual improvement in air technology and weaponry during the war, one side often gained a temporary advantage over the other side, usually with lethal consequences. Fairness and chivalry no longer played a significant role. Two important topics are the temporizing of violence through “beautification” and the trivialization of killing, both of which are examined in detail in this dissertation. It is demonstrated that the aviation authors often downgraded the “eerily beautiful” war to a spectacle, and fighting and killing to a banal event.
- 8 The broad spectrum of the war experience was elucidated in aviation literature. The way men deal with death, personal fears and inhibitions, and the physical and mental consequences of the war all played a role. The aviation literature conveyed the image of a strong aviator, who had to pass through a phase of weakness in order to fulfill his duty. Personal feelings played a subordinate role. The main aim of the air war was to show that the strength and soldierly virtues alone shaped the men.
- 9 The dissertation also addresses the question of the legality of military strategies and military action in aviation literature. The nature of these works is apologetic and is often clearly expressed as such, which attempts to justify to the reader, for example, that Zeppelin attacks on Great Britain were a necessary means of conducting modern warfare.
- 10 Finally, the analysis focuses on the collapse of the German Kaiserreich, based on aviation literature and private correspondence. The image of the “army undefeated in the field” (Im Felde unbesiegt), purportedly “stabbed in the back” at home, was used in these works to excuse and at the same time mask the German defeat.

- 11 The conclusion of the investigation is an excursus that examines three contemporary silent and sound films from 1918/19, 1935 and 1938. It turns out that these films adopted motifs from the aviation literature. This is most evident in the Nazi propaganda films “Women, Executioners and Soldiers” (“Henker, Frauen und Soldaten”) from 1935 and in “Pour le Mérite” (1938). They promote the chivalry of German pilots and focus on the German officer. The audience was to be shown the struggle for the rearmament of the new air force, and the German people’s spirit of aviation was to be showcased. Both films end with National Socialism being presented as the supposed savior of the German people.

NOTES

1 The thesis was completed in 2015 at the Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena and was published last year in German: I. Voigt, *Stars des Krieges: Eine biografische und erinnerungskulturelle Studie zu den deutschen Luftstreitkräften des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2019).

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