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An Artist as Soldier: Seeking Refuge in Love and Art

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An Artist as Soldier: Seeking Refuge in Love and Art

Description

At the center of this book are the World War II letters (*Feldpostbriefe*) of a German artist and art teacher to his wife. While Bernhard Epple's letters to his wife, Gudrun, address many of the topics usually found in war letters (food, lodging conditions, the weather, problems with the mail service, requests for favors from home), they are unusual in two respects. Each letter is lovingly decorated with a drawing and the letters make few references to the war itself. In addition to many personal communications and expressions of love for his wife and children, Epple writes about landscapes he saw as well as churches, museums and bookstores he visited. Epple's letters give testimony to how a particular German soldier who was drafted and survived the war did his best to remain a civilian in uniform; distancing himself from a reality that was not of his choosing, seeking comfort and refuge in his love for art and his ability to share this love with his wife, herself an artist. While Epple's letters are deeply personal, this book is about the human experience of war and the separation from civilian life and from family and friends.

The introduction provides a short discussion of the importance and uses of war letters as historical documents, followed by a biography of the letter writer. The letters make up the two central chapters. The drawings form an integral part of the letters; each is reproduced and accompanied by an English translation of the letter. In addition to the drawings, the text includes several photographs of the letter writer and his family.

Keywords

World War II, Feldpostbriefe, Bernhard Epple, letters, Germany

Disciplines

Cultural History | German Literature | Military History

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Comments

Professor Heisler's introduction available by clicking the download link above.

Introduction

War Letters

The Second World War began on September 1, 1939 with the German Army's invasion of Poland and subsequent declaration of war on Germany by France and England. It ended in Europe on VE-Day, May 8, 1945 and in Asia, on September 2. Although it involved many nations, the main belligerents were the Axis powers (Germany/Italy/Japan) and the Allies (England/France/Soviet Union/the United States. Over the almost five years of its duration, the conflict took more lives and destroyed more property and land than any previous war. Among the estimated 60 to 80 million people killed were 54,770,000 men in uniform.

The literature on World War II is large, varied and still growing. It focuses on all aspects of the war, military, civilian, economic, social, political and human. In addition to the large volume of scholarly works, it includes popular history, as well as memoirs, personal accounts, diaries and letters. In the context of the history of ordinary people, "history from below", diaries and war letters of ordinary soldiers have gained increasing attention in recent years (Wette 1995, Knoch 1989, Carroll 2001, Adler and Quinn McLennan 2003). This is particularly true of the millions of letters written by soldiers and their loved ones on both sides of the conflict during the Second World War.

On the personal, human level, war letters provide a tangible connection between soldiers at the front and their families left behind, bridging emotional needs of partners, families torn apart, normal life suspended. Their psychological and emotional importance is clearly

demonstrated by the recurring themes in letters from both sides of the conflict, the yearning for mail and the despair expressed when letters do not arrive.

At the same time, letters fulfilled a political and military function. Recognizing the importance of keeping the men fighting at the front connected with their families and friends back home, and to keep up morale, military authorities on both sides of the conflict considered letters an important tool in the war effort and they actively promoted and facilitated the correspondence between fighting forces and their families back home, often reminding soldiers that they should write and even providing them with appropriate phrases. For example, military authorities in England coached soldiers' wives and girlfriends to "tell him you love him" (Wette 1995, Jolly 1995).

In June 1942, about six months after the United States entered the war, the US Post Office Department officially inaugurated a new mail service called V-Mail (Victory Mail). The service was a response to the onslaught of letters that had overwhelmed the postal service. Although it was free and quick, it provided correspondents with only one page to express themselves. The page was sent through a machine to be photographed. The negatives of thousands of V-mails were then put on rolls of film, sent to a processing center, developed and forwarded to the recipients (Carroll 2001). When the service was discontinued November 1, 1945, more than a billion letters had been delivered.

Although the German system, *Feldpost* (literally field mail) can be traced to 18th century Prussia, *Feldpost* became an important means of communication between the front and home during the First World War.¹ The system put in place during the Second World War began operation on September 2, 1939 (24 hours after the German invasion of Poland). It ended up

covering huge geographic areas, from the North Cape to the Caucasus, the Pyrenees and North Africa. The service employed 12,000 people working at 400 offices, with about 18 workers per office and included letters, postcards, and packages (Cape 2010). Mail would take between twelve and thirty days depending on distances and circumstances of the war. Of the more than 40 billion items sent, the majority were communications from civilians to the front; only 24 percent were from soldiers to civilians (Buchbender and Sterz 1982).

Like V-Mail, *Feldpost* was free of charge and, like V-Mail, it was censored to avoid damage to the morale of fighting forces and the home front. The monitoring of letters was supervised by the High Command of the Army (*Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*). The so-called *Feldpostprüfstellen* (*Feldpost* examination stations) examined samples of the total *Feldpost* traffic in order to detect and prevent the dissemination of secret news, news that was undermining morale, spreading rumors, criticizing military actions, mailing propaganda flyers by the enemy, or sabotage. Letter writers were keenly aware of the censorship apparatus (the so-called “Schiere im Kopf”- “the scissors in the head”).

The important role of *Feldpost* for maintaining the morale of the fighting forces and the home front is well illustrated by the constant theme about its role in supporting the physical and spiritual well-being of those at home found in *Mitteilungen für die Truppe* (announcement for the forces) a front newspaper distributed to every fighting unit (Fritz 1997). Thus, a March release of the paper reminds readers that *Feldpost* was an “indispensable comrade of the soldier” (“ein unentbehrlicher Kamerad des Soldaten” *Mitteilungen für die Truppe*, March 1941, cited in Irrgang 2007, 46).

Judging by the volume of publications on the subject, the interest in war letters has been particularly keen in Germany, where several archives devoted to the collection of letters were set up, beginning in the 1980s.² The first academic publication in 1982 was a collection of 327 letters from the Sterz collection, entitled *Das Andere Gesicht des Krieges: Deutsche Feldpostbriefe 1939-1945 (The Other Face of the War: German Feldpost letters 1939-1945)* edited by Reinhold Sterz and Ortwin Buchbender. Since then interest in and publications of and about *Feldpost* have grown significantly. While recent publications include collections of letters written by well-known individuals such as Heinrich Böll in Germany and Erich Jandl in Austria, the majority of letters are written by unknown ordinary men and women caught up in the turbulent events of the war.³

The existing literature varies considerably.⁴ As was the case for the collection of letters in *Das Andere Gesicht de Krieges*, published collections of letters include edited collections of selections by several writers (so-called heterogeneous collections) or collections of letters written by one individual (homogeneous collections). In addition to the many volumes of collection of letters, often self-published by the author or a surviving relative, the literature also includes discussions by historians and social scientists to analyze the letters as historical documents, while also recognizing the inherent limits of such sources as accurate descriptions of events.⁵ Whether we are looking at heterogeneous or homogeneous collections, the central questions posed focus on how the writer(s) experienced the war and how he (they) dealt with these experiences; which events are described and which events are not mentioned; what were the thoughts and feeling of the writer(s). Most important is to attempt to understand how “normal” people, young men, fathers of small children dealt with the war (Stader 2006, 11).

This book is about a collection of one hundred letters written by German artist and art teacher Bernhard Epple to his wife Gudrun between 1940 and 1945. Unlike many war letters, Epple's letters tell us little about the war, about battles won or lost. While they are deeply personal, they provide insights into how a particular young man dealt with the war. They reveal Epple's struggles as an involuntary conscripted soldier and his attempts to remain a civilian in uniform. As an artist and art teacher, he tried to distance himself mentally from the war, finding some refuge in art, purchasing art books and visiting local museums and churches whenever possible and most important, in drawing the sketches that decorate the letters to his wife, herself an artist.

¹ According to one estimate, some 28.7 billion letters were sent during that war. See, Bernd Ulrich. 1997. *Die Augenzeugen. Deutsche Feldpostbriefe in Kriegs- und Nachkriegszeit 1914-1933*. Essen. Klartext Verlag.

² The collection Sterz in the Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte, now Landesmuseum Stuttgart, and the extensive collection in the Museum für Kommunikation in Berlin.

³ See, Jochen Schubert, ed.: *Heinrich Böll: Briefe aus dem Krieg 1939-1945*, 2 volumes with a preface by Annemarie Böll Köln 2001. Ernst Jandl . 2005. *Briefe aus dem Krieg: 1943-45*. Berlin. Luchterhand.

⁴ Examples of the more academic literature are:

Ortwin Buchbender and Reinhold Sterz. 1982. *Das andere Gesicht des Krieges*, München. Beck.
Wolfram Wette. ed. 1995. *Der Krieg des Kleinen Mannes, Militärgeschichte von Unten*. München. Piper.

Stepen Fritz. 1995. *Hitler's Frontsoldaten*. Lexington. University of Kentucky Press. Konrad Jarausch and Klaus Jochen Arnold., eds. 2008. *Das stille Sterben. Feldpostbriefe von Konrad Jarausch aus Polen und Russland 1939-1942*. München. Ferdinand Schöningh.. Ingo Stader.. 2006. *Ihr Daheim Wir da Drassen*. Köln Weimar Wien. Bohlau Verlag. Ruth Cape. 2010, *Youth at War. Feldpost Letters of a German Boy to his Parents, 1943-1945*. Bern. Lang. Astrid Irrgang. 2007. *Leutnant der Wehrmacht Peter Stolten in seinen Feldpostbriefen*. Freiburg. Rombach Verlag. Gerald Lamprecht. 2002. *Feldpost und Kriegserlebnis. Briefe als historisch-biographische Quelle*. Graz. StudienVerlag. Jens Ebert Didczuneit, 2010. "Schreiben im Krieg- Schreiben vom Krieg. Feldpost im Zeitalter der Weltkriege". *Militärgeschichtliche Zeitschrift* 69

(2): 304-313. Klaus Latzel, 1999. *Kriegsbriefe und Kriegserfahrung: Wie können Feldpostbriefe zur erfahrungsgeschichtlichen Quelle werden? Werkstatt Geschichte*. Ergebnisse Verlag Hamburg. Peter Knoch. 1986. "Feldpostbriefe, eine unentdeckte Quellengattung". *Geschichtsdidaktik. Probleme, Projekte, Perspektiven* 11:154-71.

⁵ For an extensive bibliography of collections of letters and diaries see www.feldpost-archiv.de. For example, in *Wartime* (1990) Paul Fussell argues against the historical use of letters because their purpose is to quiet relatives, thus they deliberately hide or change facts.