



Artur H. Boer. *The Great War from the German Trenches: A Sapper's Memoir, 1914-1918.* Translated and edited by Bertil van Boer and Margaret L. Fast. Jefferson: McFarland, 2016. 200 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4766-6368-5.

Reviewed by Brian K. Feltman

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Like many soldiers of the Great War (1914-18), combat engineer Arthur H. Boer kept a journal of his time on and behind the frontlines. By war's end, though, the veteran of some of the conflict's bloodiest battles was eager to distance himself from the war and his German homeland. He immigrated to Sweden, and it was not until the 1960s that Boer was ready to revisit the memories of his life as a soldier. He translated his journal entries into Swedish and constructed a narrative in his adopted language. He likely never imagined that his memoir would ultimately be published in English through the efforts of his American grandson. For decades, Erich Marie Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) or Ernst Jünger's *Storm of Steel* (1920) have shaped English speakers' understanding of German soldiers' experiences in the Great War. This English translation of Boer's memoir complements these classics while diversifying the genre with a highly readable account by one of the war's ordinary soldiers.

Boer was initially swept up in the enthusiasm of 1914-15, but the trials of war quickly left him feeling "weak and dumb" (p. 62). He went on to serve nearly four years on the eastern and western fronts. The notes he recorded in those years lend insight into wartime comradeship, the carnage of industrial warfare, relations with the

home front, and views of the enemy, among other topics. Boer was keenly aware of the boundaries separating officers and common soldiers, but his memoir reveals a belief that on the frontlines "there existed a comradeship of the highest order" (p. 106). Soldiers worked diligently to foster an atmosphere of solidarity and ostracized those who threatened the group dynamic. Men at the front shared care packages with less fortunate comrades and collectively mourned and tended the graves of the fallen. The sense of comradeship was strengthened through the communal sacrifices soldiers made in the trenches. Boer's descriptions of the rats, lice, and general filth found there resemble those of other published accounts. Nonetheless, he offers several unique observations on lice's aversion to sweat and the use of ants to delouse clothing.

In this brief memoir, Boer does not attempt to sanitize the realities of warfare. After only months on the eastern front, he came to realize that while the death of a young soldier was tragic, a sudden demise without suffering could be a blessing. Boer's descriptions of death are succinct, yet they reveal the horrors soldiers faced on a daily basis. For example, when Boer encountered a deceased Russian whose head had been sliced in half, he noted "no butcher could have done it bet-

ter” (p. 76). One of the characteristics that distinguishes Boer’s memoir is his ability to compare the western and eastern fronts. Following his transfer to France, Boer had to acquaint himself with the constant danger of artillery, which had not represented a considerable threat in Russia. He witnessed artillery’s ferocity first hand at Verdun, where corpses were constantly disinterred and churned into the soil by falling shells. These experiences left Boer convinced that Russia was “little more than a maneuver compared with France” (p. 108).

Despite its focus on life at the front, Boer’s memoir indicates that he valued contact with civilians and maintained strong ties to the home front. When he lost a comrade in battle, Boer’s thoughts inevitably shifted to the fallen soldier’s loved ones and what the loss meant for individual families. Civilians likewise valued personal connections with the men on the frontlines. In one case, the family of a comrade began sending care packages to Boer in the months after the loss of their own son. When Boer convalesced in Germany after being seriously wounded, he recorded only warm relations with civilians who graciously offered nourishment, entertainment, and the opportunity to participate in local events to recovering soldiers. Even as the war came to an end, Boer and his fellow soldiers recognized that civilians on the home front had suffered tremendously on account of food shortages. Strains between the battle and home fronts undoubtedly existed, but Boer never lost sight of how the war negatively affected noncombatants.

The German army faced a diverse array of enemies, and Boer’s thoughts on his adversaries suggest that he generally respected the men against whom he fought. During an unofficial truce in 1915, German and Russian foes wondered aloud if it was really necessary to continue fighting. The encounter led Boer to see the Russians as more than enemies. When a German officer reported the cease-fire to authorities, Boer cynically deter-

mined that “people are not the ones who decide on war or peace” (p. 61). Boer recognized the bravery of his Allied enemies, even if the British habit of equating warfare with sport perplexed him. He and his comrades feared black colonial soldiers, though, and they seem to have been influenced by German propaganda that depicted colonial troops as savages with no regard for the laws of war. The Swiss historian Christian Koller has demonstrated that although colonial troops did occasionally fight in a style considered cruel by Europeans, they generally fought like their European counterparts.[1] Boer heard tales of Germans being found with their throats cut and recalled “colonial soldiers, often black as night in color,... acted according to their customs from their wild homelands with only knives as an effective weapon” (p. 174). Boer’s reflections on this subject provide evidence that propaganda often led Germans to grant black soldiers no quarter on account of the atrocities they believed the colonial troops had committed.

Boer spent his postwar career as an engineer, not an author. His decision to return to his writings decades after demobilization adds weight and authenticity to his words. Boer was not outwardly political, but one detects traces of pacifism in his memoir. It is difficult to imagine that the Second World War did not influence the manner in which he translated and drafted the memoir in the 1960s—even if he observed the war’s development from Sweden. It is therefore important to recognize how decades of reflection may have influenced his interpretation of the notes he scribbled as a young soldier. Students will benefit from the memoir’s introduction, written by Margaret L. Fast, and Boer’s memoir should be added to the rotation of readings considered for use in undergraduate courses on the Great War. Scholars will find the memoir’s content relevant to many historiographical debates. Though specialists will be familiar with many of the subjects Boer takes up,

his writings offer a worthwhile addition to the standard repertoire of Great War memoirs.

Note

[1]. Christian Koller, "The Recruitment of Colonial Troops in Africa and Asia and Their Deployment in Europe during the First World War," in *Captivity, Forced Labour and Forced Migration in Europe during the First World War*, ed. Matthew Stibbe (London: Routledge, 2009), 122-123.

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