



Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany

Isabel V. Hull

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In a book that is at once a major contribution to modern European history and a cautionary tale for today, Isabel V. Hull argues that the routines and practices of the Imperial German Army, unchecked by effective civilian institutions, increasingly sought the absolute destruction of its enemies as the only guarantee of the nation's security. So deeply embedded were the assumptions and procedures of this distinctively German military culture that the Army, in its drive to annihilate the enemy military, did not shrink from the utter destruction of civilian property and lives. Carried to its extreme, the logic of "military necessity" found real security only in extremities of destruction, in the "silence of the graveyard."

Hull begins with a dramatic account, based on fresh archival work, of the German Army's slide from administrative murder to genocide in German Southwest Africa (1904-7). The author then moves back to 1870 and the war that inaugurated the Imperial era in German history, and analyzes the genesis and nature of this specifically German military culture and its operations in colonial warfare. In the First World War the routines perfected in the colonies were visited upon European populations. Hull focuses on one set of cases (Belgium and northern France) in which the transition to total destruction was checked (if barely) and on another (Armenia) in which "military necessity" caused Germany to accept its ally's genocidal policies even after these became militarily counterproductive. She then turns to the *Endkampf* (1918), the German General Staff's plan to achieve victory in the Great War even if the homeland were destroyed in the process—a seemingly insane campaign that completes the logic of this deeply institutionalized set of military routines and practices. Hull concludes by speculating on the role of this distinctive military culture in National Socialism's military and racial policies.

Absolute Destruction has serious implications for the nature of war-making in any modern power. At its heart is a warning about the blindness of bureaucratic routines, especially when those bureaucracies command the instruments of mass death.

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