

Texte paru dans le volume 75, n°1, du *Journal of Military History*, janvier 2011, p. 350-351, en réponse au compte-rendu écrit par Leonard V. Smith dans le n°74-4 d'octobre 2010, p. 1301-1303.

To the Editor, *Journal of Military History*:

In his review of my book *14-18. Les refus de la guerre* (*JMH*, 74, 4, oct. 2010, 1301-1303), Leonard Smith states that it seeks to “turn [a] rather old antiwar political position into an interpretation of the [1917] mutinies”. It is always sad to see a scholarly work not judged on its own merits, but on its alleged political stance; in this case it is all the more disheartening as my work makes no such political statements. It aims to understand how and why the 1917 French mutineers challenged the army and refused to fight, the ways in which they organised, the discourses of protest they constructed, and ultimately why this improvised social movement failed to coalesce and succeed in breaking the war effort. These arguments are made through conceptual propositions supported by broad archival research – of which readers of Professor Smith’s review must remain unaware, as he dedicates more than half of his text to unwarranted political musings.

The other half of his text is devoted to a rebuttal of some of my arguments, through a rather frank celebration of his own. This hardly comes as a surprise, as my research often contradicts Professor Smith’s earlier findings, especially his unfounded generalisations on French soldiers or 1917 mutinies based on a single case study – the fifth infantry division. However, some true disagreements regarding the war and the mutinies deserve explanation.

First, I maintain that “consent” is an ill-chosen word to describe the attitudes of conscript soldiers caught in a much bloodier and longer war than they’d imagined, with no way out; even more inadequate to analyse those soldiers who strove to end the conflict, or escape it, in May-June 1917. Incidentally, I fail to see how nationalism could be irrelevant to a discussion of “consent” to the First World War.

Secondly, Professor Smith asserts, in an off-hand manner and without any argument or evidence whatsoever, that I “fail to establish” the social identities of mutineers; these, I must insist,

are ascertained in my work: mutineers are younger and more educated, on average, than their comrades, which helps make sense of the often articulate ways in which they protest and dissent.

Finally, Professor Smith writes that “Any historian of the mutinies must confront the fact that the soldiers decided to return to the trenches when no external force existed that could have compelled them to do otherwise.” In this short assertion lie many fundamental fallacies. Soldiers did not “decide” to return to the trenches: some were arrested, many others were rounded up and transported to safe areas in the rear, a few deserted, while most of them ceased to protest and went back to a sullen obedience. None of these were “decisions” made by “essentially free political actors” as Professor Smith defines the mutineers in his 1994 book (p. 176): another singularly ill-chosen expression.

Such a depiction of “free” soldiers grossly misrepresents the very limited choices available to frontline combatants in the context of the First World War, and underestimates both the inertia of the war and the institutional strength of the French army. That Professor Smith should equate this strength with “force” or its “threat” reveals a somewhat limited vision of the social world, in which people are either free to decide what they choose, or coerced into submission by brute force alone. Mutineers, I contend, offer a case in point of more complex phenomena, among which are the powerful mechanisms of conformity and routine obedience.

These ideas, of course, can and should be discussed and compared: indeed, my book contrasts the French case with the more radical Russian and German experiences of 1917-1918 and engages with the vast literature on protest and social movements. Hence, if “debates about the mutinies of 1917” should “remain among the French”, as Professor Smith writes, it will hardly be “for French reasons”.

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