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Alfred Kelly, *Carl Rückert's Memoirs of the Franco-Prussian War*, Palgrave: Cham, 2019; 203 pp.: 9783319958033, £59.99 (hbk)

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Alfred Kelly's translation of Carl Rückert's war memoirs offers an Anglophone readership a remarkable new perspective on the experiences of German soldiers in the Franco-Prussian War. While the book does not contain new information and does not advance an interpretation that diverges from other published accounts, it gives the reader an extraordinary sense of living alongside Rückert in his long march to the battlefields of Gravelotte, his brief but violent exchange with the French enemy and his treatment as an amputee.

Based on his letters to his mother thirty years after the war, Rückert's account is shaped by the distortions of memory and the influence of later developments. Yet in being published after the initial wave of patriotic testimonies, Rückert's memoirs joined others in being more candid about the suffering endured by the nation's soldiers. It also enabled Rückert to be more critical of what he saw as the hollowness of nationalist rhetoric towards disabled veterans who did not fit the desired image of the healthy young nation. Inspired by visions of a united Germany, Rückert joined the army in his native Hesse as a one-year volunteer. As an architect, he was more middle class and educated than most of his fellow soldiers. Struck by their provincial outlook, Rückert reflects upon the meaning of the nation to such men. Most only encountered the fatherland directly through military service. To them, Rückert notes, it was not about history or concepts of the nation, but rather the fatherland meant obedience to their commanders. After the war, the same men would become reacquainted with the

fatherland when they could not pay their taxes and when they returned home to find their families suffering.

In his first encounters with death on the battlefield, Rückert provides us with insights into the complexities of soldiers' motivations. Seeing a freshly-dug grave, he reflects that soldiers were driven less by any 'cool, rational calculation' than by 'blind passion' (64). Yet in concluding that only a minority were moved to sacrifice their lives for the fatherland, Rückert's view accords with the scholarship on how many soldiers perceived the nation as a distant, abstract idea. Rückert's portrayal of how German soldiers viewed the French enemy and the chassepot rifle also fits with other accounts. Even his description of the discovery of chocolate, champagne and silk handkerchiefs in French soldiers' rucksacks confirms widely-held German perceptions of the 'decadence' of the Second Empire.

Debate has long raged over the extent to which the Franco-Prussian War was a 'modern' conflict. While the devastation of the new weaponry is evident, Kelly suggests that what is striking in Rückert's account is how little the soldiers' experiences differed from those of their predecessors. Indeed, much of the book covers the familiar story of soldiers marching for miles laden down with heavy rucksacks, being left to fend for themselves and being at the mercy of rudimentary medical services. As Rückert nears his destination, it is in his response to the devastation at Mars-la-Tour rather than in what he saw that his account is most insightful. He describes soldiers having to suppress their compassion for the wounded and having to learn to be 'insensitive' (106) towards the dead. In marked contrast with the glorification of the dead in post-war commemorations, Rückert observes how the death of a

horse represented a greater loss to the state than a soldier whose replacement involved no capital expenditure.

After having marched for seventeen days, Rückert reached Gravelotte. The battle of 18 August 1870 was extremely costly, leaving over 20,000 German soldiers dead or wounded. However, Rückert's experience of the fighting was quickly cut short after he was shot in the leg. He describes how he sought to end his suffering by positioning himself in the path of French bullets, but when that failed, he prepared himself for death. Eventually, he was found and taken to a field hospital, but his account again defies patriotic myths as he reflects how victory did not help the wounded forget their suffering. Rückert's description of his medical care underlines its rudimentary nature. The doctors' prevarication and contradictory diagnoses aggravated his suffering. It was only after the agreement of peace terms in May 1871 that he began to walk again. Despite being assured that significant advances had been made on prosthetic limbs, Rückert found that the leather leg provided by the state was inadequate. He therefore questions the validity of Germany's victory celebrations when the fatherland failed to care for its war veterans.

Rückert's memoirs contribute towards our understanding of the development of nineteenth century warfare, medical treatment and the memory of war. Above all, however, if Rückert's writing brings a 'visceral connection to the past unmatched by even the best general histories of the war' (xvii), Kelly's translation conveys it to a new audience.