

Book Review on Battle of Verdun memoir – Received January 28, 2012

The Holocaust – from a Survivor of Verdun, by William Hermanns, (Harper & Row, 1972)

By Peter Phillips

William Hermanns, as a German soldier in World War 1, survived the bloody battle at Verdun which took over one million lives. Hermanns went on to become a member of the faculty at San Jose State University, and waited over fifty years to formally publish his written notes and recollections of the War to End War.

Verdun was modern war run amuck, churned bodies mashed in mud and trenches, continuing artillery bombardments, airplane strafing, poisonous gases, lower classes as cannon fodder, massive death and wounding on both sides and despair of conscience for those involved.

In a time of permanent war, Hermanns work takes on an even stronger meaning today. He describes his patriotic love of Fatherland as systematically instilled by church, school and family. His school featured the slogan, "It is Sweet and Seemly to Die for One's Country." His family reinforced the belief that to be a man one shows courage in the face of war. And the cultural leaders in both the church and state pontificated how God was on the side of Germany. Hermanns struggles with his loss of conscience and morality in the face of brutal war, and ultimately promises God in the height of battle that he will relentlessly work for good the rest of his life. He acknowledges a mysterious intuition within himself that can work with logic for human betterment.

World War I was barbarous. Yet most of the deaths were between warring armies, whereas today in the Wars of the US/NATO global empire over 90% of those dying are civilians. And the ratios of death by occupiers to occupied are often 100 to 1 in favor of the high technological capabilities of the invading forces.

Hermanns' *Holocaust*, of course was superseded by another Holocaust and perhaps his book should have a different title. But the relevancy of his story is more that pertinent for today's wars. Hermanns published at the end of the Vietnam War certainly with the conviction that humankind must move beyond war. That message is even more important today

The loss of human morality and conscience is taking its toll on today's soldiers of empire. In 2010, more US soldiers took their own lives than died in combat. The problem is so severe that the military is trying massive new psychological practices to desensitize soldiers to killing during training.

Hermanns' *The Holocaust* brings a message of resistance to war that is broadly needed in the world today. We all have the internal intuition that Hermanns recognized on the battlefield. That inner core of knowing war is wrong and Thou Shall not Kill is our common foundation for new movements of peace. Hermanns gives us insight into human despair, and the forces of evil in the world. Organized resistance can occupy hope and change for human betterment and the end to war.

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