



**Mary Louise Roberts, *Sheer Misery: Soldiers in Battle in WWII*.
Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021.**

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Mary Louise Roberts has set out to explore what she calls a “somatic history of war,” (3) an exploration of the embodied experiences of (mostly American and British) infantry soldiers in the European theater of the Second World War. In this manner, she

continues a shift toward the study of the *body* and of embodiment that began in the social sciences and then developed in the humanities over the past three decades. Roberts' contention that hers is the first volume to explore the bodily experiences of war is somewhat overstated given that a number of scholars before her have devoted analyses to the somatic dimensions of combat and war more generally. Nevertheless, her analysis is a useful addition to contemporary scholarship both in terms of the thematic organization of the book and the many fascinating insights it provides.

Following a short introduction, the volume is divided into five thematic chapters devoted, respectively, to the senses, the dirty body, the foot, the wound, and the corpse. One of the central insights that Chapter One provides is how the senses – especially sound and smell – helped soldiers make sense of their immediate surroundings in combat. The sections on sound are especially interesting as we learn how troops learned to discern between different types of artillery and mortars so as to gain a measure of control over the uncertainties of battle. Another important point Roberts makes here is that the high flow of adrenaline in combat may have intensified soldiers' sense memories as expressed in their letters and diaries. Chapter Two, on the dirty body, is devoted primarily to the cartoons drawn by Bill Mauldin and popularized in the US Army's newspaper *Stars and Stripes*. While interesting in its own right, the emphasis on officers' seeing dirt as seditious, even criminal, is probably true of top commanders that were located in sites far from battle and during the lulls between fighting. What Roberts usefully underscores, however, was how some commanders linked dirt to the lower classes and thus to ordinary foot soldiers.

Chapter Three on the foot, one of the finest in the volume, sees Roberts at her best. The analysis of how soldiers and commanders saw trench foot – a painful if avoidable condition resulting from long immersion in water or mud and marked by a blackening and death of surface tissue – is fascinating. However, Roberts' claim, that it resulted from army training for endurance and dissuasion of troops from showing weakness, seems a bit excessive since many cases of trench foot may have resulted from the conditions in the field and the poor quality of the boots and supplies. Chapter Four, another very insightful part, focuses on wounds to show how they were classified by soldiers, how they changed meaning between battlefield and hospital, and why they were hidden from view. The categorization of wounds according to severity,

debilitation, and humiliation helps us understand the many meanings they took on for troops; take, for example, the "million-dollar wound" (97) that was serious enough to justify withdrawal from battle but was not accompanied by permanent disfigurement. Roberts also describes the dilemmas that medical staff faced between care for soldiers and the need to send them back to combat as soon as possible.

In Chapter Five, Roberts contends that the corpse provided a framework for understanding the war since the dead conveyed something about what the war meant to the fighters. Devoting some space to the US Graves Registration Service charged with the care, removal, and disposal of dead soldiers, Roberts shows how their officials perceived themselves and were perceived by others. In a later part of the chapter, she shows how families longed for the remains and the personal paraphernalia of the soldiers to be brought home by the military administration. Like the wounded, every effort was made to avoid showing the public back home the condition of wounds and of bodies shot up or exploded since it would lower morale.

While reading this book I, rather unfortunately, repeatedly came across mistakes in the use of military terms or a lack of understanding of military matters that some specialists could find irritating if not amateurish. One example is the author's simple dichotomy between *officers* and *soldiers* in expressing the strategic versus the experiential view of soldiers' bodies; that is, between a view of soldiers as abstract *manpower* and a soldier's visceral understanding of combat. Roberts seems to conflate generals with field officers, although generals had very different experiences of the battlefields than field officers. Another instance is Roberts' labelling of sergeants as *officers*. A long line of memoirs and biographies of field officers – at times up to the level of battalion commanders – shows how similar their experiences were to foot soldiers and how they operated under very comparable conditions. These kinds of mistakes are all the more a pity because they could have been easily avoided by a tighter editorial hand.

Another matter that kept cropping up in my perusal of the book is that there is almost no mention of bodily experiences that do not involve misery. These would include such visceral phenomena that have been mentioned in previous books such as the aesthetic fascination of looking at bombing and firefights, the exhilaration of surviving combat, or the sheer enjoyment of some small pleasures such as a warm meal

and bed. In this sense, her book prompted me to think about the full meaning of a somatic history of combat, one that does not efface any bodily pleasures of battle – surely a central element of a somatic history of war. A final point is that a conclusion to the book is sorely missing. One would have liked to hear what Roberts sees as the wider implications of her volume for the history of war.

This volume offers an interesting analysis of how soldiers portrayed their bodily experiences and of the official viewpoint of the military bureaucracy and of generals in classifying, training, and caring for these very bodies.

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