



An Intimate History of Killing: Face to Face Killing in Twentieth Century Warfare

By Joanna Bourke

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The characteristic act of men at war is not dying, but killing. Politicians and military historians may gloss over human slaughter, emphasizing the defense of national honor, but for men in active service, warfare means being - or becoming - efficient killers. In *An Intimate History of Killing*, historian Joanna Bourke asks: What are the social and psychological dynamics of becoming the best "citizen soldiers?" What kind of men become the best killers? How do they readjust to civilian life? These questions are answered in this groundbreaking new work that won, while still in manuscript, the Fraenkel Prize for Contemporary History. Excerpting from letters, diaries, memoirs, and reports of British, American, and Australian veterans of three wars (World War I, World War II, and Vietnam), Bourke concludes that the structure of war encourages pleasure in killing and that perfectly ordinary, gentle human beings can, and often do, become enthusiastic killers without being brutalized. This graphic, unromanticized look at men at war is sure to revise many long-held beliefs about the nature of violence.

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Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #1325821 in Books
- Published on: 2000-11-27
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.00" h x 1.25" w x 5.00" l, 1.23 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 509 pages

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

"The characteristic act of men at war is not dying, it is killing".

With that unsettling--yet incontrovertible--assertion, Joanna Bourke opens her investigation of how servicemen deal with the most willfully ignored of wartime activities. Drawing on private letters and diaries of men (and a few women) from the First and Second World Wars and Vietnam, she shows not only how military men talk of their fears and anxieties--familiar enough territory--but also how they talk of joy and pleasure: the physical, sexual excitement of killing other men.

In its own right, the material--lucidly and wittily handled--is fascinating enough. But across Britain, the U.S., and Australia, across three distinct wars, the same stories come through loud and clear: the joy of a man-to-man combat, which, ironically, became less and less common through the century. As Bourke shows, these powerful stories were influenced by the combat tales in magazines, novels, and films that enthralled boys across generations. In the end, despite the best efforts of the military, the experience of war cannot be prepared for.

Some may have reservations about Bourke's conclusions, but the huge mass of detail she brings to light in *An Intimate History of Killing* forces us at the very least to reconsider those easy clichés about the brutalizing, traumatizing effects of war. --Alan Stewart, *Amazon.co.uk*

From Publishers Weekly

A historian at London's Birbeck College, Bourke (*Dismembering the Male*) writes that she "aims to put killing back into military history." To do so, she focuses on the two world wars and Vietnam, examining American, British and Australian combatants' writings. Soldiers' letters and diaries, she writes, "weave together domestic trivia with a narrative of murder," combining surprising pleasure with persistent guilt. Bourke finds that men at war often harbored contradictory notions of their behavior, claiming that they were "following orders" while still trying to accept personal responsibility for their actions. Bourke also examines theories of combat and killing held by psychologists, sociologists and literary writers. Some of the surprises she offers refute conventional belief. In a large-scale firefight, only 25% of men ordered to shoot will shoot; the other three-quarters are "essential for morale." Later chapters concern "fraternizing" and battlefield homoerotics, war crimes and massacres, doctors, chaplains, and women in combat. Admirers of Paul Fussell's books about both world wars will appreciate Bourke's methods. Against Fussell's stress on war's disagreeable burdens, she emphasizes its mixed motives and even pleasures: many soldiers liked their bayonet training, and many fighter pilots loved their work. A persuasive final chapter attacks the "brutalization thesis," the claim (advanced frequently after Vietnam) that combat obliterates a soldier's conscience. Bourke makes the disturbing and convincing argument that soldiers can kill, and even enjoy it, while retaining their senses of self and society, right and wrong. (Nov.)

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From Library Journal

This extraordinary book deals with war not as seen on some green-tinted TV screen but as experienced by men (and some women) at the front. Focusing mostly on World Wars I and II and Vietnam, these firsthand accounts from British, American, and Australian combatants are riveting. While dealing primarily with war as experienced on the ground, this book also looks at war as seen by combat air crews. The chapters describe

the men's emotions (including awkwardness) as they engage in combat, the attempts (more or less successful) of various nations to train men as killers, atrocities (with special attention being paid to the massacre at My Lai), the effects of combat on medics and chaplains, and women's experiences in combat. This fine work has extensive notes and a large bibliography. Bourke (history, Birbeck Coll., London) is the author of such works as *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain, and the Great War*. For public libraries and military history collections. (Illustrations not seen.) A Joseph Toschik, Half Moon Bay P.L., CA Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc.

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