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Review of Erich Kuby's "Mein Krieg"

By [Florian Felix Weyh](#)

The books which guide us through life are often the early chance finds on the stalking expeditions of school-free afternoons. Around 1980 I found in a box of junk a thick pocketbook: Erich Kuby "Mein Krieg – Aufzeichnungen aus 2129 Tagen" (My War – Notes from 2129 Days). I belonged to the first generation of school children which first had learned in detail about the Third Reich, but the book nevertheless touched a sensitive nerve in me, because everything we got to read about a soldier's life from 1939 to 1945 was either conventionally decent Heinrich-Böll-type literature, or its crass opposite, the worst of militaristic pornography which even until today is a flourishing business. The truth of the Kuby-campaigns back and forth across Europe, with the threat of a death sentence in his backpack because of his [realistic] defeatism, made a deep impression on me. So deep that, for 20 years, I fruitlessly recommended this book to other people. Only determined used book sellers were able to dig it up. *Habent su fata libelli* (books have their own fate), and today the elderly Kuby might perhaps, as the result of the popularity of [Victor] Klemperer, find a well-deserved place among the private chroniclers of the German century of catastrophes. Like Klemperer, Kuby [who, however saw, real combat] reached for his pen in the most difficult circumstances, in muddy foxholes, military prison, war hospitals and barracks, and recorded what he saw, heard, and thought in letters which he sent to his wife [and friends] at home. At the same time he maintained a dangerous "double-entry accounting" by keeping a carbon copy of the letters. The heroism of intellectuals consists in stubborn persistence in the belief that writing can never be a crime.

Erich Kuby was not born a hero. In the first years of the Third Reich he leads the life of a Bohemian, at first in Switzerland, and then in Schwabing [the "Greenwich Village" or "left bank" of Munich]. When a wife and a child come along, he decides he needs to earn some money and finds work in a Berlin publishing house. However, in 1939 he is called up into the army. Up until the "Wehrmachtsausstellung" [postwar exhibition exposing the crimes of the Wehrmacht], the lie of the "decent German" was popularly accepted – the escape into the military. One need only consider Captain [Ernst] Jünger as a example of this "clean" solution. Erich Kuby exposes this lie as a means with which to play down one's participation in an aggressive war. However, there is no provision in the Prussian-Nazi military apparatus for a person like Kuby. He doesn't arouse suspicion because he is against the war, but rather *because he is completely aloof* and displays a provocative neutrality, a lack of interest in medals and awards which clearly signals that there would be a life after the thousand-year Reich. [As one officer reproached him: "You don't believe in victory!"]

The great achievement of this book, which was not sufficiently appreciated when it was first published, is that Kuby doesn't so much describe the political pressures of a ideologically misused army – that was what one wanted to read in postwar Germany – but rather the military's pliant cooperation with the ruling clique whose negative values were seamlessly integrated into military regulations. Add to this its own Prussian tradition of contempt for humanity, and it was capable of turning its duty to take care of its soldiers into a system of terror. "R.U." (Return Unwanted) was noted in his personal files after he was released from military prison and sent to the infantry in Russia. This was the equivalent of a death sentence which he was only able to have removed by an escapade reminiscent of "The Good Solder Schweik." A nation which recklessly attacks other nations also consumes its own citizens if they aren't

sufficiently ruthless. The Prussian tradition demanded of its soldiers that they become unfeeling automatons, but Kuby wasn't willing to conform. During his first campaign in France he began preparing some of his correspondence for publication as a book which he entitled "War trip in France," and his commander officially approved the project. The manuscript describes a sort of coffee and champagne vacation and mentioned that Kuby and other soldiers handed out apples to French POWs, a passage which eventually puts him in the hands of the military justice system. The censor prohibits publication of the book, but the manuscript circulates anyway among the commanders [annotated in green pencil by none other than Alfred Jodl] as proof of his "Wehrkraftzersetzung" (defeatism as a soldier). His sergeant H. [Uffz. Hahn], former SA thug, then seizes on a minor infraction of sentry duty to have Kuby court-martialed. He is reduced in rank from private first class to private, sentenced to a year and 9 months in prison, but is paroled and sent to an infantry unit at the Russian front. Months later he is arrested again and sent to a punishment battalion (his certain end), but a lieutenant ignores the order and assigns Kuby to a staff position. Later, as member of a communications unit, he is sent to the fortified city of Brest, shortly before it is besieged by the Americans. Among other things, "Mein Krieg" is the study of malicious, spiteful file notations. In bad times, the injured vanity of a superior officer can kill.

"Why did I have to be born into a nation which turns Wagner operas into history?" asks the soldier freshly stripped of his rank. He answers his own question in a Russian foxhole: "I have my own war aims, for example, to not lose my sense of irony." He hangs on to it until the very end. His remarkable stoicism is the equal to that of another WW2 chronicler who, to be sure, is cut from a different cloth. Kuby detests the noble soldier Ernst Jünger who spent the war as an upper level staff officer and saw no combat. When Jünger fought in the trenches in WW1, he wrote effusive celebrations of battle. Nevertheless, the two chronicles complete each other like two sides of a coin, and elicited, after the war, opposite reactions from the public. Jünger became the representative of the new Federal Army (noble soldier like Karl May's Winnetou), while veterans' organizations hauled Kuby into court for slander. Upside down world, for the writings of the courageous but disengaged Kuby depict much more accurately the life of the common soldier than the lofty reflections of Captain Jünger. Now that a frightening new military doctrine is being promulgated in our country, "Mein Krieg" belongs in the marching kit of everyone seeking foreign adventure, so that no one can say he didn't know what he was getting into.

[Another book which should be put into the kit bag is Celine's "Voyage au bout de la nuit" (Voyage to the End of Night, by a former French soldier in WW1).]

Comment by the translator:

I don't remember how I discovered Mein Krieg, but it must have been around 1976-77 when I was studying German literature at the University of Bonn. Passage after passage of the book stuck in my mind (the big H. and all the little H.'s dreaming of a cottage on the Volga, not much sympathy for someone who jumps over the railing of a bridge and expects to find an easy chair waiting below, etc.). Kuby told it like it is, and he took chances. He was persecuted for his aloofness and indifference to medals and promotion, but also lucky in that some of his superiors understood that Germany would need people like him after the war, and protected him from the worst. Generals Lichl, Jahn, and especially Captain Kaletta deserve mention in this regard. But Kuby couldn't count on luck, and many another nonconformist didn't survive the grindings of the Wehrmacht mill. Actually, we are the lucky ones who get to read his writings. Almost two decades after my discovery, I have now begun paying back my debt to Erich Kuby by making some of his works accessible to a public who doesn't and never will learn to read German. Most people, if they even think about it, would say: Why bother when most

Germans speak English? On the other hand, if you do learn to read German, you will have direct access to the best body of literature the world has produced: Gottfried Keller, Thomas Mann, Rilke, Franz Kafka, Robert Musil, and Günther Grass. Avanti et adelante! N'ayez pas peur! Greift nur zu! Go for it! You have nothing to lose but your provincialism.

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