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Matthew S. Weinert on Back to Peace: Reconciliation and Retribution in the Postwar Period edited by Aránzazu Usandizaga and Andrew Monnickendam. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007. 320pp.

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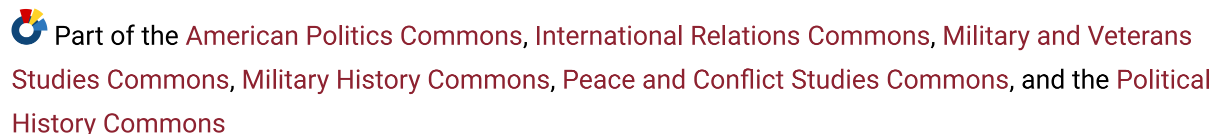
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Abstract

A review of:

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Keywords

Veteran experiences, Soldier experiences, War, Reintegration

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<u>Back to Peace: Reconciliation and Retribution in the Postwar Period</u> edited by Aránzazu Usandizaga and Andrew Monnickendam. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007. 320pp.

Writing at the intersection of academic fields very often provokes precisely by revealing deficiencies of accepted disciplinary wisdom and by instigating discussion of undervalued processes that shape our lives and the societies in which we live. <u>Back to Peace</u>, which straddles literature, history, and politics, does not disappoint.

This book appears at a fortuitous time in American history: soldiers are returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, and many are struggling with loss, soldiers' experiences and pain, and the growing unpopularity of what many perceive to be an unnecessary war. But dealing with war's aftermath—the reconciliations and retributions, the sorrows and maladjustments, the shame and displacement—has so often been relegated to the private realm, or to others such as philosophers, to think about in the confines of cerebral worlds. Surely I overstate the case. But one cannot help but think of these things, given the book's premise that "the understanding of war can be much improved by a systematic study of its aftereffects…[and] that knowledge of the different aspects of the return to peace is a necessary part of the comprehension and maybe even the prevention of further conflicts" (3). The volume thus aims "to initiate the pioneering work of searching for the common language of the return to peace" (4) by examining literature of war (for instance, American and British propaganda pamphlets or Gertrude Stein's ruminations written during World War I) and literature about war. And it finds this language of a return to peace in art itself—a poignant place to begin, since artists are so tellingly among the first groups to be eradicated in repressive regimes and in times of violence.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I: Return of the Combatant, concerns the "forgotten fronts of everyday life" (4), a jarring and apt appropriation of the language of war to capture the vicissitudes and challenges of readjusting to peace. This section interrogates our perceptions of "normalcy" by juxtaposing society's amnesia of war with the sacrifice, loss, and moral voids experienced by ex-combatants. A chapter on British and American propaganda that counseled soldiers to "change back to the boy[s] [they] used to be" pairs dramatically well with a chapter on the absence of "amnesia on war issues" in postwar Japan. There, military veterans were subjected to such harsh treatment and ridicule that many were forced into hiding. Sacrifice must apparently be total and for the state; anything less is worthy of erasure or, worse, condemnation and ridicule.

Part II: Reconciliation, attends to various reinventions of and within the social and its incumbent structures and ideologies such as peace, union, identity, and culture. If Part I exposes our inabilities to honor and confront the sacrifices that societies or governments expect, then Part II reveals the sheer ambiguity of our understandings of peace. This seems an ode to Hobbes' presumption of the abnormality of peace, which is the subject of a chapter (Chapter 6 of Part II). Without personal and collective efforts, processes of reconciliation are doomed.

Finally, Part III: Wars within Peace, scrutinizes women's experiences in and of war. Despite the gravity of the previous sections, Part III proves the most sobering. The writers discussed—Stein, Duras, Atwood, among others—assert their right to lament their losses (publicly, as it were), and

expose the moral failures of a return to peace that is not, in the words of the editors, "a bed of roses but a bed of thorns" (16).

While I find many of the chapters compelling, the book will not be entirely helpful to an IR academic audience, or even to a policy making one, although some activists, scholars and others working in-country on reconciliation and peace-building issues might find the book useful as a window into the psyche of suffering and struggle that accompanies such lengthy processes. But this assessment should not be cause to overlook this remarkable volume. Why? Because I think so many of us in IR overlook or dismiss the human dimension, and *Back to Peace* brings that dimension to life in all its starkness. True, the book speaks primarily to the literary-minded. Though the chapters are lucid, those unfamiliar with the writers discussed—Rebecca Harding Davis's "Waiting for the Verdict," John Dryden's "Troilus and Cressida," or Marguerite Duras' " *La douleur* "—might find the essays esoteric at best. Yet this is also the volume's greatest strength: its raw, unapologetic assault upon the ramparts of academic disciplines for failing to reveal the complexities and disturbances involved in returning to peace. And it does so from the hallowed perspective of those artists whose artistry so often impinges on sacred truths in ways that earn them in life, enmity, and, in death, reverence for their perspicacity. A language of peace stems not from a language of war, however intertwined they may be. Rather, a language of peace stems from the language and artistry of art itself.

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