



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 5. Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War, 1890-1918
Soldiers Describe Combat II: Sophus Lange (1914-15)

Sophus Lange reflects on becoming a soldier. He writes of lofty, unfulfilled expectations that contrast sharply with the monotony and exhaustion that characterized everyday life. The idealized vision of war in August 1914 was replaced by bitter disappointment.

Sophus Lange, student of philosophy, Kiel
Born September 21, 1893, in Flensburg
Died September 6, 1916, near Estrées

August 18, 1914

How did one live before? Even a book of gripping and immediate force could only really provide genuine pleasure when it was known that harmony prevailed not only in one's room but in the whole apartment as well. While drinking coffee, one would flip through Hebbel's diaries, and seemingly inconsequential hours, such as private lessons, were made richer by a bouquet of roses placed on the table in front of oneself, always there to look at.

The "new life" that has descended upon us represents the opposite of all this. And yet I am not unhappy here; indeed, I am rather happy. This "rush to the flag," especially among intellectuals, is not only based on a love of Germanness; in all of this robustness and "roughing it"* is a profound reaction to every sort of refinement. Alongside a capable mind and a responsive soul, one yearns for the awareness of having muscles, ligaments, and nerves, too. One jumps into the colorful uniform of the soldier like a refreshing bath.

So it is that I am upset when I have to drill in the shade and not in the hot sun, when our military service is made easy. So it is that I yearn for twenty kilometers when we only have to march ten. I feel incredibly comfortable in my soldier's uniform. My well-being is increased by the fact that of the 600 members of our battalion at least 450 are "one-year volunteers" [*Einjährige*] and of these approximately 300 are university students. Our treatment, which is actually polite and paternal, is based on that fact; we are spared any kind of drills, pedantry, and yelling.

In the trenches near Moulin, January 6, 1915

Now I am fully a soldier. I only admit into my present existence that kind of thought which deepens and explains my muscular, physical life. I can't help it – at the moment, all I want to be

* *Strohsack-Leben*: literally, "straw mattress life."

is a soldier – and I want to look at and illuminate this word from all angles in my mind and to experience it in its every nuance. My reading material is composed accordingly. Although I know that Kant and Goethe and Dürer and Luther – that all of this is much more beautiful than my present life, and although I know that I will return to them with great pleasure later – should I be allowed to return at all –, I don't want to have anything to do with them right now. Rather, I am only interested in that which has some sort of relationship to the "soldier." Therefore, send me the Reclam edition of *Penthesilea*, for it contains the glowing heat and fire that I need these days; in it, so many noble, courageous, snorting horses run over the fields. Send me the *Prinz von Homburg*, for in this a part of my life is glorified: the Prussian drill, the ingenious machine-like nature of the Prussian "soldier;" send me *Wallenstein*, it contains Grey and Hindenburg, sutlers and soldiers' carefree revelries, there are the great acts of statesmen; send me a lot of Schiller, Goethe, and Shakespeare, but not Faust and Hamlet; I have no use for them now. I am a soldier! At the moment, I am not seeking fame in intellectual originality and depth, but rather in being able to dig as long and as well as someone who has held a spade in his hand his whole life and who, despite so much hardship, hasn't caught so much as a sniffle. At present, I am most happy when on an especially dangerous and difficult day I am not downcast, but feel an increased awareness of life and an inner joy pulsating through my veins. Fresh and careless – in short, like Detlev von Liliencron, I am moving through France; or rather I am hunkered down here in France. This is my only sorrow. I would like to be on a horse, to patrol the area on a horse at night, to bring reports and messages during the day in great haste, rushing from place to place. Or let us soon move forward. Attack on the whole line: onward to Paris!

In the trenches near Moulin, April 24, 1915

We are both suffering equally deeply from the same poverty and privations. We are not being granted the shades of war that we desire. We are being kept from the enormous machinery of the war – you completely, me in part. We would like to see big levers pulled, heavy pistons pounding, we want to be first-class operators of this powerful machinery; and I am at best only second class and you third or even fourth. You could accuse me of being discontented for no reason, for at least I am where the machinery is in full swing. Certainly, the machinery here is running furiously and magnificently, but it is only one part of the whole large operation and I have been looking at this part now – every day, every hour – for over six months. I know this part in all its details so well that I hardly experience what I see and hear of it any more; rather, I only register it somehow. Being a soldier in the field has gradually become as gray and mundane to me as being a soldier in the garrison has to you.

One would be a sorry chap, however, if one were not able to pull oneself out of his ill-humor and boredom, if one allowed outer appearances, outer trappings, to destroy one's pleasure in life at a time when the very idea that one has been allowed to live in such an era must bring cheer to anyone. There is so immeasurably much to work through, to learn and experience in order to be worthy of this Great War. Even if our own eyes are not allowed much of a glimpse into this war, no one can prevent us from looking with these very eyes into the light of the grail for which this war is being fought. Let's engage with others, and, even more so, let's engage with books and

pictures (because it is easier) solely for the purpose of becoming better acquainted with our Germanness and learning to love it beyond all description! If we compare the cultures and civilizations of the peoples who are fighting, and if we investigate whether the “German” is the most valuable culture and civilization, the one that God wants most in this world – oh, up till now we have believed this much more than we have known it and felt it. Let us read voraciously! Your milieu does not allow this? Your milieu must allow it, by God. Certainly, you must be able to remain the master of your insidious environment. In the evenings and on Sunday you can surely seek out a small German nook, at your grandparents’ or even at home in an attic study with a view of blossoming trees. And there you can experience hours so rich and so beautiful that you will be able to draw upon them throughout the rest of the whole gray week. You have libraries there and art stores and a table where you can spread out your books and your pictures. You can get Dürer and the Italians and compare their Madonnas in peace and quiet. You can lay Thackeray’s *The Book of Snobs*, Daudet’s *Tartarin de Tarascon*, and Wilhelm Raabe’s stories next to each other and have in front of you English, French, and German. You can drink in deep, full gulps from goblets repeatedly refilled with “the German,” and thereby instill an enormous yearning within yourself to become a prophet of Germanness as your sole profession after the war.

And in your case these activities serve a real purpose; you know with relative certainty that you will not be killed. You must find solace in the fact that all of the powers that must now lie idle within you because you have been forced to return home will go on to serve “Germanness” in peacetime with ten times more powerfully than those of a soldier, so that you will be able to outdo his achievements. Oh, if I, too, would have the chance to work so much and so hard that I would become in my conscience and in my emotions a truly enthusiastic German! For only knowledge produces feeling. But what am I supposed to do here in my narrow, dirty shelter, where I am lying so close to bricklaying apprentices and others with whom I have little in common (they are good natured but have precious little learning) that we are rubbing the dust from the trenches off each other’s clothes? I can only take a small, quick drink every now and then from the German well. In spite of this I want to master life so that it may become bright.

Soon it will be the first of May! Think of me on the first of May. Never has May been celebrated as this one will be by me. With this May, the May of my life shall begin – a life of fullness, beauty, and power. On the morning of the first of May when the day awakens, take a glass of wine and drink to my future and to yours, a powerful May future. I will do so, too!

Source: Sophus Lange, in Philipp Witkop, ed., *Kriegsbriefe gefallener Studenten* [*War Letters by Fallen Students*]. Munich, 1928, pp. 201-04.

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