
BOOK REVIEWS

Disease, War, and the Imperial State: The Welfare of the British Armed Forces During the Seven Years' War

By Erica Charters

(Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2014) (285 pages; \$50.00 hardcover, \$47.59 Kindle)

In *Disease, War, and the Imperial State*, Erica Charters considers the relationship between the British fiscal–military state and the welfare of soldiers and sailors engaged in fighting the Seven Years' War. Charters credits the investment of the state in preserving the health of its most precious resource and “the conservation of manpower and the prudent use of resources” as that which “ensured global success” for the British (p. 3). In developing the connection between the state and the administration of military medicine, the efficacy of military medical policies is not used as a barometer of their success, with Charters choosing to illuminate the social and cultural creation of such policies.

While narrow in temporal scope, the monograph is wide-ranging geographically, with each chapter focusing on a region. The first chapter considers the experience of British and American provincial troops in North America. The second details the experiences of fighting in the West Indies and the portrayal of the campaign in the contemporary press. The third considers the European theater of war with a focus on new preventative measures to deal with contagious diseases. The role of the navy in maintaining a permanent blockade of French ports is showcased in Chapter 4. The fifth chapter demonstrates the environmental unsuitability of British troops in India, while the final chapter considers the welfare of French prisoners of war housed in Britain. In adopting a geographically based framework, it is possible to consider the intricacies of each region, while also developing a broader connective narrative.

Charters successfully integrates a wide array of archival sources from correspondence between medical officers and state officials to quantitative materials such as sick returns and army muster rolls. The use of the sick returns demonstrates one of the major historiographical contributions of *Disease, War, and*

the Imperial State in showcasing the realities of British bodies in hot climates. Despite contemporary understandings of acclimatization—the process through which bodies from colder climates adapted to hotter ones through a period of seasoning—this process was not reinforced through a quantitative examination of sick returns. In the Indian situation, this led to an increased use of subaltern soldiers rather than importing British troops to the subcontinent, a practice that would only intensify for future 18th-century conflicts. Her consideration of how particular conflicts were received in the British press is innovative and interesting. This forces the reader to remember that political decisions were not made in a vacuum, while showcasing that it was not just state officials who cared for the welfare of British troops as a pragmatic response to their own imperial interests.

Disease, War, and the Imperial State, although a detailed exploration of the British military medicine during the mid-18th century, has much to offer beyond a specialist audience. Medical lessons learned in the crucible of war and the emphasis of military medical practitioners on preventing disease as the principal form of medicine are both applicable to other times, states, and places. Charters's work is particularly timely in showcasing the intersection of the state and military medicine at a social and cultural level and provides a useful framework for scholars seeking to do the same. Moreover, as the author notes, "Examining the role of disease in war demonstrates the crucial role of warfare, the British state, and the colonies in the construction of modern medical expertise" (p. 200). Conceiving of the foundation of 19th-century medicine in the experience of the 18th century also bridges the modern–early modern divide omnipresent in the history of medicine.

Charters has presented an extremely readable exploration of the intersection of state building and military medicine with a strong narrative thread. Readers interested in 18th-century military medicine will find themselves effortlessly engaged with the subject matter and the style of writing. Yet, in times of debate surrounding the role of the state in medical provision, and the importance of primary preventative health care, *Disease, War, and the Imperial State* offers an apolitical lens through which to view state-funded medicine.

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