War to the German Soldier
by George N. Shuster

German war fiction written after 1945 is as different from that of the post-1918 period as Mary Johnson’s books about the Civil War are different from Hemingway’s about more recent conflicts. Some minor practitioners still try to squeeze a drop or two of patriotic fervor out of marching and dying, but the liquor has no kick in it. The great German books of 30 years ago were concerned with idealistic men who had for the most part assumed that war was a kind of patriotic singing exercise during which you took a chance at being shot and then found yourself stuck for four years, more or less, in scorfulous mud. Younger readers of today would have to do a good deal of backbreaking research if they hoped to divine the mood of that time. French and German students, for example, laid down their lives with an enthusiasm which in retrospect seems romantically absurd and breathtakingly suicidal. What the German survivors believed they had come by was “the war experience,” or the experience of solidarity with other men in the presence of death. This an American seldom shared, probably because the time he expended on fighting was mercifully short. But it affected the French and the German profoundly and is no doubt one reason why Hitler came to power and the second tragedy began.

Mr. Heinrich’s book is a superior sample of the literature born of the Second World War, resembling in several important ways the best which has appeared in our own country. For example, it gives the prostitute a place near the center of the stage, with no veils to hide her nakedness. This is no doubt so because what was happening to woman was of the utmost tragic importance.

The hero of this novel is a non-com named Steiner, in some respects a blend of Leatherstocking and Lone Ranger, but who can also be as ruthless and cruel as a gangster. He worms his way out of impossible situations with flashes of genius. Viewed as a straightforward reporter of military escapades in which his hero figures, Mr. Heinrich succeeds very well, indeed, primarily because he individualizes soldiers instead of submerging them in the mass. It would probably not be possible to narrate more macabre, revolting yet somehow horribly fascinating yarns than that of the capture of Russian women soldiers and its aftermath. In such pages one relives, if one is so minded, the grim business of life against life in modern war.

Steiner himself exemplifies the male half in love with death because every other kind of love eludes him. He is unquestionably the most exciting character to come alive in German war fiction. A three-dimensional Sturm-und-Drang fellow, he leads a platoon as deftly personized as can be imagined. Perhaps the most unforgettable member is the soldier Zoll who could not resist rape and dies horribly as a result. The rest typify almost every stratum of German society. They ask questions about the meaning of life, philosophy, religion, statecraft; the author answers for them.

The ghastly meaninglessness of all utopias, which lies over contemporary Germany like a pall, seems the only point there was to the War. This meaninglessness dictates the manner in which relationships between officers and soldiers are portrayed. The villains are leaders who seek in felonious ways to withdraw from the risks of the struggle; those who do not do that are accepted for what they purport to be. Steiner is not a rebel against authority. He bows to it when it is what it claims to be, and his story is utterly lacking in the caste consciousness of yore. The “they” who are blamed remain remote and inaccessible.

The Cross of Iron, by Willi Heinrich, translated by Richard and Clara Winston (Bobbs-Merrill; $4.50).

Among the lesser achievements of author Heinrich is the evocation of Russia as a theater of war. It is relived in all its endless, mysterious distances but also in its occasional idyllic moments. The book is utterly devoid of hatred and indeed of any affection save that which springs up, seemingly despite itself, between men who must have confidence in one another if any are to survive. In this sense Steiner is fond of the soldiers he leads, though he is quite ready to blot out any who do not conform.

The book succeeds because it is revolting and inglorious. The soldiers who were ordered to march into Russia were not asked for their opinions. It was up to them to survive if they could. They could not. The trap was sprung and they were caught and died. There was really nothing to do but to die. All else about the war was a delusion.

Anima

We are betrayed by what is false. Within
Our hearts good and evil strive. Our minds,
Sometimes aloft, above grace, or sin,
Search out satisfaction. Time reminds

Our senses of the savage contradictions
Entertained tumultuously. We win,
We lose, we stay awhile upon convictions.
In some new century has any been?

The falsity is life itself. We are
Betrayed by time, which made us mortal. Time
Is a laughing light upon an ancient star.
Inmost thought is subtly made to rhyme.

It is the perdurable toughness of the soul
God and Nature make us want to keep;
The struggle of the part against the whole.
Each time we take a breath it must be deep.

RICHARD EBERHART