The Forgotten Soldier by Sajer, Guy

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Thesis

This book is written in French, which is the author's native language. It was then translated into English, which was complex. Some of the materials were translated from French into German, then German to French, then German to English. This book was published in various formats, at the very least five times in English. Guy Sajer is a pen name of Guy Mouminoux, Sajer being the author's mother's maiden name. The author's mother was German and his father was French. Throughout the book, the author comments on how difficult he finds speaking German fluently, leading him to associate with people who only speak French (Sajer, 1978).

Abstract

Guy Sajer writes a memoir on his experiences while fighting for the German army in his book "The Forgotten Soldier." Guy survived and fought in numerous battles from Don to East Prussia, forming strong bonds of friendship with the men he fought alongside. Sajer's motivation for fighting is slightly different since he was ethnically French, while his comrades were Germans. He did not have the indoctrination of the Nazi ideologies that most of his German comrades had experienced. This resulted in having no racial opinions on the German atrocities towards Russian prisoners, which were witnessed firsthand (Sajer, 1978).

Guy Sajer's will to keep on fighting when Germany's fate was sealed continued to differ from that of the other German soldiers. He states that the reason he was fighting for Germany was because he was protecting France from Bolshevism even though the Russians deployed their soldiers only for revenge (Sajer, 1978).

Sajer's reasons for remaining in the war even when Germany was defeated were inevitable since he was connected to Germany either nationally or emotionally, which resulted in him explicitly placing his loyalty to France all the way through the war. When the war came to an end, Sajer fought even more because he was overwhelmed with the thoughts of dying and his will to avoid death just to become a hero as the fight was a lost cause against Bolshevism (Sajer, 1978).

Book Summary

The Forgotten Soldier is an account of the experiences of the author as a German soldier during World War II fighting on the eastern front. Guy Sajer was a Frenchman who fought on the German Wehrmacht side. This resulted in a somewhat less biased viewpoint in his detailed experiences, for example, his unfamiliarity with the Nazi ideologies, the beliefs of German invincibility and the inferiority of Slavs (Sajer, 1978).

Sajer provides detailed information on the reasons behind the enlistment of the Wehrmacht, and the success of Nazi anti-communist propaganda while encouraging the enlistments and atrocities done by the Germans towards the Russian partisans and prisoners. His experience is more believable since he was an outsider amongst German comrades (Sajer, 1978).

Sajer believed that the French would eventually join the Germans in the fight against the Soviets. This was his reasoning behind his enlistment in the German army. He also believes that by attacking the Soviet Union, Germany was actually protecting Western Europe. This was a testament to the successful Nazi propaganda. The long march from southern Russia to Germany marked the beginning of his greatest hardships on the eastern front; he kept on believing that the French were on their way (Sajer, 1978).

Most of Sajer's closest comrades accepted him as one of their own, despite his limited knowledge of the German language. There were not many instances in which he was discriminated against for pretending to be a German soldier. The most significant encounter happened between Lensen and his German comrade. While drinking with his comrades during a lull, one native from East Prussia began criticizing the French after Sajer had sung a French song. Even though the two did not fight, Sajer concludes that his poor soldiering skills were a result of his upbringing and ethnicity (Sajer, 1978).

The war on the eastern front turned out to be a war of ideologies as the conflict between National Socialism and Bolshevism produced brutal atrocities, some of them witnessed by Sajer firsthand. When comparing Germany's fight against Bolshevism, the author identifies an extent to which German soldiers are influenced by Nazi propaganda. Most specifically for soldiers like Sajer who are introduced to Nazi propaganda at an early age (Sajer, 1978).

The Nazi ideology resulted in several atrocities being committed on the eastern front against the Soviet partisan fighters and Russian prisoners of war. This war established all Slavic people as inferior to the Germans. Sajer does not give any evidence about whether he believes the Russians were inferior to his comrades and himself, even though he was a Frenchman fighting for the Germans. This does not mean that he says he encountered any German soldiers who believed in the Nazi's idea of racial inferiority (Sajer, 1978).

The author states that every war always gets to its depth of horror due to the idiots who perpetuate terror, presenting it as vengeance. His indifference to the allegiance compared to any native German

soldier, together with his unfamiliarity with the Nazi ideology, meant that Sajer was not likely to condone or feel pity for the acts of revenge for any Russian atrocities. This shows the reader how Sajer was less biased on the account of any incident presented in a German account, where an act of revenge always seemed justified because of the influence of nationalism (Sajer, 1978).

There is another incident which occurred in the winter, witnessed by Sajer, against a group of partisans derailing a train from going back and forth. Sajer and his comrades successfully attack the partisans' stronghold. While marching back to the train, Sajer sees a firing squad killing the partisans who had surrendered. The commander justified these actions, stating that the laws of war declared that they were to die automatically with no trial. Even though this was the case, Sajer witnessing the execution of the partisans was depressing. Sajer's comparison between the two tragic events shows that unlike most of the German comrades, Sajer did not think the Slavs were an inferior race. But he believed that the loss of life regardless of race was tragic (Sajer, 1978).

Sajer also notes the change in attitude of the soldiers when the war began to change against the Germans during the slow retreat westward. The attitude changed from staunch patriotism to the will to survive regardless of leaders and ideologies. The first instance occurred when the Germans surrendered at Stalingrad. When the author realises that the older men start expressing defeatist views while the younger ones are determined to free their comrades, he thinks it is because the younger ones have not yet witnessed the horrors of the war (Sajer, 1978).

Change in attitude is not uncommon for soldiers; it occurred during World War II in most armies whenever they were up against any insurmountable odds. The original reason why leaders sent soldiers to war is always forgotten when the soldiers on the ground are faced with insurmountable odds. It does not matter if the war is for ideological reasons; ultimately the soldiers are defeated like the author and his comrades on the eastern front.

The striking testimony of friendship among soldiers is depicted in this book, not to forget the utter waste of senseless conflict (Sajer, 1978).

Works Cited

Sajer, Guy. *The Forgotten Soldier*. London: Sphere Books Limited, 1978. Print.