

Soldiers Describe Combat V: Peter Hammerer (1916)

Abstract

The psychological stresses of war affected the fighting ability of as many as 600,000 German soldiers. Here, Peter Hammerer is evaluated by a military court for his apparent psychotic or unlawful behavior. The reader can also get a glimpse of the world of a soldier suffering psychological turmoil through his letter as well as the military's handling of the matter. Often outside evaluations were used to mediate the cases that were brought before a military court.

Source

Archival Sources: Hammerer Files

Document 3: Letter from Peter Hammerer (November 3, 1916) to his wife Rosina Hammerer in Haslach near Kempten (Allgäu), Wertach post office^[1]

Written on November 3, 1916.

My dearest wife Rosina,

I'm letting you know I received your letter of October 23, 1916. Dear wife those things that you sent through Michael Mayer sure tasted good. The big package. Dear wife don't send things so large any more as that is much too expensive. Dear wife Rosina, I sent you a card on October 23 and those in the post office in Haslach have sent it back to me and written on it unknown. You are not in Haslach. Is that not a mean lot and they know you so well – you can see what sort of help you have there my dear wife. What sort of misery you are going to have when you go into childbed this month and I am not going to be there. No help but the children. And the devil's swindle doesn't stop. Although I think about it all the time, I am running out of answers what to do as to you. Dear wife Rosina, here the sons-of-bitches write you're getting so much help and get so much, the swindle nation. Dear wife, just like those crucifix bandits wrote that I wasn't doing anything – just getting drunk all the time.

I'm supposed to give my life for this pack. No, they shall give their own lives. I get nothing from them – only harm. Dear wife, let things go their own way – I've had enough. I stayed with you several extra days and now I have received two months jail. It's just as well. Dear wife Rosina I know my own thoughts. I told it to them in the trial. I want to be let out. I don't want to have anything more to do with this misery. This must be the payment for the years when we were protecting the Big Capitalists, protecting their stuff. Let them protect it themselves and not send people out who have to go out and make a living. I have nothing from them and I want nothing more than to just come home to you. It's been over two years of trouble and misery now for you and the children and me. I have nothing to defend. Now I just want to make my own money, be on my own. I get nothing from them but hunger and misery. They don't give us nothing more to eat than goulash, and there's only potatoes in it – the rest of the goulash gets eaten by those who are behind the front. They hold their heads in a way that isn't pretty and get the big money on top of it. Dear wife, you can't imagine how bad it is here for us and every day it just keeps getting worse. It's the same inside and outside. You saw it in Kempten already. The Big Shots – they have more meat to gouge themselves on than a shepherd could jump over. And inside it's the same. Dear wife, let me just tell you, those who have been taken prisoner are much better off than we are here. It's said that he in the "field" deserves double rations, and we get nothing to eat but potatoes and cabbage. It's because of them. They got big money and better food so that they can turn the troops into fools. But that's over. Everybody

knows it's a lie, a swindle. Many warm greetings from your dear husband. I hope to see you soon.

[on a different piece of paper, same place and time:] Dear wife Rosina, I am telling you again, let me know when you don't have a mark any more. If you should be really bad off I will come to you immediately no matter what happens. They should stop or let me go – either let me out or stop. They'll keep fighting for years because they are getting something out of it. Many of them have become rich through the war and there are still a lot that want to become rich and those are the ones we have to be there for and I am sick and tired of it. Let them go into the trenches themselves and not send us poor people in for them. One hears that at every front and everyone says the war is there only for the big capitalists so that their stuff doesn't go kaput and that these and no one else are the guilty ones for the war going on so long. Because they are profiting from it. They receive a cost of living allowance out here and at home the poor women with their children only receive a few marks. Why's that? If there was a God then he would have taken care of this long ago, but there isn't one, that's obvious. I have seen enough and heard enough and stuck it out long enough and neither do I want a third winter – I want to be discharged."

Source: BHStA/IV, Militärgericht 6. Landwehr-Division, H 5, eingelegter Umschlag vor Blatt 19.

Document 4: Expert Medical Report by Senior Physician [*Oberarzt*] and Battalion Physician Dr. Kaindl of the First Battalion of the Twelfth Reserve Infantry Regiment concerning Soldier Peter Hammerer, April 21, 1916, to the First Battalion of the L.I.R. 12:

The examination of infantryman Peter Hammerer 1. Komp. Ldw. Inf. Rgts. No. 12 produced no evidence of either bodily ailments or phenomena indicating degenerative processes; nor did it show any deviations that would allow me to conclude that there was either a weakened nervous system or neurological deficiencies of any form.

Hammerer's physique is well-proportioned; his nutritional status and development is good; the sensory organs are without any noticeable defects. His knee reflexes showed themselves to be much faster than normal when tested, so that one can assume there are concealed irregularities in his nervous system. He is quite obviously easily excitable, with an accompanying reddening of the face. These are phenomena that would permit me to conclude that his nervous system has some blood congestion toward the head or toward the central nervous system.

Hammerer denies suffering from alcoholism or sexually transmitted disease. Furthermore he explained that he already turns "violent" [*rapiadisch*] after only a few beers.

He claims he does not sleep well, often falling asleep only in the morning. He also says he suffers from nightmares very frequently. Often he suffers from vertigo, which is probably the result of the congestion mentioned above.

Clearer indications for judging the mental condition of the soldier Hammerer can be derived from the family history of the accused.

The father of the accused – also a basket maker – is still alive and is said to be an alcoholic who has repeatedly gotten into trouble with the law on account of fights.

His grandfather on his mother's side supposedly committed suicide; his grandmother was supposedly insane in her later years.

In summary, to conclude on the basis of the objective findings, and provided that the evidence given was true, it can be presumed that:

1.) Hammerer received an insufficient and probably quite inadequate education and therefore does not

possess the important character traits that are necessary to lead an ordered life.

2.) Hammerer represents an example of a very excitable person who has no educative or moral footing, who is afflicted with a complete lack of self-control.

3.) Hammerer is affected by a direct paternal genetic deficiency as well as a maternal one through his grandparents.

4.) On account of the nature of his occupation (an itinerant trade, which his father also practiced) and his insufficient education, Hammerer does not possess those life values that are absolutely necessary for a good soldierly spirit.

To put it briefly:

Hammerer is an inferior, weak-willed, weak-minded, easily excitable individual with few morals, and without any firm view of life or sense of duty. These characteristics need to be taken into consideration in making a judgment. They do not, however, allow him to be classified as beyond responsibility or mentally incompetent.

Dr. Kandl.

Addendum:

I think it is worth mentioning in regard to making a judgment on Hammerer that already as a pupil who only went to school on the holidays [*Feiertagsschüler*] he reputedly attacked his teacher and was therefore punished with expulsion.

Dr. Kandl.

NOTES

[1] Translator's note: the original German text contains numerous spelling and grammar mistakes. The following translation aims to convey the style without including these errors.

Source: BHStA/IV, Militärgericht 6. Landwehr-Division, H 5a, Blatt 12/13.

Translation: Jeffrey Verhey

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