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## **Wings of Glory: Aviation “Aces” in German and French Society (1914-1939)**

The “knight of the air” is a myth that survived the Great War. Yet it was profoundly at odds with the common experience of soldiers. Was the war so different in the air? The “Aces” are emblematic characters of the First World War in the air: because they shot down several enemy aircraft, they benefited from media exposure that allowed them to share their point of view. They were the heroes of German and French aviation.

This dissertation examines 348 of these men and compares their individual trajectories with the representations they convey. It shows that, for the two thirds of these famous aviators who survived the conflict, the war constituted a capital that they used to obtain better social positions. This capital was particularly effective in the aviation industry, which developed during the interwar and in which they often made a career. They were also to be found in aero-clubs, where they hold positions of power and carried the image of the “knights of the air”. Ultimately, very few of them had any further connection with aviation after demobilization.

This explains the persistence of the myth and its development into a separate memory from that of the rest of the veterans. The airmen continued to distinguish themselves from the others, and tried to take advantage of the mythical narrative that reinforced their symbolic capital. They served a revisionist purpose in Germany, emphasizing soldiers who had achieved nothing but success and, more generally, were instrumental in the creation of the air forces. They were major figures who passed on their values to their successors, despite contradictory developments in military doctrine.

The experience of the First Air War was an element of shared identity, and therefore of cohesion, but it never prevented divergences, especially political ones. This was particularly the case in the 1930s, when the Nazi elite appropriated the memory of military aviation and used it to support its actions.