

quizzical eyebrow at finding himself described several times as “the Russian ambassador” – he was, in fact, the Austro-Hungarian ambassador at St. Petersburg and later Habsburg foreign minister. And the reader is not spared the hoary old chestnut of Europe’s leaders not responding to Franz Ferdinand’s murder. If only!

The events at Sarajevo on that fateful June 28, 1914 are treated at some length, though without adding much to our knowledge and at the price of repetition (there is indeed considerable “padding out” here and throughout the book). But this raises a wider question. If, as Miller-Melamed argues, Franz Ferdinand’s chauffeur’s “wrong turn” on Sarajevo’s Appel Kai was irrelevant, in sharp contrast to the many “wrong turns” by Europe’s leaders after June 28, then one is left wondering why he treats those same events at such length but compresses what happened after Sarajevo into barely a dozen pages.

At the root of the book’s flaws seems to lie a confusion about its aims and conceptualization, which its author’s liberal spraying of other scholars with criticism cannot quite hide (for the sake of transparency, the reviewer catches a few droplets too). In consequence, it is neither an explication of the centrality of the Balkans to European power politics nor does it elucidate why Europe’s statesmen were unable to prevent the Sarajevo crisis from spiralling out of control. Instead of laying to rest the mythology that has arisen around Princip’s gunshots, Paul Miller-Melamed has resurrected older ones about linear developments that led to the outbreak of war in 1914, and that is far worse than “nothing.”

doi:10.1017/S0008938923001413

Trauma, Religion and Spirituality in Germany during the First World War

By Jason Crouthamel. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. Pp. xiv + 258. Hardcover \$115.00. ISBN: 978-1350083707.

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In his new book, Jason Crouthamel charts how German soldiers used religious language to articulate and process their frontline experiences during the First World War. Religion allowed for expressing the hardship and trauma of war in a large variety of ways, from a simple coping mechanism to elaborate expressions of sacrifice, redemption, and spirituality in the widest sense. Religion itself was, as Crouthamel rightly states, “not static,” but “in a state of constant flux,” turning the war into a “laboratory for religion” in which new, often syncretistic forms of faith were explored (3). The focus of this book is on religious practice and its place in the everyday life at the front, and on faith as an expression of meaning in communication with relatives at home. The intensive theological attempts to reinterpret the Christian message in nationalist terms only provide the backdrop for this study. To put his investigation on a firm primary-source basis, Crouthamel has conducted extensive research in all major German archives with extensive collections of war diaries and war letters.

The book is organised into seven chapters and an epilogue that analyses the reverberations of defeat through the prism of religious language. Chapter 1 charts the top-down militarization of faith and its instrumentalization for the German war effort. The second chapter traces the broad range of religious emotions and expressions that the beginning of the war triggered among

soldiers and civilians. The third chapter reconstructs how frontline soldiers and civilians used religion to process the trauma of violence and bereavement, and how the semantics of “nerves” (*Nerven*) straddled the divide between psychiatric discourse and popular expression for a state of mind under the strain of total war. Chapter 4 discusses what Crouthamel describes as the “brutalization of faith in the front experience” (81). This terminology is misleading. The notion of a religious “brutalization” is not echoed in any of the primary sources Crouthamel presents in this chapter. Instead, the sources talk about the increasingly apparent discrepancy between the carnage of war and the idea of an all-powerful God. It would have been more precise to analyse this as a manifestation of theodicy, the established academic term for this problem.

Whereas these four chapters provide the core of the book and its argument, the following three are somewhat weaker in their empirical grounding. Chapter 5 argues that contemporary observers noticed how soldiers tried to move beyond established religious ideas as their traditional belief was challenged, if not altogether shaken. Crouthamel relies here mainly on the well-known survey by the psychologist Paul Plaut and observations by the Protestant theologian-turned-Social Democrat Paul Göhre. Chapter 6 probes the emergence of what Crouthamel calls “alternative beliefs” (135), a term that encapsulates a wide range of phenomena from superstition to hybrid religious imagery that also included monsters and pagan symbolism. The final, seventh chapter offers interesting glimpses into attempts to create a new religiosity that would correspond to the realities of trench warfare, mainly using the example of those soldiers who discovered “spiritual sustenance in comradeship” (182).

Following on from Patrick J. Houlihan’s trailblazing *Catholicism and the Great War* (2015), this is the first book-length study that analyses a large variety of expressions of religious belief in Germany during the war. Crouthamel interrogates his primary-source materials with clarity and subtlety. His core argument – soldiers responded to the violence of war with a broad range of religious expressions and idioms – is convincing and uncovers new aspects of the mentalities of German frontline troops. Yet the book also has conceptual shortcomings. The first problem is the inflationary use of the term “trauma.” Crouthamel defines trauma not simply in medical terms, but as an “experience that damaged belief systems” (2). But when a soldier simply speaks of the “großen Strapazen” he had to endure (1), it is misleading to subsume that under the category of “trauma,” even in the wider definition suggested by Crouthamel.

The second conceptual problem is the recurring references to “Judeo-Christian” values, beliefs, and even a “Judeo-Christian God” (177). “Judeo-Christian” is a notion developed in U.S. Cold War discourse, where it was meant to emphasize the shared stance of Christians and Jews against “godless” Bolshevism. In a German context, the term is largely meaningless, even in the slightly toned-down version of monotheism that Crouthamel seems to refer to. Christians in Germany were, in the first instance, either Catholics or Protestants. It might be sometimes difficult to identify the confessional background of a given individual, as Crouthamel explains. But that does not absolve the historian from the task to read changes in national Protestantism and ultramontane Catholicism during the war as two entwined yet separate stories. Confessional differences are visible in the evidence Crouthamel presents, but not analysed in systematic fashion.

Finally, the author suggests that scholarship should move beyond the “bifurcated question” whether the war led to religious revival or decline, and instead focus on the ways in which individual soldiers reconfigured their Christian or Jewish faith (11). While this is an interesting premise, it loses sight of the quantitative evidence which suggests that the frontline experience was indeed a major gateway towards secularization. The postwar decline in practised piety among Protestants and – less pronounced – Catholics, the vastly increased number of Protestants who left the church for good starting in 1919, and the rise of the socialist Freethinkers in the Weimar Republic are key indicators. German soldiers found many different and diverse ways of engaging with religious belief from 1914 to 1918. Yet the overarching trend that emerged from these reflections was secularization.