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Michael S. Neiberg, *Dance of the Furies: Europe and the Outbreak of World War I*. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2011. Pp. 292. ISBN 978-0-674-72593-5.

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The publisher's dust cover for this interesting and well researched study of European public opinion on the eve of the Great War sets up a highly flammable straw man by declaring that "Michael Neiberg shows that ordinary Europeans, unlike their political and military leaders, neither wanted nor expected war during the fateful summer of 1914.... [He] dispels the notion that Europeans were rabid nationalists intent on mass slaughter." Fortunately, Neiberg (US Army War College) himself avoids such overstated claims in his finely crafted, often eloquently composed, transnational study rooted in a wealth of letters, diaries, and memoirs of ordinary folk responding to the greatest upheaval of their lives.

Neiberg's focus is both broader and narrower than that of some books about the origins of the Great War appearing in time for its centenary. Broader in that he digs into wide, if not always deep, strata of opinion among several national publics, trying to extrapolate general views from private letters, diaries, and recollections. Narrower in that he is ostensibly uninterested in historiographical debates, old and renewed, on the diplomatic and political origins of the war: "It is not my intention to assign blame for the causes of the war.... I concur with the general consensus of historical opinion that the blame for the outbreak of the war rests with a small group of German and Austrian military and diplomatic leaders" (4). In fact, his study has at least tangential implications for those debates: most explicitly regarding the role of nationalist sentiment and grievance as a possible causal backdrop to July Crisis political decision making.

Neiberg lays out six major arguments. First, that, like Europe's military and political elites, its peoples indulged in delusions of peace in the lead-up to fighting—"Few Europeans expected a war and even fewer wanted one"—and, debatably, but crucially to the argument of the book, that "Europe was not a place of white-hot nationalist passions looking for a spark" (5). Neiberg shows that many, perhaps even most, people were shocked and surprised when their leaders started a classic "Cabinet War" in summer 1914. But he goes too far in asserting that "Europeans in 1914 ... shared much in common, including a pronounced aversion to war" (234). How and why they went along, and with such gusto, becomes a central problem that Neiberg has more difficulty resolving. Yet he emphatically rejects the old view of seething, antagonistic nationalisms long heading toward a collision in arms.

Second, that "a focus on nationality at the expense of other sources of identity clouds our understanding of the war.... Class, gender, and ethnicity were just as important as nationality" (6). That may be, but the dearth of sources on working-class and peasant views limits Neiberg's contribution on this question.

Third, that "the peoples of Europe accepted the necessity of war primarily because they [all] believed their wars to be defensive" (6).

Fourth, and far more controversially, given that all major belligerents sustained high popular support for victory goals for several years, that "disillusion with the war ... was well in place by the end of the war's first year" (7). Why then did people continue to fight after 1914? Because "the war had become a total war of life or death within its first few weeks" (235). But in fact, many generals and soldiers still thought the war could be won quickly with renewed fighting in spring 1915. It is very doubtful that most people were already fundamentally disillusioned about the war at the end of 1914. The determination to win actually went up on all sides as casualties and conditions worsened after the war's first year. Cabinet and command shifts in 1917 and, more tellingly, critical elections in the western democracies brought to power hard-line government leaders who rededicated their nations to the war militarily and politically.

Fifth, that, although the peoples of Europe were not consulted on the decision for war, they responded enthusiastically to the call to the colors, "based on the understanding of a short war necessary for the de-

fense of the homeland against an unjust invasion” (7). Neiberg again stresses that, by the end of 1914, people understood that they had been misled by inaccurate statements at best and “willful lies at worst” (8). This is a problematic assertion that the study cannot sustain, since it does not deal with public support for the various war efforts beyond the end of 1914, when most people supposedly knew the fighting was based on a big lie or lies. A survey using the same methods and questions for 1915–18 would be a welcome sequel to this study. As it stands, *Dance of the Furies* too often presents big conclusions based on little evidence.

Neiberg states rather than proves his sixth thesis—that the major wartime societies fought on for reasons that included “a desire to avenge the losses of 1914, the quite real threats to their existence that remained from foreign armies, and an awareness that the hatreds unleashed by the war as early as the end of its first month made anything short of total victory or total defeat unthinkable” (8). He argues that propaganda and coercion played the major roles in making this so after 1914, but adduces no convincing evidence to that effect. This leaves unanswered one of the most critical yet least understood questions about war in general and the Great War in particular: the relationship of hate to war. Did the intense hatreds released by the First World War, which still roil the world to this day, arise from causes that erupted in 1914? Or were those hatreds a consequence of actually fighting the war? To his credit, Neiberg confronts this question explicitly, arguing that hate came out of the war rather than caused it (202–7).

The book’s sources include private diaries, correspondence, and other accounts by ordinary (albeit, mostly well educated, middle-class or aristocratic) witnesses to history, people with no say in the decisions made in the dread summer of 1914. Granting that the articulate classes tend to record their impressions for posterity more often than do the working classes or peasants, it is still disappointing that, in a study of popular attitudes, Neiberg so frequently quotes and cites well known poets, novelists, and intellectuals, including (far too often) Sigmund Freud, whose views cannot be called representative.

Neiberg’s quick survey chapters on background to the assassination in Sarajevo, the summer crisis of 1914, and delivery of the Austrian ultimatum are competent but sometimes wander beyond the primary source documentation into large generalizations that may, or may not, be true. The evidence for wider public opinion is gathered primarily from newspaper editorials, which hardly reflect the perspectives across, say, the array of ethnic minorities in the Austro-Hungarian empire or the German political spectrum. Like most academics, Neiberg overvalues the opinions of the intelligentsia and newspaper editors. His perusal of the editorial pages of Central European countries yields the expected conclusion that “Even in Germany, there was hardly a wave of public opinion taking unwilling leaders along with it toward war” (77–80).

Readers of *Dance of the Furies* are asked to accept that out of Europe’s calm confidence in that last summer of peace there came a sudden “psychotic explosion” of anti-Serbian anger inside the Austro-Hungarian empire (81). In his least persuasive chapter, Neiberg tries to reconcile the notion of prewar socialist anti-militarism and anti-imperialism with the baleful reality of the swift and nearly universal embrace by socialist leaders and the working classes of their nation’s or empire’s war effort. To that end, he portrays the onset of war as a tragedy of acceleration: nearly everyone opposed a war arising with “truly shocking speed” from a stewed conspiracy of elites. Even leftists opposed to armed conflict on principle succumbed to “the sudden speed of events” (93–111) as war exploded out of the July crisis into the guns of August. The author explains this as arising from the conviction on all sides that *their* war was defensive, hence just and justifiable (114).

This is the critical point. Neiberg contends that Europeans exhibited a sudden and powerful “war enthusiasm” despite the absence of pro-war sentiment before the war. He accounts for the transformation alternately as resulting from mounting casualties or government propaganda that duped the peaceful but opposing publics of the warring powers. He cautions that violent popular views “should be read not as a pent-up desire among the people of Europe for war but as the determination of people to fight a foe that would not respond in kind to what they believed were sincere efforts of their own nation to work for peace” (119). Here and elsewhere, Neiberg uses *people* of Europe as an implicit moral construct, when it would be more accurate historically to use *peoples*. He ascribes hatreds evident (he admits) “as early as the war’s first few days” to each side blaming the other for “the unleashing of a war that no one had wanted” (136). He

then argues, with some success, that the great hate associated with World War I sprang from the actual fighting of the war. It did not even appear in his sources until the killing and dying started.

In the last third of the book, Neiberg contends that “by the end of the war’s first year, desires for vengeance and genuine enmity had developed, with lasting and terrible consequences” (137). In this section of several chapters he makes his most original and persuasive use of ordinary, daily sources not usually considered in the literature on the first months of war. But he goes too far in arguing that there was a “rapid return to prewar lack of enthusiasm for going to war. The period of ‘war enthusiasm,’ to the extent that it existed at all, barely lasted into the war’s first fall for the men on all sides” (190). If that is true, why did whole divisions of volunteers join “Kitchener’s Army” in 1915–16, not to mention the nearly all-volunteer Canadian Corps up to 1917 and many other volunteers on all sides? But it is unhelpful to criticize *Dance of the Furies* for not providing evidence relating to events and issues outside its purview—just as it is for the author to make unsupported claims about them.

There are a few factual errors in the text.¹ But a much larger problem is posed by unsubstantiated assertions made about matters that lie outside the realm of the evidence provided in order to buttress the author’s core argument for the essential passivity, if not pacifism, of Europe’s peoples before the war and their mobilization in more bellicose directions by wartime propaganda and governmental coercion. For the greater part, however, Neiberg’s easy prose will draw readers through a volume filled with keen and wistful insights, illustrative anecdotes, and apt quotations.

1. E.g., Austria-Hungary was not “populated mainly by Serbs” (13).