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Nathan N. Orgill, Rumors of the Great War. The British Press and Anglo-German Relations during the July Crisis, Lanham, MD (Lexington Books) 2019, XX-261 p., 15 b/w ill., ISBN 978-1-4985-5972-0, USD 95,00.

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Considering the vast body of historical studies on World War I that sprang from the conflict's recent centennial, finding a unique and innovative approach to the »Great War« might seem a challenging enterprise. In his recent book, »Rumors of the Great War«, Nathan Orgill admits as much, while offering what he defines as a particularly understudied but salient contribution to the question of why, in summer 1914, European statesmen pushed the continent beyond the precipice of war and into »mass suicide« (p. 1). Focusing in particular on British diplomats' and politicians' actions during the July Crisis – lasting from Archduke Franz Ferdinand's assassination on June 28 to Austria-Hungary's declaration of war against Russia on August 6 – Orgill analyzes the press's role in shaping political agency. Employing diplomatic archival and press sources, as well as his protagonists' memoirs and similar ego-documents, Orgill shows how the English press played a critical role in shaping Britain's and Germany's responses to events on the continent.

According to Orgill, »the British press played a role of fundamental importance in the summer of 1914,« as it was scrutinized by leaders in London, Berlin, and Vienna to help assess British »popular opinion« and calibrate their dealings accordingly (p. 14). Orgill bases these claims on a three-pronged analysis. First, he examines »how the British press reported, interpreted, and assessed the ›news‹ of the dramatic events of 1914,« highlighting the deep ambivalence of journalists across Britain's political spectrum about entering the war. Second, he »attempts to draw links between diplomacy and popular political culture« to underline how British journalists and statesmen were not only joined by commonalities in education, class, and patterns of sociability, but also by a shared feeling of accountability to »public opinion« (p. 6). During the July Crisis, British responsibility to act according to »popular sentiment« had a dual effect. On the one hand, it led to a dithering of Britain's policymakers – epitomized by Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey's »muddled and noncommittal« actions in July 1914 (p. 6) – as they feared entering a conflict that was broadly perceived as inconsequential to British interests. On the other hand, when not preoccupied with critical domestic affairs (such as conflicts over Irish Home Rule and the status of Ulster), the British press remained largely sympathetic to Austria-Hungary's and Germany's situation for much of the crisis. Interpreting this coverage as a lack of popular enthusiasm for

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war, Germany's statesmen in turn came to believe in Britain's neutrality, precipitating their increasingly aggressive stance over the course of the July Crisis. Finally, Orgill analyzes the intricate workings of the British press prior to and during the crisis, showing how »prewar newspapers – and the journalists who ran them – became foreign-policy actors in their own right« (p. 10), in that they »worked to restrain the decision-makers and to help predict how the public would react to a war« (p. 7). As Orgill argues, Britain's decision to enter the war lay with its statesmen. Nevertheless, »the men of [the press], like the people they were assumed to represent, ultimately affirmed the decisions of statesmen. They helped to inform and construct the outlook of political leaders and the public; they were agents in the political process in their own right« (p. 231). As such, they too bore responsibility for the outbreak of war.

With his book, Orgill hopes to undermine the »Old Diplomacy« historiographical approach that »very heavily focused on individual statesmen and their general failure in the summer of 1914« (p. 7). Instead of underlining »the ›human agency‹ theory, where the misguided decisions of a few have been interpreted to have caused the great suffering of the majority in war« (p. 8), Orgill with this book purports to offer a »cultural history of politics,« wherein »the ensemble of conventions, interests, customs, expectations, unspoken assumptions, hopes, and fears diffused among the millions of people who shaped the fundamental and distinctive characteristics of the political environment« (p. 10) play a definitive role.

Here, however, a reader of Orgill's book might be disappointed. While Orgill does present an interesting initial chapter on the late nineteenth-century »media revolution« (p. 21–63) – which entailed the rise of new journalistic practices, literacy rates, and mass distribution methods – and how this unfolded differently in Britain and Germany, his book consistently avoids a problematization of the press's ability to actually reflect »public opinion«. He only attempts to define »public opinion« – and related terms, such as »public sentiment« (e. g. p. 35), »public feeling« (e. g. p. 135), »popular sentiment« (e. g. p. 181), or »the opinion of the masses« (e. g. p. 224) – once at the beginning of his book, when he specifies that he uses the term »as contemporaries viewed it in newspapers, public speeches, crowd behavior, and parliamentary debates« (p. 10).

Bracketing any references to »public opinion« in scare quotations for the rest of his book, Orgill eschews any intellectual problematization of what, in 1914 Britain, Germany, or Austria-Hungary, constituted the »public,« what its relationship to a »public sphere« might have been, and which components of this may or may not have been reflected in different media. For Orgill, it seems obvious that »public opinion« was »ostensibly represented in the press« (p. XVI). Ignoring a massive, influential historiographical literature on the »public sphere« – as epitomized by debates surrounding Jürgen Habermas' theories – Orgill seems

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content to simply quote instances when statesmen themselves argued that »public opinion« had been influential in their decision-making processes (e. g. p. 147, 161, 189).

Instead of providing a true »cultural history of politics,« which would require Orgill to occasionally read a document against the grain and truly embed his sources into their larger cultural and social contexts, Orgill provides a detailed overview of the statements of diplomats, politicians, and state leaders within the context of press reporting on the same issues over the course of the July Crisis. This ostensibly allows him to embed the actions of »great men« into broader discussions of the time, discussions here framed by and primarily responsive to an elite, exclusivist social milieu. Hoping to counteract »Old Diplomacy« historiographies of the Great War, Orgill occasionally hints at larger sociocultural forces at play: the rise in literacy rates (as shown in a table on illiteracy in his appendix, p. 233), or the creation of a »popular press« that catered to female readerships (p. 24–26), for instance. For the most part, however, his narrative and analysis replicate the concerns of the men who drove policy around 1914. Throughout the book, the only »female« agents he identifies are Europe's nations, whom he consistently refers to with the antiquated pronoun »she«. Even the book's images exclusively include portraits of middle-aged to elderly white male statesmen and journalists, such as British publishing magnate Lord Northcliffe (p. 27) or German imperial Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg (p. 54).

Orgill's lackluster analysis of the »public sphere« does him no favors in supporting a thesis that it was a democratizing press, as an emanation of »public opinion«, that helped influence statesmen's decisions and pave Europe's path to war. In his conclusion, Orgill finally seems to concede that »public opinion in Britain can by no means be equated with the reports of her press – even if it was the tendency of statesmen at home and abroad to do so in 1914« (p. 230). While it rings true, Orgill does not interrogate this statement further. Instead, he claims that »attempting to surmise the personal opinions of millions of men and women« is simply too »difficult [a task] to tackle« (p. 230). Orgill thereby ignores the concerted efforts of historians to write cultural histories of World War I and Europe's empires »from below«[1]. More problematically still, Orgill seems unaware of German-language literature that has successfully problematized questions of »popular opinion«, the press, and the public sphere

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1 Consider, for instance, the flourishing literature on the late Habsburg Empire (which Orgill completely ignores): e. g. Pieter M. Judson, The Habsburg Empire. A New History, Cambridge, MA, London 2016; or cultural histories of the Great War that deal with questions of »popular sentiment«, propaganda, and rumors: John Horne, Alan Kramer, German Atrocities, 1914. A History of Denial, New Haven, CT 2001.

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in World War I Britain and Germany[2]. Nathan N. Orgill's intricate reconstruction of British (and to a lesser extent, German) decision-making in light of contemporaneous press sources is to be commended. Nevertheless, with its lacking theoretical rigor, »Rumors of the Great War« will mostly serve historians interested in the minutiae of an elite decision-making process in July 1914, as Europe teetered into an abyss of destruction.

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2 Most conspicuously absent from Orgill's book is: Florian Altenhöner, Kommunikation und Kontrolle. Gerüchte und städtische Öffentlichkeiten in Berlin und London 1914/1918, Munich 2008 (Veröffentlichungen des Deutschen Historischen Instituts London, 62).

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