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Michael S. Neiberg, *Dance of the Furies: Europe and the Outbreak of World War I*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2011. 292 pp. Notes. \$29.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-674-04954-3.

Review by Martha Hanna, University of Colorado.

Michael Neiberg is an accomplished and much-published scholar of the Great War. He brings to his scholarship a firm understanding of military strategy and tactics; a gift for clear and often elegant prose; and an understanding that war is much more than a chess-game manipulated by strategists and suffered by grunts. All of these qualities are evident in *Dance of the Furies: Europe and the Outbreak of World War I*. Unlike his previous work, *Fighting the Great War*, *Dance of the Furies* does not set out either to review the entire history of the war or to concentrate primarily on the military history of the war. Instead, it narrows its chronological focus—by concentrating on the six-month period from the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand to the end of 1914—and widens its analytical lens. *Dance of the Furies* draws on a wide-range of eye-witness accounts, some well known and others refreshingly obscure, to examine how ordinary Europeans, from Britain to Russia, experienced, responded to and were directly affected by the advent and opening months of the Great War.

Neiberg makes two main points: the war was not provoked by nationalist passion run amok; indeed, it was very much the result of the calculations and miscalculations of perhaps two dozen high officials. Disputing Helmuth von Moltke's assertion in 1890 that "the age of cabinet war is behind us—all we have now is people's war" (p. 4), Neiberg demonstrates that the people of Europe had little interest in the Balkan Crisis of July 1914, little appetite for fanning the flames of war, and, indeed, scant understanding that the crisis might escalate into continent-wide war. Whatever prompted the diplomats and statesmen to aggravate the crisis, it was not the pressure of popular opinion. Neiberg's second main argument is that the very nature of the war itself, marked by the extraordinarily high casualty rates of 1914 and a bitter realization that war was a very bloody business indeed, fomented nationalist hatreds that had not existed only weeks earlier. Soldiers at the front, appalled by the brutality of the war, and civilians at home, enflamed by atrocity tales and national propaganda that universally painted the war as a defensive and righteous struggle, acquired a passionate hatred for the enemy that would make a compromise peace almost impossible and an early end to the war a lost illusion.

Dance of the Furies contends that if Europeans thought of the assassination of Franz Ferdinand at all—and most seem to have "ignored the incident or downplayed its significance" (p. 25)—they conceived of it as a clap of thunder in the summer sky, a meteorological event that did not necessarily portend a major storm. Whether occupied with plans for summer holidays, garden parties, or international socialist congresses, the memoirists and diarists whose accounts Neiberg draws upon to construct his analysis, had many other things to distract them than an assassination in an out of the way corner of Europe. Surprised, then, by the failure of diplomacy and the onset of war, most Europeans thought of it as something like a natural disaster that had to be endured; few actively welcomed it.

Here Neiberg reinforces the argument, first articulated in Jean Jacques Becker's *The Great War and the French People*, that the "enthusiasm of August 1914" was a relatively rare phenomenon. Some intellectuals welcomed the prospect of war, but in the main, enthusiasm was thin on the ground. Yet most Europeans believed that their nation was the victim of aggression (be it from Germany or Russia)

and that national defense was therefore legitimate and imperative. Even in Russia, where peasants reported for duty with little understanding of why Russia was at war and townsfolk occasionally engaged in anti-conscription riots, most people ultimately complied with mobilization orders. Socialists did so, too, because they believed in the justice of their nation's cause: against Russian autocracy (if you were German), German militarism (if you were French), or in defense of national liberty (if you were British).

If Europeans had not been spoiling for a fight before August 1914, they quickly became convinced that their cause was just, their enemies demonic, and victory the only acceptable outcome. The first months of the war were decisive in this regard. Neiberg rightly stresses just how brutal combat in 1914 really was. It is easy (but erroneous) to think of 1916 as the high water-mark of hellish warfare. And although Neiberg is not the first scholar to set us right on this score--Hew Strachan has stressed how much more murderous the war of movement was than the static conditions of trench warfare; Jean-Yves Le Naour has demonstrated how especially costly 1914 was for the French army--Neiberg's reminder that "each side suffered more than 1,000,000 casualties on the western front alone in 1914" (p. 209) is nonetheless salutary. [1] And historians of France will find especially sobering the oft-forgotten fact that the French suffered more deaths in battle on 22 August 1914 than the British suffered on the first day of the Somme (p. 174). Atrocity tales (some legitimate, some exaggerated, some fully invented) further enflamed hatreds on all fronts by defining the enemy as an existential threat to each and every embattled nation. Hatred did not provoke the Great War but it certainly helped to sustain, prolong, and intensify it: "the hatreds that came to the surface in 1914-1918 were an effect, not a cause, of the outbreak of war. In other words, men came to learn to hate their enemies both as a consequence of propaganda and, more immediately, as a way to avenge the deaths of friends, relatives, and comrades" (p. 8).

Neiberg's approach is intentionally transnational. He does not deny that national identity influenced how Europeans experienced the early months of the war: the French and Belgians certainly experienced the war differently than the British, for example. He is, nonetheless, more interested in identifying the common threads that emerge from the eye-witness testimonies of soldiers and civilians across Europe. This constitutes one of the real strengths of the book and, curiously, one of its weaknesses. He very effectively demonstrates, for example, the pervasive power of rumor in wartime Europe, showing that the absence of reliable information was perhaps most evident in Germany and Austria-Hungary. He also stresses that the social divisions, resentments, and potential for unrest that would surface in 1917 and 1918 were evident as early as December 1914. An "us vs. them" mentality within civil society, generated by an inequitable distribution of essential commodities and hostility towards war profiteers, threatened the civil truces that had emerged in all the major combatant nations. Britain and France "effectively managed their social contracts [and] laid the foundations of systems that would survive a long war" (p. 216); Germany, Russia, and Austria-Hungary did not.

Yet by stressing points of commonality, *Dance of the Furies* sometimes obscures important differences of experience and understanding. Neiberg argues, for example, that "soldiers sometimes came to doubt the wisdom of the reasons they were fighting" (p. 195). This was surely more true of the British, whose enthusiasm for defending "poor little Belgium" quickly waned, and the Germans, who wondered why defending the fatherland against tsarist autocracy required that they invade Belgium and France, wreaking havoc as they went. But for French soldiers whose homeland had been invaded and whose capital city was under direct assault, the reasons for fighting were still patently obvious. Moreover, I am not convinced that "an increasing separation between the worlds of soldiers and those they left behind on the home front" (p. 180) accurately describes the French experience of war.

Without doubt, the conditions of warfare subjected front-line French soldiers to circumstances that sometimes defied accurate description in letters home, but this did not stop them trying. Nor, I think, did the war in all its horror convince French soldiers that this was a futile enterprise. Neiberg's observation that "for most young soldiers, the reality that they might actually be killed in this conflict,

perhaps with no remains to have buried in their hometown cemetery, made real not only the danger of the war but its ultimate futility as well" (p. 190) surely goes too far. Certainly, the risk of death would have given many a *poilu* pause, but did this alone convince them that their enterprise was futile? I think not. Indeed, much of the evidence presented in *Dance of the Furies* suggests that no one at this stage of the war thought their undertaking was futile. Persuaded that the enemy was capable of the worst atrocities and the most heinous behavior, front-line troops seem rather to have hardened their resolve. Their hopes of spending Christmas at home were definitely dashed, but their determination to secure victory remained firm.

NOTES

[1] Hew Strachan, *The First World War: A New Illustrated History* (London and New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003), p. 160; Jean-Yves Le Naour, *The Living Unknown Soldier: A Story of Grief and the Great War*, trans. Penny Allen (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004), p. 39.

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