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Review of Andrea Gräfin von Hohenthal, *Griff nach der Psyche?
Psychologie im Ersten Weltkrieg in Großbritannien und Deutschland*

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ANDREA GRÄFIN VON HOHENTHAL, *Griff nach der Psyche? Psychologie im Ersten Weltkrieg in Großbritannien und Deutschland*, Krieg in der Geschichte, 120 (Paderborn: Brill Schöningh, 2023), x + 609 pp. ISBN 978 3 506 79086 6. €129.00

In her comparative study, Andrea Gräfin von Hohenthal examines the genesis and development of psychology as a science and medical-therapeutic practice during the First World War. Through her examination of the British and German psychological associations and specialist societies of the period, the author traces the individual and group actors who played a central role in shaping the discipline of psychology. In addition, she takes into account the perspective of those who called upon psychological expertise, such as the army and the military administration.

First, von Hohenthal examines psychology's 'formative phase' in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At that time, it was neither a discrete discipline or field of study, nor was it possible to take any course of study – which is why the author defines psychologists as members of the British Psychological Society and the Gesellschaft für experimentelle Psychologie (Society for Experimental Psychology) in Germany, specialist societies that were founded early on (1901 and 1906 respectively). By the mid nineteenth century, psychological knowledge was already being produced and methods were being tested within certain fields. For example, the Medico-Psychological Association (founded in 1865), the successor to the Association of Medical Officers, was open not only to doctors in psychiatric institutions but also to researchers in psychology, such as Charles Myers, who played an important role in the care of injured soldiers during the First World War. Von Hohenthal maintains that, although psychology in the late nineteenth century was an international project, there were as yet no shared conceptual tools nor any common understanding of the principles of psychology. Any international cooperation seemed to be driven purely by the appetite for a new science. Experimental psychology, which had been established in Germany and was increasingly gaining international recognition around 1900, played a particularly

Translated by Marielle Sutherland (GHIL).

important role in the exchange of ideas. The German psychologist Wilhelm Wundt in Leipzig had become the linchpin of this variant of psychology. He attracted students from the Anglo-American world and made sure the programme of scientific experimental psychology was also promoted in Great Britain and the USA.

This development coincided at the end of the nineteenth century with a push for new expertise within various disciplines—for example, medicine, pedagogy, and law. Based on this ‘scientification of the social’ (Lutz Raphael, cited on p. 37)—undertaken not least by state actors—von Hohenthal interprets the formation of an experimentally oriented psychology as the result of academic discourse and the expectations of policymakers and the public, that is, as a specific epistemological approach. She focuses on the following questions: what role did psychological experts play? What kind of expertise did they bring to the military administration? And which spheres of work were open to psychologists?

Von Hohenthal puts the First World War period, which was a catalyst for scientific psychology, at the centre of her analysis. As well as essays in specialist journals and the records of psychological societies such as the archive of the British Psychological Society, her sources include British and German medical reports and British reports by parliamentary and other committees, such as the ‘Report of the War Office Committee of Enquiry into “Shell-Shock”’. Furthermore, she examines patients’ files and psychologists’ personal archives, as well as the letters, diaries, and memoirs of patients, drawing on these egodocuments to incorporate their perspective too. Before the war, psychologists did not have any kind of practical function. Only with the outbreak of war did specific fields of activity emerge in either country: in psychiatry and the treatment of soldiers, in the war industry, and in assessments within recruitment processes, particularly for pilots. Charles Myers, for example, became a psychological adviser to the British Armed Forces, and this put him in a position to show that psychologists were indispensable. It was the British Army’s openness, or its low level of organization, that offered these windows of opportunity, particularly as the Army Medical Corps played a very limited role before the war. In the German Empire, by contrast, there was a high level of organization in the medical service, giving

psychologists, even in the field of military psychiatry, very limited scope for influence and much less room for manoeuvre. However, their involvement in the treatment of injured soldiers behind the front line enabled German psychologists, too, to play an active role.

In both countries, these new experts were integrated into modern warfare. Psychologists were able to apply their specific knowledge, which was based on the testing and measuring of cognitive and emotional capability. They evidently did not question whether or not they should be contributing to the war effort. In both Great Britain and the German Empire, they assimilated unhesitatingly into the military hierarchy, adopted its concepts of authority, and subordinated the welfare of individual patients to national goals.

The Battles of Verdun and the Somme, which from 1916 caused huge losses of soldiers and materiel, led to the conscription of more and more workers from industry, who were replaced by untrained and female staff. This reorganization of the war economy, and the efficiency problems people feared it would cause, convinced politicians and military administrators to test and implement new methods of assessing workers. Psychologists provided the knowledge and the corresponding methods for selecting suitable candidates, and these techniques remained in demand in both the military and the private sector in the Weimar Republic after the war, whereas the British Army returned to more traditional recruitment processes. Nonetheless, in Great Britain there was still a high level of interest from the private sector.

During the war, psychologists' concepts and views of the causes of 'shell shock' and the appropriate therapies for it also changed. At first, mental disorders were seen as having been caused by the war itself. It was felt that many soldiers and officers were overwhelmed by the enormous levels of death and destruction, the constant physical and psychological stress, and the fact they were not given long enough to recover. In the course of the war, however, and partly because of the increase in pension applications, this belief changed and the illness was attributed more and more to the individual soldier's constitution and disposition. This meant it was no longer the war that was seen as causing mental exhaustion and breakdown, but the weaknesses of the individual. In Germany, this shift in focus

to the individual led to the use of more aggressive treatments such as electroshock therapy in order to make patients fit for work and war again. German psychologists were primarily concerned here, von Hohenenthal claims, with getting men back into the war economy. Returning them to military duty was less important, whereas British psychologists were tasked with getting their patients 'fit for the front' (p. 496). The therapeutic approaches employed to this end by psychologists in Great Britain remained rather 'benevolent' (p. 491); they seemed to distance themselves from aggressive therapies. Whether British officers and rank-and-file soldiers were treated equally in this regard remains unclear.

For Great Britain, the picture of war psychology that emerges is to a large extent based on the reports and accounts of officers who were also writers, such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, who were briefly treated by the psychologist William Rivers at Craiglockhart War Hospital near Edinburgh. Rivers' methods, however, and even the diagnosis of 'shell shock', were highly controversial at the War Office in London, where the view was taken that such patients were merely deserters or malingerers who should not be rewarded – in the case of Craiglockhart – with 'luxuries, golf and tennis' (p. 313).¹ Nonetheless, in Great Britain psychologists like Rivers were able to try out new methods such as talking therapy within military psychiatry.

As well as having practical implications for psychology, the First World War spawned groundbreaking conceptual research in the field. Once the USA joined the war, British thinking was increasingly shaped by American knowledge and ideas. The previously dominant influence of German experimental psychology waned, British psychologists turned their sights west, and Anglo-American psychology began to prevail.

For many psychological experts in Great Britain, the end of the war also meant the end of their work. Posts within universities or the

¹ On Craiglockhart see e.g. Thomas Webb, "'Dottyville': Craiglockhart War Hospital and Shell-Shock Treatment in the First World War', *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 99/7 (2006), 342–46; or Peter J. Leese, 'A Social and Cultural History of Shellshock, with Particular Reference to the Experience of British Soldiers during and after the Great War' (PhD thesis, Open University, 1989).

military were neither continued nor developed. Only three hospitals carried on using and testing psychological and therapeutic knowledge and methods. In industry, psychologists were reliant on the initiatives of individuals who recognized the value of the new aptitude tests and selection processes and wanted to use them in companies.

In Germany, unlike Britain, psychology continued at the institutional level too. Psychological expertise played an important role in the now considerably reduced armed forces. The universities, too, established further professorships and departments in psychology. This post-war period also saw the founding of a psychotherapy society, which distanced itself from the aggressive therapies that had been used experimentally during the war.

Von Hohenthal also traces less obvious continuities that go beyond the period under study through to the Second World War. Ability assessments and aptitude tests applicable on a mass scale formed a subset of psychological knowledge that was continuously employed in Germany in the Weimar Republic and under National Socialism. In Great Britain, by contrast, psychological expertise only made a comeback when the Second World War broke out and it was once again needed in industrial psychology and military aptitude tests. Likewise, psychologists were called upon to share what they had learned about the symptoms of exhaustion and breakdown in military psychiatry during the First World War so that they could help prepare young doctors for the tasks that lay ahead in the coming conflict.

Andrea von Hohenthal successfully demonstrates how the First World War acted as a catalyst in the field of psychology. Psychologists from both countries came together proactively to play an important role in the war effort. Through their broad range of methods – including statistics and questionnaires – they proved their worth in modern warfare as particularly valuable ‘modern experts’ (p. 495), for example in selection processes for pilots. There was therefore a demand for them in military psychiatry, the war industry, and the armed forces. In both countries, the military needed them to explore, assess, and manipulate the human psyche.

The author also identifies the subtle differences between psychologists and their therapeutic approaches in Great Britain and Germany during and after the war, without losing sight of international

connections. Furthermore, she illustrates the catalysing role of the First World War in terms of the importance attached to psychologists in both countries, which waned, but did not disappear altogether. The psychologists' expertise could be reactivated at any time.

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