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Roger Chickering. *The Great War and Urban Life in Germany: Freiburg, 1914-1918.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. xiv + 628 pp. $110.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-85256-2.

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A City Fights The War

Unlike cities in the Second World War, most major urban areas in Europe remained untouched by violence from 1914 to 1918. Nonetheless, the massive scope of the conflict meant that the war made itself felt in them in various other ways. Material shortages were a grim fact of everyday life; city governments struggled to deal with unprecedented economic and social pressures; and non-combatant urban dwellers, whose morale was crucial to the successful prosecution of a long conflict, had to come to emotional and psychological terms with a war that consumed their loved ones with an appetite as insatiable as it was unpredictable. The growing realization among scholars of the Great War that these experiences are as deserving of their attention as what happened on the battlefields has begun to generate top-quality work on urban life during the period.[1] To the ranks of the very best of these studies can now be added Roger Chickering's *The Great War and Urban Life in Germany*, a careful study of extraordinary scope and depth by one of modern German history's foremost practicing scholars.

Two fundamental principles guided Chickering in the creation of this book. The first was that the First World War was a "total war." "Total war" is a contentious term among historians, but Chickering argues that it is useful for denoting the fact that the war's scope eroded the distinction between soldier and civilian, leaving no one in the belligerent countries untouched in some way. The second was that in order for the scope of "total war" to be fully illuminated, it requires total history, ideally a history that brings together "all dimensions of a society's history at a given moment" (p. 2). To impose limits on this potentially limitless task, Chickering chose to focus on one city's experience of total war. Thus, Freiburg, a beautiful Black Forest city of modest size near Alsace and the Swiss border, chosen in part because its population (eighty-five thousand in 1914), was small enough to generate a manageable amount of data but large enough to include a diversity of cultural, confessional, and social perspectives on the war. The intervention of the state in the economic life of the city was so extensive that Chickering suggests it resembled socialism; and, like socialism, it was doomed to fail, not because of the inadequacy of the effort, but (and here he quotes the economist János Kornai) "'because the task is hopeless"' (p. 228).

The civil and military authorities also struggled to come to grips with another phenomenon of twentieth-century warfare that, like ration cards, arrived in Freiburg during the First World War. Many readers will probably be surprised to learn that Freiburg was the victim of numerous French air raids, which began in 1914. In all, twenty-five raids killed thirty-one people. One attack, in April 1915, killed seven children; the worst one, in April 1917, killed twelve people and destroyed the university's Anatomical Clinic. All told, property damage in Freiburg amounted to some three million marks. Chickering notes that the scale of these attacks does not compare with what was to follow in the next war. Yet the power of airborne ordinance increased throughout the war, while the restraints on their use against civilians decreased, making the outlines of a more violent future distinctly clear. These outlines are equally clear in the reaction of the authorities to the raids. Faced with an outraged (and sometimes dangerously curious) public, they tried a variety of things to deal with this wholly new problem, all of them familiar to those who know what is coming–air defense artillery, blackouts, and public shelters. The exasperated city even tried locating a British prisoner of war (POW) camp in the center of town. It did not work. "Unfortunately, the camp is worthless," one person observed after an attack that killed a woman across the street from it, "the enemy pays no attention to it" (p. 109).

No total account of total war would be complete without an exploration of its cultural effects, so Chickering

weaves cultural analysis into the material and institutional account that is the book's core. His range here is vast, and he is attuned to the often subtle ways that the war influenced culture in the city. Chickering notes, for example, that the general atmosphere of seriousness and austerity induced by the war made the citizens of Freiburg deeply uncertain about the place of levity and humor in public. To be sure, people told jokes–about the war and its effects on them. ("Why did God give another son to Abraham in his old age?" a student is asked by his teacher. "So he'll get an extra bread ration" the student answers [p. 390].) Chickering's primary cultural concern, however, is the way in which Freiburg's civilians interpreted and made sense of the vast conflict that raged within hearing distance of their city and the sacrifices it demanded of them. He argues that this search for meaning was largely conducted within and shaped by the institutions and values of the three "milieus" within which he groups the city's residents: the Catholic, the Socialist, and the slightly more amorphous liberal-nationalist. The different interpretations of the war generated within these milieus, from the emphasis on suffering and spiritual renewal of the Catholics, to the sacrifice in the name of future equality of the Socialists, and to the liberals' dreams of national regeneration and triumph, were further inflected by individual characteristics, such as (crucially) social class, gender, and age. As the war dragged on, the fissures that separated these milieus and their views of the war became ever clearer, social relations in the city ever more strained. And yet, Chickering shows, the three were also united by a consensus built on the sense that Germany was fighting a defensive war. According to this consensus, one had to see things through: *durchalten*, "hold out," was the leitmotif of Freiburg's civic culture during the war.

Chickering sees the imposition of meaning on the war as an act of human will exerted on a nearly overwhelming force, thereby rendering its power not quite absolute. And yet, as he himself shows, the effects of the war were so pervasive that no one–rich or poor, young or old–could possibly have ignored them. Its effects were truly *everywhere*. This is driven home by the incredible amount of detail in this book. Chickering notes, for example, that the tonal quality of church choirs changed as male singers were drafted into service; that a shortage of soap made Freiburg's public places malodorously unpleasant; and that civilian speech began to absorb the terms and images of the battlefield, with, for example, the *Freiburger Zeitung* calling in 1917 for "a campaign of extermination" (*Vernichtungsfeldzug*) against a plague of insects (p. 413). One of this book's great triumphs, however, is that Chickering never lets the human face of wartime Freiburg get lost among these details. One way that he does this is to include many names of ordinary Freiburgers that otherwise would have been lost to history. We are told, for example, of such people as Isidor Weil (son of a paper wholesaler, Emanuel Weil), a member of Freiburg's small Jewish community who was killed in combat; Maria Thoma, a peasant woman killed by a German antiaircraft shell while out gathering wood; and Fridolin Stick, a day-laborer whose wife and four children had to subsist on a monthly public allowance of seventy-two marks, most of which was spent on potatoes, milk, and bread. Including names like these is a wonderful way of reminding the reader that the story of Freiburg at war is actually a collection of many thousands of individual stories of hardship, loss, and struggle.

Chickering's account is based heavily on official documents and newspapers, though a wealth of other material is included: memoirs, letters, diaries, cookbooks, and even a handful of interviews. In what may perhaps become a model of how to write the urban history of the Great War, Chickering does not embed Freiburg within the larger story of the fight between Germany and the Entente, a story in which the city plays an important, but supporting role; rather, the overarching story is the struggle between Freiburg and the war itself, which becomes here a kind of malignant force (almost like a horrific, four-year-long natural disaster) with which the city grapples. As a way of thinking about and investigating the effects of the war on Freiburg, it works brilliantly. All there is to quibble with in this book is the title. Chickering himself notes that Freiburg had many qualities (such as its proximity to the fighting) that made it unusual. Thus the book is not really about "urban life in Germany" (and Chickering does not claim that it is). Whether generalizations about "urban life in Germany" during the war can even be made is a question for specialists to take up. When they do, they will want to have this book at hand. Chickering's goal, he tells us, was to produce an account that was "comprehensive, coherent, plausible, and … easy to read" (p. 9). It is well met.

Note

[1]. This trend is epitomized by Cambridge's two-volume collaborative project, Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert, eds., *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin, 1914-1919*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); and vol. 2, *A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

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