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0521771374 - The Spirit of 1914: Militarism, Myth, and Mobilization in Germany

Jeffrey Verhey

Excerpt

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Introduction: The myth of the “spirit of 1914”

In August 1914 Germany went to war. The war was not unexpected. It had been brewing for quite a while. Yet when it came it came suddenly and, like a whirlwind, transformed German public opinion. In the afternoon of 28 June newspaper vendors sold “extras” telling of the murder of the Austro-Hungarian Crown Prince. For a few days there was excitement in the streets, and small crowds formed around the newspaper stands. Yet this fever quickly subsided. After the first week of July there was almost no mention in the press of Austrian–Serbian foreign relations, or of foreign relations at all. Instead, newspapers contained the sorts of diversions that made for pleasant reading alongside a glass of beer in the good summer weather: the trial of Rosa Luxemburg for anti-militaristic remarks, the scandals in France, and yet another call from the right for patriotic Germans to join together to fight the peril of Social Democracy.

On 23 July this changed. Newspapers reported that Austria had issued Serbia an ultimatum, due to expire on Saturday, 25 July at 6.00 p.m. Readers need not be reminded that as Germany was allied with Austria this could lead to German involvement in a European conflagration. In the late afternoon on 25 July vast crowds of curious and excited people gathered in the larger German cities at the sites where they expected the news of the Serbian response first to be distributed: at the city squares downtown, in front of the newspaper office buildings, in the downtown cafés. After learning that Serbia had rejected the ultimatum, in Berlin and a few other large cities “parades” of enthusiastic youths marched through the streets, singing patriotic songs.

The next week Germans wondered if they would be going to war. Crowds of curious people gathered where the extras would first be distributed, in public squares or in front of the newspaper buildings. As the week continued the curious crowds grew in size. People waited for hours, wondering about their fate. The tension was palpable. Finally, on 31 July the news came: the proclamation of the state of siege. The next day even more nervous, curious people gathered in public squares and in front of

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the newspaper buildings, waiting for the extras which, in the afternoon, informed them of the mobilization. Germany was at war.

In many places the extras stating that Germany was at war were greeted with a chorus of patriotic outbursts, people yelling hurrah and singing patriotic songs, which many contemporaries and most historians have characterized as “war enthusiasm.” On 1 August 1914 tens of thousands in front of the Berlin castle broke out in what seemed to many contemporaries to be a “religious” ecstasy when the Kaiser spoke to his people, proclaiming from a castle window that he no longer recognized any parties, he knew only Germans.

The first month of the war resembled a month-long patriotic festival. In the first three weeks of August Germans said good-bye to their troops, smothering them with flowers and so much chocolate that the Red Cross asked the population to be less generous; the soldiers were getting sick.¹ At the end of August Germans celebrated the news of the first successful battles with exuberance, as if the war had been won. The national flag flew everywhere, even in the courtyards of Berlin’s working-class apartment houses, where it had never been seen before.

When published in newspapers or shown in movie-house newsreels, the photographs of the August enthusiasm had an immediate “historic” aura. In the next few days and weeks journalists, politicians, and government officials contributed to this aura by employing a religious vocabulary to describe what was already known as the “August experiences.” The “war enthusiasm” was a “holy” moment,² a “holy flame of anger,”³ “heroic,”⁴ a “revelation,”⁵ it had brought forth a “rebirth through war,”⁶ had brought Germans “out of the misery of everyday life to new heights.”⁷ “What Germany has experienced in these days was a miracle, a renewal of oneself; it was a shaking off of everything small and foreign; it was a most powerful recognition of one’s own nature,” wrote a *Tägliche Rundschau* journalist.⁸ “Whatever the future may have in store for us,” Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg stated at the close of the 4 August session

¹ See the letter from Prof. Dr. Messerer, 4 September 1914, Staatsarchiv München, Polizeidirektion, no. 4556.

² Gottfried Traub, “Heilige Gegenwart,” *Illustrierte Zeitung* (Leipzig), no. 3713, 27 August 1914, p. 344.

³ “Eine erhebende Kundgebung des geistigen Berlins,” *Berliner Morgenpost*, 4 August 1914, no. 211, p. 3.

⁴ “Der Siegessonntag,” *Tägliche Rundschau*, 24 August 1914, no. 398 (Sonder-Ausgabe), p. 4.

⁵ “In der Reichshauptstadt,” *Norddeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, 6 August 1914, no. 182, p. 1.

⁶ Oscar Schmitz, “Die Wiedergeburt durch den Krieg,” *Der Tag*, 9 August 1914, no. 185.

⁷ Quoted in Wilhelm Pressel, *Die Kriegspredigt 1914–1918 in der evangelischen Kirche Deutschlands* (Göttingen, 1967), p. 14.

⁸ H. R., “Mobilisierung in Deutschland und in Frankreich,” *Tägliche Rundschau*, 2 August 1914, no. 358 (Morgen), p. 1.

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of parliament, “the fourth of August 1914 will, for all time, remain one of Germany’s greatest days.”⁹ “One will speak and talk of this first week of August as long as the German people exist and the German language sounds. Whoever was able to experience it, he will be accompanied by its pictures and its emotions as long as he lives,” wrote a *Tägliche Rundschau* journalist on 9 August.

As time passed the “spirit of 1914” would be invoked as an experience and a goal, as a holy memory and a utopian future. The “spirit of 1914,” wrote the Berlin historian Friedrich Meinecke in late 1914, must be the “victory prize.”¹⁰ Future generations, wrote the journalist Ferdinand Avenarius in October 1914, would judge their present by how much of the “spirit of 1914” remained.¹¹ On 1 August 1915 the theologian Gottfried Traub claimed that “the August days . . . will remain a source of future strength, destroying all doubters.”¹² The young author Walter Flex professed in 1916:

It is my belief that the German spirit in August 1914 and after achieved heights such as no people before or after has seen. Happy is he who has stood at this peak and did not have to climb down. The following generations of Germans and other nations will look at this, God’s water mark, as the edge of the border from which they walk forward.¹³

After the war the memory of 1914 would be invoked as an ideal and a goal. Gustav Stresemann claimed at the 1921 conference of the Liberal German People’s Party that “never did a people stand purer before God and history than the German people in 1914.” If we have “not been able to find our way back to the unity of 1914,” continued Stresemann, “it must remain our goal.”¹⁴ The *Münchener Neueste Nachrichten* wrote on the ten-year anniversary of the beginning of the war, one year after the Ruhr crisis, that we must look back to the “spirit of 1914” to “awaken the belief in the future of our own people.”¹⁵ Gertrud Bäumer, one of Germany’s leading female politicians and journalists, wrote in her memoirs, pub-

⁹ Bethmann Hollweg’s speech is reprinted in Ralph Lutz (ed.), *Fall of the German Empire 1914–1918. Documents of the German Revolution*, vol. I (Stanford, 1932), p. 16.

¹⁰ Friedrich Meinecke, “Um welche Güter kämpfen wir (19 August 1914),” pp. 50–51; and “Staatsgedanke und Nationalismus (October 1914),” p. 76, both in Friedrich Meinecke, *Die deutsche Erhebung von 1914. Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Stuttgart and Berlin, 1914). Similarly, the Berlin law professor, Wilhem Kahl, in “Dr. Kahls Rede in schwerer Zeit,” *Deutsche Tageszeitung*, 10 October 1914, BAL, RLB Pressearchiv, no. 7565, p. 8.

¹¹ Ferdinand Avenarius, “Die neue Zeit,” *Der Kunstwart* 28, no. 1 (October, 1914), p. 4.

¹² Gottfried Traub, “Deutschlands Schwerttag,” *Eiserne Blätter*, 1 August 1915, BA, Abt. Koblenz, NL Traub, no. 7, no p.

¹³ Walter Flex, quoted in Benno Schneider and Ulrich Haacke (eds.), *Das Buch vom Kriege, 1914–1918. Urkunden, Berichte, Briefe, Erinnerungen* (Ebenhausen, 1933) p. 37.

¹⁴ Quoted in *Nationalliberale Correspondenz*, 1 December 1921, BAL, 62 DAF 3, no. 697, p. 176.

¹⁵ “Den Kriegsopfern,” *Münchener Neueste Nachrichten*, 3 August 1924, no. 209, p. 5.

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lished in 1933, that “come what may . . . the memory of that Sunday [1 August] will remain and will continue to be a value in itself.”¹⁶ In 1933 the National Socialists claimed that the origins of the present “revolution” lay in the “spirit of 1914.” They described their accession to power as a recreation of the days of 1914. On 21 March 1933, the “Day at Potsdam” when Hitler and Hindenburg shook hands, the minister at the official church service, Dr. Dibelius, interpreted this symbolic handshake as the renewal of the “spirit of 1914,” thus demonstrating that others saw it that way, too.¹⁷

What engendered such rhetoric? Certainly the August “experiences” were powerful. In August 1914 one had to be peculiarly dull not to feel the emotions C. E. Montague has so poignantly described (in a different context):

the evening before a great battle must always make fires leap up in the mind . . . For there the wits and the heart may be really astir and at gaze, and the common man may have, for the hour, the artist’s vision of life as an adventure and challenge, lovely, harsh, fleeting, and strange. The great throw, the new age’s impending nativity, Fate with her fingers approaching the veil, about to lift – a sense of these things is a drug as strong as strychnine to quicken the failing pulse of the most heart-weary of moribund raptures.¹⁸

Yet some contemporaries not only asserted that these experiences were exciting, they interpreted them as a liminal moment, what Paul Tillich (in a different context) has termed a *Kairos*: “an outstanding moment in the temporal process, a moment in which the eternal breaks into the temporal – shaking and transforming it, creating a crisis in the depth of human existence.”¹⁹ In this “internal transformation,”²⁰ this purification of the soul, this “rebirth through war,”²¹ when individual and collective identities were transformed, Germans felt the ecstasy that accompanies the belief that eternal truths and reality have become one. In the words of Rudolf Eucken, a philosophy professor and a Nobel laureate in literature:

an exultation took place, a transformation of an ethical nature. We felt ourselves placed completely in the service of a higher task, a task which we ourselves had

¹⁶ Gertrud Bäumer, *Lebensweg durch eine Zeitwende* (Tübingen, 1933), pp. 264–265.

¹⁷ Thus, as on 4 August 1914, the text for the sermon was Romans 8, verse 31: “If God is for us, who can be against us.”

¹⁸ C. E. Montague, *Disenchantment* (Westport, 1978, first published 1922), p. 122.

¹⁹ Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era* (Chicago, 1949), p. 45, and “Kairos. Ideen zur Geisteslage der Gegenwart,” in Paul Tillich (ed.), *Kairos. Zur Geisteslage und Geisteswendung* (Darmstadt, 1926), pp. 1–21.

²⁰ Karl Mayr, “Wilhelm II,” *Süddeutsche Monatshefte* 11 (September 1914), p. 790.

²¹ Oscar Schmitz, *Das wirkliche Deutschland. Die Wiedergeburt durch den Krieg* (Munich, 1915), pp. 4 ff.; Schmitz, “Die Wiedergeburt durch den Krieg,” *Der Tag*, 9 August 1914, no. 185.

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not sought, but which had been placed upon us by a higher power, and which had therefore the compelling power of an imperative duty . . . We experienced a powerful upswing in our souls: the life of the whole became directly the life of each individual, everything stale was swept away, new fountains of life opened themselves up. We felt ourselves taken above ourselves, and we were full of burning desire to turn this new consciousness into action.²²

The enthusiasm made Germans more religious, more courageous, more masculine, more authentic, brought the end of the “the superficiality of the soul and the mind, the drive for fun and pleasure.”²³

Above all, the “August experiences” were an experience of fraternity, of community, and a catalyst that would create what would later be termed the *Völksgemeinschaft*. In the words of the sociologist Emil Lederer, writing in 1915, “during the days of mobilization the society (*Gesellschaft*) which had existed transformed itself into a community (*Gemeinschaft*).”²⁴ It was here, in describing the nature of their experience of community, that contemporaries found their most colorful, their most inspired language. The conservative minister Eduard Schwartz professed:

The *Volk* has risen up as the only thing which has value and which will last. Over all individual fates stands that which we feel as the highest reality: the experience of belonging together.²⁵

The theologian Ernst Troeltsch asserted:

Under this incredible pressure German life melted in that indescribable wonderful unity of sacrifice, brotherhood, belief, and certainty of victory which was, and is, the meaning of the unforgettable August.²⁶

According to the liberal journalist Hellmut von Gerlach, “prejudices have fallen, false opinions have been corrected, people, divided before by enormous mountains, have come to see one another as comrades (*Völksgenossen*).”²⁷ The liberal journalist and feminist Gertrud Bäumer claimed that in August 1914 “the limitations of our egos broke down, our blood flowed to the blood of the other, we felt ourselves one body in a mystical unification.”²⁸

²² Rudolf Eucken, “Der Sturm bricht los!,” *Deutsche Kriegswochenschau*, 29 July 1917, no. 34, p. 1.

²³ Otto von Pfister, *Neues deutsches Leben und Streben*, second edition (Berlin, 1915), p. 5.

²⁴ Emil Lederer, “Zur Soziologie des Weltkrieges,” in *Kapitalismus, Klassenstruktur und Probleme der Demokratie in Deutschland 1910–1940* (Göttingen, 1979), pp. 120–121. The essay is from 1915.

²⁵ Eduard Schwartz, *Der Krieg als nationales Erlebnis. Rede gehalten im Saal der Aubette zu Straßburg am 24. Oktober 1914* (Strasbourg, 1914), pp. 2–3.

²⁶ Ernst Troeltsch, *Der Kulturkrieg* (Berlin, 1915), pp. 25–26.

²⁷ Hellmut von Gerlach, “Das Jahr des Umsturzes,” *Die Welt am Montag* 20, no. 52 (28 December 1914), pp. 1–2.

²⁸ Gertrud Bäumer, “Frauenleben und Frauenarbeit,” in Max Schwarte (ed.), *Der Weltkrieg in seiner Einwirkung auf das deutsche Volk* (Leipzig, 1918), p. 314.

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Did this account of the “August experiences” accurately describe the emotions and feelings of the German people in 1914? Curiously, only recently have historians turned their attention to this question. Although there is an enormous literature on the outbreak of the First World War, on “war guilt,” on the actions, intentions, and motivations of government officials, until recently most historians simply accepted contemporaries’ accounts of German public opinion in 1914 as “enthusiastic” without systematically analyzing or investigating it.²⁹ George Mosse has typically written that the outbreak of war was met with “indescribable enthusiasm.” Modris Eksteins saw the August experiences as a German “*Frühlingsfeier*, her rite of spring.” Eric J. Leed claimed that “August 1914 was the last great national incarnation of the ‘people’ as a unified moral entity.”³⁰

Historians engaged in local histories on First World War Germany have suggested, however, that the mood of the population in July and August 1914 cannot be adequately explained by the adjective “enthusiastic.” Klaus Schwarz noted in his 1971 history of Nuremberg in the First World War that “the population of Nuremberg reacted to the increasing possibility of war in a much more nuanced manner than is expressed by the cliché of broad war enthusiasm.”³¹ Volker Ullrich came to similar conclusions in his 1976 study of Hamburg,³² Friedhelm Boll in his 1981 study of Braunschweig and Hanover,³³ Michael Stöcker in his 1994 study of Darmstadt,³⁴ Wolfgang Kruse in his 1994 study of the German working class and the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD) in 1914,³⁵ Benjamin Ziemann in his 1997 study of the wartime experience in rural

²⁹ See Wolfgang Jäger, *Historische Forschung und politische Kultur in Deutschland. Die Debatte 1914–1980 über den Ausbruch des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Göttingen, 1984). Nor was this tendency limited to academic literature. In two popular books on the outbreak of the First World War there was also little discussion of the “spirit of 1914”: Eugen Fischer, *Die kritischen 39 Tage. Von Sarajewo bis zum Weltbrand* (Berlin, 1928); and Emil Ludwig, *Juli 14. Vorabend zweier Weltkriege* (Hamburg, 1961 [first published in 1929]).

³⁰ George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York, 1990), p. 70; Modris Eksteins, *The Rites of Spring. The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Era* (Boston, 1989), p. 94; Eric J. Leed, *No Man’s Land. Combat and Identity in First World War* (Cambridge, 1979), p. 30. The most recent example in this vein is Peter Fritzsche, *Germans into Nazis* (Cambridge, 1998).

³¹ Klaus Dietrich Schwarz in his *Weltkrieg und Revolution in Nürnberg. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung* (Stuttgart, 1971), p. 106.

³² Volker Ullrich, *Die Hamburger Arbeiterbewegung vom Vorabend des Ersten Weltkrieges bis zur Revolution 1918/1919* (Hamburg, 1976), p. 11; and *Kriegsalltag. Hamburg im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Cologne, 1982).

³³ Friedhelm Boll, *Massenbewegungen in Niedersachsen 1906–1920. Eine sozialgeschichtliche Untersuchung zu den unterschiedlichen Entwicklungstypen Braunschweig und Hannover* (Bonn, 1981), p. 151.

³⁴ Michael Stöcker, *Augusterlebnis 1914 in Darmstadt. Legende und Wirklichkeit* (Darmstadt, 1994).

³⁵ Wolfgang Kruse, *Krieg und nationale Integration: eine Neuinterpretation des sozialdemokratischen Burgfriedensschlusses 1914/1915* (Essen, 1993).

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Bavaria,³⁶ and Christian Geinitz in his 1998 study of Freiburg.³⁷ Although these works have gone a long way toward reforming the traditional view of the history of the August experiences, we still lack a study of German public opinion in July and August 1914 as a whole.³⁸ What were the German people feeling and thinking in those warm days in July and August 1914? How broad was the “war enthusiasm?” What were the geographical, occupational, and temporal variations in the way Germans greeted the outbreak of the war? What emotions are described by “war enthusiasm?” And what were the other emotions people felt in these exciting and confusing days? The first part of this book (chapters 1–3) attempts to answer these questions.

The second part (chapters 4–8) concentrates on the creation, genealogy, and reception of a narrative of the meaning of the August experiences, a narrative that contemporaries termed the “spirit of 1914.” This narrative was one of the most important narratives of the war. On 31 July 1916 Theodor Wolff, the editor of the *Berliner Tageblatt*, wrote:

Two years ago today the state of siege was declared . . . We know how false it is when *Temps* and similar newspapers reassure their readers that the German people greeted the outbreak of war with joy. Our people had heavy hearts; the possibility of war was a frightening giant nightmare which caused us many sleepless nights. The determination with which we went to war sprang not from joy, but from duty. Only a few talked of a “fresh, wonderful war.” Only a very few, too, in comparison to the great masses, found flags immediately after the Austrian ultimatum and marched in front of the windows of the allied embassies, including the Italian, and in front of the Chancellor’s office, screaming themselves hoarse.³⁹

³⁶ Benjamin Ziemann, *Front und Heimat. Ländliche Kriegserfahrungen im südlichen Bayern 1914–1923* (Essen, 1997), pp. 39–54. Other local studies, such as Karl-Dietrich Ay, *Die Entstehung einer Revolution. Die Volksstimmung in Bayern während des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Berlin, 1968), Eberhard Lucas, *Die Sozialdemokratie in Bremen während des ersten Weltkrieges* (Bremen, 1969), Gunter Bers (ed.), *Die Kölner Sozialdemokratie und der Kriegsausbruch* (Hamburg, 1974), and Detlef Jozszak, *Die Entwicklung der sozialistischen Arbeiterbewegung in Düsseldorf* (Hamburg, 1980), do not investigate war enthusiasm in 1914. For a brief account of the mood among the working classes in the Ruhr, see Jürgen Reulecke, “Der Erste Weltkrieg und die Arbeiterbewegung im rheinisch-westfälischen Industriegebiet,” in *Arbeiterbewegung an Rhein und Ruhr. Beiträge zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung in Rheinland-Westfalen* (Wuppertal, 1974), pp. 205–239, especially pp. 210 ff.

³⁷ Christian Geinitz, *Kriegsfurcht und Kampfbereitschaft. Das Augusterlebnis in Freiburg. Eine Studie zum Kriegsbeginn 1914* (Essen, 1998). This work appeared after I had completed this book.

³⁸ Thomas Reithel’s *Das “Wunder” der inneren Einheit. Studien zur deutschen und französischen Öffentlichkeit bei Beginn des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Bonn, 1996) by concentrating almost exclusively on newspapers, is unable to go beyond impressionistic accounts of the German public realm at the beginning of the war.

³⁹ T. W., untitled, *Berliner Tageblatt*, 31 July 1916, no. 387, p. 1, reprinted in Theodor Wolff, *Vollendete Tatsachen 1914–1917* (Berlin, 1918), p. 119.

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Upon reading this, the Berlin censor, the Oberkommando in den Marken, General von Kessel, forbade indefinitely the newspaper's further publication. Kessel was upset, he wrote to Wolff, because "the many thousands who two years ago gave joyful expression to their patriotic feelings are described as an insignificant lump of hoarse screamers."⁴⁰ Although the *Berliner Tageblatt*, one of Germany's most respected newspapers, had many difficulties with censors during the war, this was its most serious crisis. Only Wolff's promise that he would not write any more articles during the war convinced Kessel to allow the *Berliner Tageblatt* to resume publication. (The prohibition against Wolff was lifted in November 1916.)

Why was a certain memory of the August experiences so important to Kessel? Certainly Kessel was not angry because he believed Wolff's version to be historically inaccurate. Rather, aware (whether consciously or unconsciously) that modern political power cannot be sustained through physical coercion but only through consensus, Kessel and compatriots aimed to turn a certain narrative of the history of the "spirit of 1914" into a social myth, that is, an important, unquestioned historical narrative. Kessel hoped to inscribe in the myth of the "spirit of 1914" the conservative norms and values, and to make this narrative the representation of the "common sense" of the German political culture, "the values, expectations, and implicit rules that expressed and shaped collective intentions and actions."⁴¹ The conservative history of the "spirit of 1914" claimed that all Germans had felt that peculiar emotion known to contemporaries as "war enthusiasm," that in this moment of enthusiasm they had become not only aware of their common national identity – the ideas a community shares as beliefs – but that the best description of that identity, of what was German, was found in the conservative ideology. This conservative history of the "spirit of 1914" was thus a narrative of a past

⁴⁰ Kessel's 1 August 1916 letter, as well as the correspondence which followed, is in BAL, Reichsamt des Innern, no. 12276, pp. 247 ff., and in BAL, Reichskanzlei, no. 1392, p. 24. Theodor Wolff's reflections on the affair can be found in his diary, *Tagebücher 1914–1918*, vol. II (Boppard am Rhein, 1984), pp. 406 ff.

⁴¹ This is Lynn Hunt's definition of "political culture" in her *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley, 1984), p. 10. I have discussed aspects of my understanding of the mythical nature of the narrative of the "spirit of 1914" in "Der Mythos des 'Geistes von 1914' in der Weimarer Republik," in Wolfgang Bialas and Bernhard Stenzel (eds.), *Die Weimarer Republik zwischen Metropole und Provinz. Intellektuellendiskurse zur politischen Kultur* (Weimar, 1996), pp. 85–96. My understanding of political myth owes much to William McNeil, "The Care and Repair of Public Myth," in *Mythistory and other Essays* (Chicago, 1986), pp. 23 ff.; Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York, 1922); Leszek Kolakowski, *The Presence of Myth* (Chicago, 1989); Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven, 1946); and Manfred Frank, *Der kommende Gott. Vorlesungen über die Neue Mythologie* (Frankfurt/Main, 1982). My understanding of collective, or social memory has benefited especially from James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory* (Oxford, 1992).

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event, but with a purpose distinctly in the present. Indeed, given the myth-makers’ intentions, it is not surprising that their myth of the “spirit of 1914,” an account of the history of German public opinion in July and August 1914, became increasingly more removed from its real history. As Northrop Frye has noted: “a myth, in nearly all its senses, is a narrative that suggests two inconsistent responses: first, ‘this is what is said to have happened,’ and second, ‘this almost certainly is not what happened, at least in precisely the way described.’”⁴²

Political myths are an essential part of modern political culture. They constitute that web of shared meaning by which the members of a complex society form and sustain their association. A political myth, as a representation of the nation, allows a complex social system to perceive itself as a unit, as an entity and to perceive this “unity” as something natural, self-evident. In other words, a political myth is both an explanation of social reality, and a constituent element of that reality, a stabilizing social influence.⁴³ That in the First World War conservative elites attempted to employ the narrative of the “spirit of 1914” as the most poignant representation of the German collective identity points not only to the power of this narrative, but also to a latent crisis of conservative legitimacy;⁴⁴ for this particular construction of collective memory represented a break with the collective memories that had governed Germany in the past.

Before 1914 German political culture was not national, but divided into partial political cultures. In spite of the efforts of government elites in socializing institutions such as the schools and the military, there were no unquestioned national “myths,” rather, Social Democrats worked hard to expose the conservative narratives as ideology, as the expression of class interests. The ideological differences in Wilhelmine Germany were profound: if what contemporaries termed the bourgeois ideology was, in its own words, “*staatserhaltend*,” that is, upholding the state, the working-class ideology was “revolutionary.” The right tried to unite the bourgeois parties against the red menace to culture and decency (*Sammlungspolitik*). The left accused the right of immorality – Socialist newspapers published all the tawdry scandals of Wilhelmine society, exposing the moral injustices of a class society.⁴⁵ The ideological and class divisions were even reflected in the existence of at least two of almost

⁴² Northrop Frye, “The Koine of Myth: Myth as a Universally Intelligible Language,” in *Myth and Metaphor. Selected Essays 1974–1988* (Charlottesville, 1990), p. 4.

⁴³ Murray Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (Urbane, 1967), p. 159.

⁴⁴ Andreas Dörner, *Politischer Mythos und symbolische Politik* (Opladen, 1995).

⁴⁵ Vernon L. Lidtke, *The Alternative Culture. Socialist Labor in Imperial Germany* (New York, 1985). On the concept of partial political cultures, see Detlef Lehnert and Klaus Megerle (eds.), *Politische Identität und Nationale Gedenktage. Zur politischen Kultur in der Weimarer Republik* (Opladen, 1989).

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every form of sociability: a Social Democratic and a *bürgerlich* singing society, gymnastic, swimming, or bicycling club, a Social Democratic and a *bürgerlich* newspaper, theater, or library.

In 1916, by contesting the “history” of the conservative narrative of the “spirit of 1914,” Theodor Wolff attempted to expose the conservative narrative as ideology, much as Social Democratic authors had done before 1914. Yet in the First World War Wolff was a lonely actor. Almost all other participants in political discourse in the First World War subscribed to the narrative that in the 1914 experiences German society became a German community. Like Kessel, almost all participants in political discourse in Germany during the First World War hoped to accumulate political capital by identifying their ideology with the “spirit of 1914.” In this political discourse the “spirit of 1914” was employed as a metaphor for one’s own political ideology. These efforts at identification were most bluntly stated in a 1919 campaign poster: “Vote DNVP [German National People’s Party, that is, the Conservative Party], we are the spirit of 1914.” Yet radical nationalists, a political movement with its institutional basis in the Pan-German League, likewise claimed that in the “spirit of 1914” all Germans had become Pan-Germans. Social Democrats and democratic liberals asserted that the willingness of all citizens in 1914 to assist in the defence of the nation proved that the nation was composed of competent, mature citizens. A reform of the Bismarckian constitution would provide a healthier, a stronger state, would uphold the “spirit of 1914.”

If the discourse on the “spirit of 1914” had been limited to debates over the nature of political ideology the symbol would not have attained the power it did, would not have been so widely accepted. Yet the war was a collective experience; the German people needed to know what they were fighting for, what they were dying for. There were many appeals during the war to sustain German unity; very often these appeals were couched as a call to sustain the “spirit of 1914.” The unity of 1914 would be conserved by subscribing to a shared memory of these experiences, that is, it was both a story that described the group to itself and the means by which that group, by holding the story sacred, sustained its community.

The narrative of the “spirit of 1914” attained its widespread acceptance, however, not only because it spoke to a need to understand the origins and nature of the German collectivity, a need for representation, but also by becoming a part of the strategy for winning the war. There were two different forms of the myth of the “spirit of 1914” during the war, reflecting two different functions. There was a social myth, a collective narrative of a past event, a representation of the nation. Alongside it was what I term a transcendent myth, a claim that through faith one could