H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Stefan Goebel. *The Great War And Medieval Memory: War, Remembrance and Medievalism in Britain and Germany, 1914-1940.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. 357 pp. $90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-85415-3.

Reviewed by Antoine Capet (Université de Rouen)

Published on H-Albion (July, 2007)

Some Are More Medievalist than Others

It is clear from his stated objectives as indicated in the introduction that the author set himself a very ambitious task, from at least two points of view. First, because the general theme of the book is not one with which most readers are *prima facie* familiar: "The 'medievalising' of the memory of the Great War is the subject-matter of this study. It argues that the Middle Ages figured centrally in the remembrance of the First World War in both Britain and Germany between 1914 and 1940" (p. 1). Second, because, as Stefan Goebel himself admits, the book "ventures into a significantly underdeveloped field of historical enquiry: empirical comparative history" (p. 6). Mastering the subject and the enormous historiography of First World War memory in Britain or Germany was already a considerable difficulty, which he chose to compound by covering both countries, fully aware of the pitfalls, since he writes that "the comparative historian of the First World War seems to tread a tightrope between emphasizing European convergences, national peculiarities, or sectional diversities within nations" (p. 10).

Goebel's approach is clearly influenced by Pierre Nora's *Lieux de memoire* (1984-1992). Those who are familiar with the work or its translations will remember that the "sites of memory" in question go much further than mere places and buildings, to include all elements of culture. Here, of course, lies the first major difficulty as the signifiers "culture" in English and "Kultur" in German do not have the same signified notions, with "Kultur" including references to Germanity which "culture" does not have in English for Britishness. Since, not unexpectedly, he founds his reasoning on the chivalrous ideals of the Middle Ages, Goebel draws a constant implicit comparison between the exploitation of the Knights of the Round Table in Britain and the Teutonic Knights in Germany. But as the very expression "the Arthurian legend" immediately suggests, the Knights of the Round Table are not "history"–at best they are "cultural history"–admittedly a British *lieu de memoire* in Pierre Nora's wide acceptation of the notion, but evidently not with the same grounding in the national historical awareness as the "real" Teutonic Knights.

This becomes even clearer when one follows Goebel's excellent thread on Tannenberg (in East Prussia–now Stebark, in Poland), from the Teutonic Knights' defeat

against the Lithuanians and Poles in 1410, to the first major German victory there (or nearby) in August 1914, to the monumental *National Memorial* inaugurated in 1927 and its destruction by the retreating German armies before the Soviets in January 1945 (with the hurried removal to the west of Hindenburg's coffin–which the American forces of occupation finally deposited in another church of the Teutonic Knights in Marburg in 1946). Reading Goebel's superbly comprehensive treatment of the Tannenberg *National Memorial* from the point of view of German "Kultur" instantly shows that there is no British parallel. Likewise the Nibelungen legend, and its German re-interpretation, notably with the exploitation of the theme of the Valhalla where fearless warriors find their eternal rest, has no comparable British equivalent.

It is not only a matter of the cult of Wagner's *Ring* by German inter-war Nationalists (as Goebel reminds us, he also had a wide following among educated Britons): the book shows the outstanding importance of the Rhine in German collective mentalities. The British equivalent would of course not be the Thames or the Mersey, but the English Channel, Shakespeare's famous "silver sea." But then the importance of the "moat" was impressed once again on British minds not in 1918-39, but in 1940–thus being of no use for Goebel's comparative undertaking. There is somehow a pendant in Britain (not England) to the pagan Nibelungen saga, namely the old Celt heritage, which led to the erection of Celtic crosses associated with war memorials–but the space devoted to the question, infinitely smaller than what Goebel appropriately gives to the Nibelungen, clearly shows that they are not on the same level.

The main point in common between Britain and Germany in the "medievalizing" of the First World War was their parallel reference to the war as a crusade. The Order of the Teutonic Knights had of course been founded at the siege of Acre (1191) during the Third Crusade (1189-92), but it had no comparable counterpart in Britain, apart from the remotely-connected benevolent volunteers of St. John's Ambulance. The connection with the Crusades is more or less convincingly established by Goebel by pointing out that St.George (the patron saint of England) was used a lot in the imagery associated with the First World War, and that the cult of St.George had been encouraged by Richard Lionheart, one of the European sovereigns who had led the Third Crusade. Still, the Germans also used images of St.George, and the book has a stunning photograph (figure 49) of a statue erected in Weingarten in 1923 with the saint wearing what looks like the German Army helmet (the modern *Stahlhelm*, not the "funny" spiked Prussian *Pickelhaube*), which non-German populations came to fear so much between 1914 and 1945. In his insistence on the Crusades, Goebel takes it for granted that the general population in both Britain and Germany understood the historical, medieval allusion–but, of course, in English the word (with a small "c") had become far more common in its metaphorical sense, and it doubtful whether, even unconsciously, the semi-literate public perceived the supposed continuity.

One feels that in Britain at least this medievalism was an elite affair. The fascinating *Times* editorial of November 11, 1920, relating Lord Kitchener to the battle of Agincourt through the French soil brought to fill his grave, was read by only a fraction of the population. In other words, one of the great difficulties for the reader who is not as well versed as Goebel in the cultural history of both countries is to ascertain how far the very interesting elements of medievalism, which his impressive sources have brought to light, really penetrated popular minds. Even the vague notion of the "chivalrous" dimension of war, we feel, was probably not perceived by the average Tommy who only remembered the mud and rats of the trenches and his unfortunate comrades killed by the invisible German long-range artillery. Also, as Goebel very clearly explains, "the German army disgusted the chivalric community by employing chlorine-filled shells in the second battle of Ypres" (p. 221). Moreover, the Nazi "medieval" celebrations, with their "historical" bric-a-brac immortalized in color by late 1930s German newsreels, certainly do not have the slightest equivalent in Britain. Why so many uneducated German ex-servicemen enthusiastically participated in the Nationalist (not only National-Socialist) torchlight processions and later in the Nuremberg rallies is a phenomenon which is also difficult to explain by the "medievalist" atmosphere of commemoration of the war. Although, Goebel has an excellent development on how the Nazis somehow managed to found their "leadership cult" on the reign of the Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa (1122-1190), concluding that "the deliverance of the war dead was linked to the coming of a national messiah, a new Barbarossa, who would invoke the feats of a heroic past" (p. 266). But again, where is the British equivalent?

In his conclusion, the author tries to justify his approach and vindicate his thesis that there is a parallel "medievalist" movement in inter-war Britain and Germany: parallel, perhaps, but certainly not equal. When he adduces the examples of Wagner and Walter Scott (p. 288) he seems not to realize that there was a literal world of difference between the two in, say, 1935, with noth-

ing in common between the martial cult of the hero of Germanity in Bayreuth (with all those bloodthirsty Nazi dignitaries in the front row) and the benevolent folklore of a romanticized, largely invented Scottish tradition in Edinburgh.

We have here the not uncommon case of a marvelously informative book, thoroughly researched, with fascinating insights, which will no doubt throw light on many aspects of the inter-war years in Britain and Germany that most readers did not know. Yet it is a book whose stated objectives are not met, at least if they consisted in convincing the reader that there was a similar "medievalist" tendency in both countries. That the tendency was there in both is not in dispute, but the impressive factual information which the author offers somehow leads this reviewer to the conclusion that 1920s and 1930s Germany was far more affected than Britain. Now, this might well be only a personal impression. H-Albion subscribers interested in the period (as well as those with an inclination for *longue duree* cultural history and the forging of national identities in Britain and Germany) are unreservedly encouraged to order *The Great War and Medieval Memory* for their libraries. The book also has a state-of-the-art bibliography of primary and secondary sources (in English and German) which will prove a most helpful starting point for post-graduate students undertaking research on these subjects.