

Matthias Bode, Traumsommer und Kriegsgewitter. Die politische Bedeutung des schönen Sommers 1914, Frankfurt a. M. (Peter Lang Edition) 2016, 343 S., 15 s/w Abb., 7 Tab. (Geschichtsdidaktik diskursiv – Public History und Historisches Denken, 2), ISBN 978-3-631-67702-5, EUR 69,95.

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How would our collective memory of the outbreak of the First World War have differed if Archduke Franz Ferdinand had not been assassinated in the summer of 1914, and if the international crisis that followed had not occurred during exceptionally warm and pleasant weather, but in a foggy February or a rainy October? The outcome of the crisis may have been similar, notwithstanding the fact that military decision makers did of course have to pay heed to the seasons. But contemporaries would have told the story of the outbreak of war without the familiar metaphor of a glorious summer which was cruelly overshadowed by storm clouds as international tensions heightened until they were finally »discharged« in an electric storm, i. e. war. In his interesting investigation of the meaning, importance and longevity of the »dream summer« metaphor, Matthias Bode makes a convincing case that it certainly »would have been a different story« (p. 42) if war had broken out at a different time of year.

Bode has painstakingly researched how and why contemporaries and later commentators used the image of the »glorious summer« of 1914. Using diaries, letters, autobiographies, novels and later accounts by historians, he shows convincingly that the metaphor of the »dream summer« encompassed many important and recurring themes: it speaks of innocence and surprise, and of regretful longing for a more peaceful past. As such it is particularly employed in the case of many German writers who allege German innocence and for whom the weather helps conjure up images of a natural, rather than a man-made, disaster.

Hand in hand with the image of the beautiful summer goes that of the sudden storm which had come »out of the blue«, making a powerful connection between thunderstorms and war (p. 19). Bode examines this »summer narrative« which combines elements of both the beautiful summer of peace and the sudden arrival of the thunderstorm of war. In the collective memory of those who can remember the summer of 1914, and even those who cannot, the clear juxtaposition of beautiful summer days before the war, and thunderstorms and bad weather after its outbreak serve as a useful shorthand for telling the story of a more glorious and peaceful past which was cruelly ended when the war began.

There are recurring narratives of vacations brought to a sudden end, and of the end of childhood and innocence. Thus, Erich Kästner remembers that the Kaiser had ordered mobilisation »in the midst of holiday joy« (p. 15). Stefan Zweig had rarely experienced a summer that had been »more copious, more beautiful, and I almost want to say more summery« (p. 16). Soon, however, »a terrible thunderstorm clouded the sky« (Hermann Stegemann, p. 18).



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Bad weather had long been used as a metaphor for war and revolution, as Bode is able to show with examples going back to Homer, and so it was no surprise that storms, ominous clouds and cleansing thunder would all feature to describe the impact of war in 1914 (p. 95 ff.). Throughout the 19th century, generations of German school children had had to write essays on topics such as »wars are like thunder storms, terrible but benevolent« (p. 103). When war broke out in 1914, it was easy to fall back on established vocabulary of the »cleansing effect« of wars, or of thunderstorms, black clouds and close weather to describe the tension before the war and the release experienced by its outbreak (p. 109).

Images of beautiful weather often serve in later memoirs to suggest that the entire Wilhelmine period prior to 1914 had been glorious. Memoirs create a more distinctive contrast between war and summer and extend the latter to the entire prewar period, thus depicting the *Kaiserreich* as a prewar paradise (p. 243). In effect, this draws a contrast between the prewar era and the unpleasant rest of the 20th century (p. 246). Had the war broken out earlier in 1914, i. e. before the beautiful summer, it would have been more difficult to associate the prewar era so comprehensively with blue skies, holidays and *Kaiserwetter*.

But collective memory was not entirely mistaken. Bode's careful look at temperatures and hours of sunshine reveals that the summer of 1914 was (with the exception of 1911) indeed a much better and hotter summer than most (p. 113). Between 8 and 23 July it was unusually warm, but the heat was interspersed with many thunderstorms *before* there was an inkling of war – in Potsdam, for example, there was one almost every day in the second half of July (p. 121–123). By sheer coincidence, the weather changed from hot to rainy on the very day of the ultimatum to Serbia, 23 July – thus enabling contemporaries to fall back on the bad weather metaphors of their school days for describing the crisis and eventual outbreak of war (p. 124).

Similarly, Austria-Hungary's mobilisation on 25 July coincided with wet and cold weather in Germany and across Europe. In many places, enthusiastic pro-war demonstrations on 28 and 29 July occurred – contrary to what we commonly imagine – in the rain (p. 125). It rained all day in Potsdam on the 29th and many holiday makers who had left for mountains and beaches considered an early departure due to the bad weather. Bode's conclusion is compelling: »there can be no talk of summer sunshine, at least in Potsdam, during the ›July Crisis« (p. 126). Yes, the weather was beautiful in the weeks following the assassination (when there was no sense of a crisis), but the actual crisis, following the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum to Serbia, was dominated by bad and unseasonably cold weather.

Thus, meteorology and politics worked hand in hand, the weather reflecting the worried mood of contemporaries. The sun only returned on 31 July and during the first days of August, when declarations of war occurred against the background of beautiful sunshine. Yet even then there was still rain in some places, and Bode presents interesting photographic evidence which challenges what we expect to see: large crowds of people waving good-bye to a train full of soldiers in Marburg on 2 August, for example, all huddling under umbrellas on a grey and wet day (p. 130).

With the storming of Liège good weather returned – this, too, was seen as significant. »The sun shines on our war«, concluded Ernst Barlach (p. 138). However, the retreat on the Marne coincided with a change in



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the weather, and by 10 September it had turned distinctly autumnal on the Western Front (p. 135). As the German advance was stopped in its tracks, the glorious summer was over and autumn weather reflected both the fortunes of the army and the mood at the front and the home front. »The weather is becoming more serious again, autumn is coming, it's raining, the fog is my mood«, recorded Carl Schmitt on 12 September in his diary (p. 172).

As Bode concludes, while there were phases of spectacular weather and while bad weather coincided with moments of crisis, the weather was also »a construct with which the events of 1914 could be turned into a story, beginning with the summer holiday and ending with the beginning of autumn« (p. 139). Put simply: »The history of Germany's national awakening – in sunshine – ends in rain on the Marne. The dream summer of 1914 ended in parallel with the retreat on the Marne« (p. 140).

In evoking the summer narrative in the long term, the weather was used to distinguish between the *Kaiserreich* and the Weimar Republic. Carl Zuckmeyer recalled going to war on »a light morning« and returning »on a foggy November day« (p. 195), and Karl Kraus mocked that the Weimar Republic was blamed for not providing any *Kaiserwetter* but only rain (p. 197).

Bode's painstaking research into contemporary meteorological data makes for interesting reading, as it turns out that while much of the good weather that contemporaries thought they remembered had indeed occurred, some of it was simply invented by hindsight. He offers interesting comparative data on the temperature and hours of sunshine in Germany and Britain to show that (with the exception of an unusually hot summer in 1911), 1914 was indeed on the whole an unusually glorious summer. But he gives many specific examples to show that memory played tricks on eye witnesses' accounts. Hans Herzfeld, for instance, remembers that his brother was recalled to the navy on 'a hot Sunday'. That Sunday 26 July, a week before mobilisation, had been rain-soaked across Germany, as Bode shows (p. 71).

Bode's analysis is particularly interesting when he considers those who do not use the narrative of the summer of 1914. Arnold Zweig, for example, claims not to have noticed even »the smallest of thunderstorms« in 1914. For Zweig, Bode concludes, the war had not been a natural force, but the irresponsible action of people (p. 202). Erich Maria Remarque's omission of any reference to the weather is also striking, given its ubiquity in most other accounts. Deliberately omitting the summer narrative had the effect of heightening the sobering effect of Remarque's popular 1929 novel »All Quiet on the Western Front« (p. 204). However, in the film version, directed by Lewis Milestone in 1930, the summer narrative is clearly visible as school and recruitment scenes are shot in bright sunshine, while later front scenes take place in the rain (p. 205).

The use of weather metaphors was particularly helpful and much employed when it came to the ignominious war-guilt question. Associating the outbreak of the war with forces of nature served as a way of excusing human actors. Thus it was no coincidence that once Britain considered it important to diffuse the question of guilt by blaming no nation in particular, Lloyd George chose »The Brewing of the Storm« as title of the first chapter of his »War Memoirs« (1933). As Bode argues, the weather metaphor here suggests a compromise and a way of



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deemphasising the sole-guilt thesis of the immediate post-war years (p. 47).

Of course, as the author shows in a brief comparative section, the summer of 1914 narrative also features prominently in British collective memory and, indeed, the weather mirrored that on the continent, with exceptionally warm summers recorded for 1911 and 1914. »No British author makes do without referring to the beautiful summer weather« (p. 267–268), and even in the BBC's »Blackadder« comedy, Lieutenant George proclaims: »I'm the last [...] from the Golden Summer of 1914« (p. 268). As Bode shows, the image of the golden summer, with its obvious parallel to the German summer narrative, also serves to emphasise innocence as well as highlighting the contrast between Edwardian Britain and the rest of the twentieth century (p. 271).

Summer holiday associations were also helpful in providing an excuse for Germany's decision-makers, who mostly were away from Berlin on vacation during the July Crisis – seemingly a certain sign that they could not have plotted the outbreak of war (and indeed deliberately designed to serve as such). Emil Ludwig, for example, wrote pointedly that nobody in Vienna or Saint Petersburg »had gone on holiday« (pp. 248–249).

Bode makes a convincing case for the need to question and critically evaluate much about 1914 that we may have considered a given. Just like the *Augusterlebnis* has proven to be much more nuanced than we used to assume, so, too, the dominant narrative of the beautiful summer into which war erupted like a thunderstorm needed to be reassessed. We need to be mindful as to why this narrative was employed, as the myth serves specific purposes and advances a particular view of the past. Bode's account questions this narrative and in the process reminds us that eye witnesses are not always reliable and that »memory is political« (p. 287).

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