

## Compte rendu

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### Ouvrage recensé :

Chickering, Roger. *The Great War and Urban Life in Germany: Freiburg, 1914–1918*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Pp. xiv, 628. Illustrations, bibliography, index.

par J.-Guy Lalande

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## *Book Reviews / Comptes rendus*

**Chickering, Roger. *The Great War and Urban Life in Germany: Freiburg, 1914–1918*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Pp. xiv, 628. Illustrations, bibliography, index.**

In recent years, the historiography of the First World War has moved from the trenches to the home front, with a particular emphasis on the social and cultural impact of that war. Roger Chickering (Georgetown University) continues this trend with an ambitious and well-researched monograph that paints a very detailed portrait of a city literally torn apart by the Great War.

Affectionately described as the loveliest place to live in Germany due to its cultural and natural allurements, Freiburg, a city of approximately 85,000 inhabitants (many of them pensioners and tourists), small and specialized enterprises serving a regional market, and with a renowned university, at first embraced the war with great enthusiasm. The firm conviction that this was a just and defensive war and, furthermore, one that offered Germany the historic opportunity to have her rightful claims in the world recognized explains the patriotic solidarity and the language of divine retribution, sacrifice, regeneration, and atonement on the part of so many Freiburgers, be they Catholics, Protestants, Social Democrats, Liberals, or Jews. Such collective unanimity did not last very long, though. Following the stalemate on the battlefields of northern France in the fall of 1914, problems quickly arose and, given their magnitude, they created a new climate, one now characterized by the determination to stand fast and to hold out till the final victory.

The whole book, indeed, retells very convincingly the story of the many ways in which the war affected that community. It all started with the strategic bombing that Freiburg, situated not too far from the Alsatian front, had to endure. It continued with the militarization and the subsequent disruption and restructuring of its economy—a transition all the more painful, since wages failed to keep pace with the rise (at least 100% between 1914 and 1918) in the cost of living. To take just one meaningful example: the army, a privileged and voracious new consumer of foodstuffs, together with the Allied blockade, created a food problem for the civilians that became the main, but not unique, concern of an overwhelmed and frustrated municipal administration; indeed, there was a dearth of bread, milk, meats, potatoes, coal, shoes and clothes, and, not unexpectedly, a black market emerged in the wake of these shortages and of the failure of dysfunctional civil authorities to regulate the economy.

The war raised other issues: it naturally taxed the resources of the health care system and, as a result, sickness, disability, rehabilitation, and death took on new meanings; it encouraged prostitution, the proliferation of venereal disease, and

illegitimacy; it gave women new roles (their activism, though, did not successfully challenge the concept and reality of patriarchy); it generated antagonisms between the city's consumers and the countryside's producers; it introduced restrictions on public discourse which, as official information lost its credibility, gave birth to a counter-discourse of rumours and denunciations; it mobilized the energies of both children at school and the elderly; it significantly increased urban criminality; it suspended the traditional antagonism between Protestants and Catholics but, on the other hand, it revived anti-Semitism, the Jew being associated with the despised figure of the war profiteer; it occasioned a debate on the appropriateness of entertainment, luxury, and pleasure in wartime; finally—and predictably—, since it “distributed its vast material burdens heedless of equity, lavishing disproportionate hardship on the poorest and most vulnerable” (p. 439), the war not only revived old social resentments and tensions, it also triggered criticism of public regulation and a bitter debate on the country's war aims. By 1918, widespread deprivation and misery among the city's residents had undermined the national solidarity that existed at the beginning of the war.

If *The Great War and Urban Life in Germany*, a rich account of the dynamics of one German home front, illustrates very well the author's belief that “total war requires total history” (p. 2)—a holistic approach that allowed a good dose of originality, as revealed in the fascinating chapter 7: “The war on the senses,” which describes the countless ways (it could be heard, seen, smelled, felt, and tasted—no less) the war was experienced—, it will also require patience and perseverance from more than one reader: the prose is not always graceful, the evidence is at times somewhat overwhelming, and the book badly lacks a conclusion. These concerns aside, this study of Freiburg at war, one that draws on a wide range of sources and one that can be read very profitably in conjunction with Maureen Healy's *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire: Total War and Everyday Life in World War I* (c. 2004), with which it shares many characteristics, will be of great value to the specialists of World War I, urban history, cultural studies, and early twentieth-century Germany.

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**Petitclerc, Martin. *Nous protégeons l'infortune : Les origines populaires de l'économie sociale au Québec*. Montréal, VLB éditeur, 2007. 278 p.**

Rares sont les ouvrages portant sur la mutualité au Québec, encore plus rares ceux qui se penchent sur le processus d'émergence et de développement des secours mutuels. Martin