

A Supernatural War: Magic, Divination, and Faith during the First World War

Review Number: 2318

Publish date: Thursday, 2 May, 2019

Author: Owen Davies

ISBN: 9780198794554

Date of Publication: 2019

Price: £20.00

Pages: 304pp.

Publisher: Oxford University Press

Publisher url: <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/a-supernatural-war-9780198794554?cc=gb&lang=en&>

Place of Publication: Oxford

Reviewer: Ian Miller

Historically, wars have always witnessed reports of ghostly sightings and visions. However, the First World War is of particular interest as such phenomena occurred in a more modern, secular environment, at a time when science and secularisation had emerged as predominant ways of thinking about the world. In addition, the number of lives being lost due to conflict was unprecedented. However, the work of groups such as the Society for Psychical Research aside, secular scientific thought did not easily accommodate the idea of a world beyond our own populated by the departed. Nor did it entertain amulets, charms, astrology or belief in luck. Science had now relegated these to superstition and folklore. Owen Davies' *A Supernatural War: Magic, Divination and Faith during the First World War* provides a compelling overview of (what might be termed) a 'hidden history' of the First World War, one that reveals European societies still enthralled by the supernatural even in the context of modern, technologised conflict.

A Supernatural War commences with a discussion of how sociologists, psychologists and anthropologists considered the battlefields of French and Belgium to be a unique laboratory for research. American psychologists such as George Washington Crile jumped at the chance to take charge of an ambulance unit, not least because it offered important opportunities to research the emerging concept of stress. Of more relevance, anthropologists and folklorists eagerly collected widespread evidence of magic, witchcraft, omens and ghosts. However, as the remainder of Davies' book demonstrates, the battlefield was not the only place that supernatural phenomena seemingly occurred. Back at home across Europe, grieving relatives sought solace in spiritualism, astrology was used to try to predict the end of the war and fortune tellers were widely consulted for news of the potential fate of fighting soldiers. Clearly, as Davies insists, the First World War deserves the title of a 'supernatural war'.

Despite starting with a discussion of scientific interest in the 'superstitious', much of Davies' book focuses on the meanings and uses of the supernatural in popular culture. For instance, Davies provides an insightful chapter on prophecies immediately before and during the war. Between 1900 and 1914, European war seemed inevitable. On the Continent, interest in Nostradamus soared. In addition to a re-awakening of interest in historical prophecies, new prophets emerged including Australian medium Mrs Foster Turner who, in 1914, supposedly channelled the spirit of 19th-century journalist and spiritualist W. T. Stead who

announced to an audience including Sir Arthur Conan Doyle that by the end of the year Europe would be deluged in blood. Some prematurely prophesised that the end of the world had finally arrived. However, generally speaking prophets tended to foresee the military success of their own respective countries, in some ways providing pleasing wartime narratives to receptive audiences. As the war dragged on, prophets were placed under increasing pressure to accurately tell the public when conflict was to end.

Of particular interest is a compelling chapter on visions, spirits and psychics. On the battlefields, soldiers reported numerous strange visions and sensations including crosses appearing in the sky, visitations from angels, visions of the Virgin Mary and other heavenly signs. Churches across Europe eagerly reported on such spiritual phenomenon but took a warier stance towards stories of apparitions of deceased family members. Regardless, spiritualism flourished as an alternative to organised religion (although Davies argues that spiritualism was not quite as popular during the war as many historians have previously claimed). Interestingly, spiritualists considered themselves highly suitable soldiers as they were not afraid of death, having a strong belief in an afterlife. Although too busy to be holding seances and spreading the word about their faith in the trenches, spiritualist soldiers reassured themselves that they were surrounded, and often aided, by the countless dead spirits around them. There were also notable conversions to the spiritualist cause, most notably Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Despite initially being sceptical, a series of family deaths including his son encouraged Doyle to seek solace in seeking messages from beyond the grave.

One intriguing character discussed at length by Davies is the 'White Comrade'. This was a mysterious white figure seen regularly by soldiers on the battlefield. While psychiatrists and sociologists tended to dismiss sightings of the White Comrade as the result of the fevered minds of the sick and wounded, religious authorities eagerly accepted such visions. Although the White Comrade was initially a fictional character, developed in a short story by Reverend W.H. Leatham in 1915, letters sent home included claims of real sightings of a mysterious white figure who bended over the wounded, being invincible to bullet fire. The White Comrade was swiftly immortalised in a popular painting by George Hillyard Swinstead. Copies of the paintings were hugely popular and adorned various popular war shrines. While the White Comrade was a popular legend in countries such as Britain and France, Russia had its own equivalent. Russian soldiers regularly reported seeing an apparition of the general Michael Skobelev who had risen to fame in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877. He was recognisable for his white coat and white horse.

A Supernatural War continues with an intriguing chapter on fortune tellers, a group often viewed suspiciously by European governments during the conflict. Any negative messages about losing the war threatened to undermine public confidence in governments and the war effort. Morale needed to be upheld, a problem which drew the government's attention to fortune tellers. Davies uses this case study to discuss freedom of expression, the limits of state control and the place of non-orthodox practices in wartime popular culture. Fortune telling for profit was swiftly outlawed, or at least targeted, across many European combatant countries. While ostensibly protecting the public from fraud, such measures were undoubtedly taken to help maintain public morale. Fortune tellers who informed their clients that their husbands would be killed or crippled were viewed with disdain by the authorities. In Britain, the police carried out regular surveillances of fortune tellers, often in response to complaints from upset clients or in response to press calls for action. Yet the fortune telling trade persisted and endured. In reality, most shied away from forecasting the deaths of sons and husbands.

While not all soldiers and civilians believed in ghosts, supernatural phenomena or even astrology, traditions of believing in luck persisted. Not all soldiers resigned themselves to a messy fate on the battlefields. The idea of luck offered opportunities to change one's future. Bad luck, many thought, could be avoided by certain actions, symbols or numbers. For instance, wearing a dead man's boots or clothing was avoided as much as possible as this had long been considered unlucky amongst sailors. However, this was a challenge for the authorities, particularly those who introduced policies of providing second-hand clothing. Should a soldier gain a reputation for miraculous survivals or invincibility, he would suddenly find himself extremely popular. Comrades stayed close to such people in the hope that their luck would rub off on them. In turn, this pervasive desire for physical protection opened up a burgeoning global market in mass-produced trinkets,

charms and talismans. The swastika, then considered lucky, was a pertinent symbol of wartime as it held positive connotations at the time.

Although *A Supernatural War* focuses primarily upon non-orthodox beliefs and faiths, Davies also pays attention to Christian belief, still a powerful source of comfort for many soldiers and civilians. Most soldiers carried a Bible in their pockets. These Bibles regularly saved soldiers from flying bullets, leading some soldiers to believe that God had intervened and saved them. In addition, Davies reminds his readers of the thousands of non-Christian combatants who fought in the war including Jewish, Hindu, Sikh and Muslim troops. Davies concludes here that while there is little evidence of an upsurge in church membership or churchgoing across the combatant countries, religion was regularly observed both on the battlefield and at home.

Overall, *A Supernatural War* tells the story of the First World War from an original and intriguing perspective. The war undoubtedly saw a major revival of 'superstitious' beliefs and practices including spiritualism, fortune telling, prophecies, magic and talismans. Davies intimately brings this to life using intriguing examples ranging from well-publicised sightings of crosses in the sky to more personal beliefs such as the widespread use of protective amulets. The book explores supernatural phenomenon across the European combatant countries. In doing so, it offers insight into how national contexts helped shape public belief in the 'superstitious' while allowing scope for cross-comparison. A wide range of sources are drawn from including newspaper reports, diaries, memoirs, periodicals, almanacs and academic research.

Davies' key message and argument is that 20th-century Europe can hardly be considered disenchanted if so many people still believed in ghosts, witches, apparitions, charms and fortune tellers. And this is a convincing point. Far from suddenly encouraging a resurgence of 'un-modern' superstitions, or heralding a brief period of 're-enchantment', the war drew upon customs, beliefs and faiths that were still very much strong across European society. And rather than being a turning point towards the modern, it seems that soldiers returned home to a culture still enthralled by the supernatural.

The author is happy to accept this review and thanks Dr Miller for his thoughtful assessment of the book.

Other reviews:

Pop Matters

<https://www.popmatters.com/supernatural-war-owen-davies-2633185236.html> [2]

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/2318>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/301121> [2] <https://www.popmatters.com/supernatural-war-owen-davies-2633185236.html>