

First World War Studies

Volume 1, Issue 2, 2010, pages 218-219

Published online: 09 Oct 2010

Review of:

Julia Barbara Köhne, *Kriegshysteriker – Strategische Bilder und mediale Techniken militärpsychiatrischen Wissens, 1914-1920*. Husum: Matthiesen Verlag, 2009, 344 pages + illustrations.

by **Jason Crouthamel**, Grand Valley State University

Scholarship on war hysteria, or shell shock, in the First World War has focused primarily on the impact this wound had on constructions of masculinity in psychiatric circles and German culture. The brutalizing effects of modern warfare challenged doctors to define their assumptions about the male body and mind, and, as a number of scholars have recently demonstrated, the war forced psychiatrists to succumb to the pressures that industrialization and militarization placed on mental medicine. Julia Barbara Köhne makes a significant contribution to the ongoing research on psychological trauma, and she adds a fascinating, relatively unexplored dimension to the literature. In addition to analyzing the consequences of war hysteria for assumptions about masculinity in German psychiatry, Köhne explores changing technical and visual representations of mental wounds, and their relevance for perceptions of mental illness in not only the Great

War, but also 20th century media representations of the trenches and the origins of modern trauma.

Köhne's primary aim is to investigate the scientific processes and epistemological structures that led to the creation of war hysteria as an illness and a cultural problem. Similar to other scholars, Köhne is most interested in how war hysteria and neurosis were constructed, rather than whether or not her extensive case studies involving medical diagnoses and patient responses can reveal the 'reality' of these complex wounds. She focuses on several interrelated questions: how did military psychiatry construct a discourse on war hysteria? What kinds of technologies did they utilize to define the illness? How did these scientific means of analysis, especially photographs and moving images of patients, get translated into knowledge of psychiatric wounds? Köhne argues that in visual representations of war hysteria, doctors not only presented knowledge of this illness, but they also wanted to assert control over the illness. Psychiatrists asserted their authority by translating the visual image of war hysteria into functional concepts that served both their scientific goals in assessing healing therapy and military pressures to evaluate whether the patient was prepared to return to duty.

In the first part of the book, "War Hysteria and the Masses," Köhne argues that psychiatrists conflated the image of the war hysteric and the image of the masses, whose form was also gendered as 'feminine'. This hysterical contagion that threatened the German army's fitness, and thus the survival of the nation, was diffused throughout the masses of soldiers, and required new technical skills to define and control. Through a barrage of specialized scientific articles and monographs, psychiatrists counterattacked against the mass epidemic that spread like a disease through the troops. The second and

third sections of the book, focusing on media technology and visual representations of war hysteria, are the core of Köhne's work. She begins with a close analysis of psychiatrists' diagnostic records, which contain both written and visual representations of male hysteria. Köhne skillfully applies an interdisciplinary approach to these texts, as she critically analyzes doctors' different semiotic and semantic strategies for defining and controlling mental illness. In their summaries of conversations with patients, doctors revealed their prejudices as they honed in on the supposed hereditary and constitutional origins of symptoms, as well as patients' alleged unmanly traits, while questions about the conditions that may have triggered mental collapse were marginalized. Systems used to visually represent war neurotics reinforced these prejudices. Doctors employed photography and more often cinematography to document and decipher 'deviance' in patients' physical stances, facial and body structure, disturbed movement and other features. A standardized visual language emerged as different psychiatrists categorized scenes of male deficiency. 'Scientific film' fed the interests of the military and its psychiatrists more than patients, as doctors used their visual record to demonstrate they were in control, had developed successful programs for healing, and thus served the needs of the nation by stemming the 'virus' of hysteria infecting the masses. Interestingly, Köhne ends her study with a critical analysis of films and literary treatments of war trauma from the 1970s to present, including BBC documentaries on shell shock. She argues that the language of the 'scientific film' survives in these media, which by uncritically replaying the visual files of patients also replicate the assumptions First World War doctors held about the bodies and minds of victims of the 20th century's central trauma.

Though her findings about military medicine and its cultural prejudices towards 'hysterical men' essentially confirm arguments found in existing scholarship, Köhne's work brings a new and fascinating angle to the scholarship on war neurosis by concentrating on its technical and visual record. The main strength of Köhne's work is her extraordinary archival research and in-depth analysis of case studies. In particular, any scholar interested in the history of mental illness will benefit from the reprinted psychiatric evaluations included here, which both substantiate her arguments and provide rich opportunities for researchers to study how psychiatrists perceived their patients. Further, the extensive reproductions of visual texts will fascinate scholars interested in how doctors interacted with and classified mentally ill veterans. However, Köhne's analysis might have been strengthened with greater attention, in addition to cultural and scientific factors, to the social and political context of shell shock, which historians have stressed as a crucial part of the history of war neurosis in Germany. Though Köhne's stated focus is the technical framework for diagnosing hysteria between 1914-1920, it would have been interesting to see how defeat and revolution might have influenced how doctors visually represented war hysterics, who were, along with other 'national enemies,' blamed for Germany's collapse. This context is overlooked by Köhne as she shifts from war-time diagnosis to present-day comparisons in how shell shock is portrayed in diverse media. Nevertheless, Köhne's clearly argued work is well-substantiated with a rich source base. It should appeal to specialists in the history of psychiatry and the cultural history of mental trauma, and it makes a welcome addition to this rapidly expanding field.