Anxious Americans

Smith, Zachary. *Age of Fear: Othering and American Identity during World War I*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019. 233 pp. $59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4214-2727-0.

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Questions about identity have come to dominate American society and the Academy. Zachary Smith's *Age of Fear: Othering and American Identity During World War I* contributes to this discussion with his analysis of the anti-German movement during World War I.

The work is organized into five chapters, an introduction, and an epilogue. Chapters One and Two focus on the neutrality years of 1914–1916 while chapters Three and Four cover the American war period of 1917–1918. Chapter One argues that the pre-war preparedness movement reflected Anglo-Saxon Americans' anxieties about masculinity and fears that industrialization; ethnoracial, religious, and class diversity; and proto-feminism had made America weak and vulnerable to apocalyptic invasion by the technologically superior yet spiritually degenerate German "race." Chapters Two and Three examine the role that propaganda played in transforming Anglo-Saxon Americans' view of German immigrants from one of loyal, hard-working Americans to that of treasonous "enemies within." Chapter Four focuses on the demonization of Germans in Europe and how white Americans came to understand the military defeat of Germany as necessary in order to save American democracy and society from perpetual militarization. Chapter Five examines both periods from the perspective of religious pre-and-post millennial understandings of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant identity.

Age of Fear argues that the anti-German movement of World War One was the product of Anglo-Saxon Americans' psychosocial anxieties about their ethnoracial and national identities—particularly regarding their sense of racial superiority, masculinity, and Christianity—versus a reaction to the actual threat posed by the presence of German immigrants in the United States or military invasion by Germany. Using the classical sociological concept of "Othering," Smith asserts that white Anglo-Saxon Americans demonized German Americans and Germans abroad as clannish, deceitful, authoritarian, and brutish as a way of clarifying and strengthening their own ethnoracial and national identities.

Although Smith acknowledges that racializing and demonizing other minority groups have a long history in the United States, he argues that the wartime "Othering" of Germans was different because Anglo-Saxon Americans were more concerned about being invaded and dominated by Germans than they were about subordinating them: "In part, the Othering of the German people grew out of Anglo-Saxons' fears of their own inadequacy, not out of a sense of their own power" (7).

Americans' tendency to perceive conflict—about language, cultural practices, labor organization, and alcohol, among other issues—in absolute, black-white, existential,

and apocalyptic terms stems from their religious heritage of evangelical millennial Christianity, according to Smith. He notes that Americans have a far greater chance of being killed by a falling asteroid than by a terrorist, yet fears of death by Islamic terrorism, German invasion, Japanese invasion, Russian invasion, and so on, have long driven both American foreign and domestic security policies, resulting in a society that is repeatedly willing to sacrifice political and civil liberties for "security."

The work also argues that Lamarkian theories of (d)evolution influenced white Anglo-Saxon Americans' understandings of the strengths (and weaknesses) of their ethnoracial identities. This pseudoscientific theory claimed that just as non-Anglo-Saxons could evolve upward by assimilating into white Anglo-Saxon culture, so could so-called superior ethnic groups (such as Anglo-Saxons or "Teutons") devolve into barbarism and savagery. This fear of socioracial devolution was, according to Smith, a driving factor in causing Anglo-Saxon anxiety about their ethnoracial identity.

Smith's main sources are government propaganda materials (particularly posters); newspapers; cartoons; popular books; early films; and the thousands of letters that ordinary Americans sent to the Wilson administration alleging espionage, sabotage, and other dastardly behavior by German agents and their German neighbors. The work also makes extensive use of records from the future FBI and the Military Intelligence Division of the U.S. War Department.

Although the issue of perception of Germans—and what this meant for Anglo-Americans' self-understanding—is a constant theme in *Age of Fear*, Smith is also deeply interested in the truth, accuracy, and ultimate disconnect between Americans' fears and the reality of the war experience. The fact that German agents committed very few acts of sabotage in the United States between 1915 and 1918—despite Americans' conviction that German spies, saboteurs, and other terrorists were everywhere and behind every industrial fire and accident—is important to Smith.

A strength of the book is the author's focus on the role of religion in forming identity, particularly in the white South, a region with few immigrants (Germans or otherwise) and a long history of conspiracy theorizing, especially about race.

But Smith often leaves implicit what could be made explicit and then critiqued. For instance, the primary creators of American Anglo-Saxon ethnic identity are elites: prominent politicians, newspaper editors, and religious leaders. Yet the interrelationship between ethnoracial identity and socioeconomic class is not considered. In defining terms such as "Anglo Saxon" and "white," Smith actually blurs these concepts by including assimilated non-Anglo whites with Americans of British heritage. When the author discusses "Christians," he is, in fact, talking about Protestants, which could use more clarification.

In addition, white Anglo-Saxon Protestant Americans have been lamenting about declension since the late seventeenth century. It would have been interesting to contrast early twentieth-century fears of Lamarkian "racial devolution" to this much longer tradition.

Finally, there is the missed opportunity to consider the Irish Catholic experience during the war. Irish Catholics (the first immigrant "Other" in American history) had been consistently identified as ape-like and brutish in nineteenth-century political cartoons and commentary—the same image that would be applied to Germans nearly one hundred years later—but Irish Catholics did not experience the same kind of demonization that German Americans did during the war.

Age of Fear provides an interesting perspective on the relationship between racial "Othering" and American national identity. Smith also raises important questions about why Americans are so often willing to sacrifice democratic freedoms in order to fight perceived dire threats that are, in fact, not existential.