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### Prophetic Times

A critical study of the prophecies which have either come into being or have taken up a new lease of interest and importance owing to the Great War is no improbable undertaking when the war itself shall be over, and it might provide a curious kind of instruction as well as some entertainment.

(Occultist Arthur Edward Waite, writing in 1916)<sup>47</sup>

The advent of the First World War was hardly a surprise. As the Belgian poet and essayist Maurice Maeterlinck observed in 1916, ‘True, it was more or less foreseen by our reason; but our reason hardly believed in it’.<sup>48</sup> Numerous books and articles were written in Britain and France during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries debating the inevitability of a great war in Europe. There had also been periodic spy and ‘invasion scares’ in Britain with regard to rumours of French, Russian, and German attacks. Popular fears were fed by the burgeoning genres of ‘invasion lit’ and futurist fiction, and, by the early years of the twentieth century, Germany had become the predominant threat in such stories, as the first tremors of the coming war were beginning to be felt.<sup>49</sup> Some had clear political undercurrents. Erskine Childers’ spy novel *Riddle of the Sands* (1903), concerning the discovery and foiling of German plans for invading Britain, was credited with highlighting Britain’s poor military presence in the North Sea, in contrast with Germany’s growing naval power. William Le Queux’s scare-mongering novel, *The Invasion of 1910*, was commissioned for serialisation in the *Daily Mail* in 1906 for the purpose of boosting the paper’s campaign for greater military spending. With its account of German outrages in towns along the east coast, it went on to sell over a million copies.<sup>50</sup> Such war fiction also proved popular in France. In the late 1880s, the French officer and novelist Émile-Cyprien Driant (1855-1916) wrote *La Guerre de demain* (*The War of Tomorrow*) which described at length the brave daring-do adventures of French soldiers in a future war against Germany, including a story of balloon warfare. Driant was killed in action at the Battle of Verdun. Similar *Zukunftskrieg* (future-war fiction) proved popular in Germany as well. August Niemann’s, *Der Weltkrieg. Deutsche Träume* or *The World War. German Dreams* (1904) was a story of high political intrigue and military prowess as an alliance of Germany, Russia, and France wages war against Britain. The British navy is crushed at the Battle of Flushing, and the invasion begins in Scotland.

Such nationalistic story-telling fostered a receptive public environment for the wave of prophetic literature that surged over the combatant countries during the early months of the war, inspired by rumour, evangelical optimism, astrological calculations, occult zealotry, and the utterances of rogues. When, in February 1918, Charles Oman, who for the first two years

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<sup>47</sup> Arthur Edward Waite, ‘Sainte Odile: The Growth of a Legend’, *The Occult Review* 24 (1916) 207.

<sup>48</sup> Maurice Maeterlinck, *The Wrack of the Storm* (London, 1916), p. 213.

<sup>49</sup> See, David G. Morgan-Owen, *The Fear of Invasion: Strategy, Politics, and British War Planning, 1880-1914* (Oxford 2017); Catriona Pennell, *A Kingdom United: Popular Responses to the Outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 11-21; Ignatius Frederick Clarke, *Voices Prophecy War: Future Wars, 1763-3749*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford, 1992); Le Naour, *Nostradamus*, pp.19-39; Ignatius Frederick Clarke, *The Great War with Germany, 1890-1914: Fictions and Fantasies of the War-to-come* (Liverpool, 1997).

<sup>50</sup> Ian Foster, ‘The Translation of William Le Queux’s *The Invasion of 1910*: What Germany Made of Scaremongering in The Daily Mail’, in Myriam Salama-Carr (ed.), *Translating and Interpreting Conflict* (New York, 2007), pp. 169-83.

of the war worked as a censor in Whitehall, gave his presidential address to the Royal Historical Society on the subject of ‘Rumour in Time of War’, he described the prophetic literature of the war as a curious relic, the last survivor of ‘a very ancient and prolific race.’ As such, he noted that a dozen or so prophetic war pamphlets from different countries had been collected by the National War Museum (later the Imperial War Museum), which had been founded the previous year.<sup>51</sup> But as we shall now see, the dark years of the war were far from the end times for this venerable, divinatory tradition. Indeed, they were seen by some, as the herald of a profound spiritual enlightenment, a prophetic intimation of a glorious new world order. Still, as the nineteenth-century American humourist, James Russell Lowell, advised, ‘don’t never prophesy – unless you know.’

### ***Prophecies old and new***

The compendious list of French war literature, *La Littérature de la Guerre*, published in 1918, listed eleven principal booklets of war prophecies published between 1914 and 1916, some of which contained dozens of different examples. The editor also referred to the thousands of handbills containing prophecies that circulated around the country.<sup>52</sup> Maurice Maeterlinck counted no less than eighty-three predictions and prophecies concerning the coming of the war.<sup>53</sup> In Italy, Giuseppe Ciuffa compiled a book of over a hundred war prophecies in 1915, many of which were the same as those in the French literature, but there were also some distinctly Italian ones.<sup>54</sup> Old prophecies were recycled and given new meaning and popularity in Germany as well, particularly variations of a prophetic folktale that had first been recorded in 1701 known as *die Schlacht am Birkenbaum* or ‘Battle of the Birch Tree’. It concerned a time when the world would be godless. A frightful war would break out with Russia and the North on one side, and France, Spain, and Italy on the other. A prince dressed all in white would emerge as a saviour after a terrible, bloody battle near a birch tree on the border of Westphalia. Was he the Kaiser?<sup>55</sup>

Prophecies also swirled around the conflict in the Near East. In November 1914, the spiritualist Wellesley Tudor Pole (1884-1968), who served during the war as a Major in the Royal Marine Light Infantry, and then in the Directorate of Military Intelligence in the Middle East, surveyed what he knew of relevant prophecies circulating in relation to the Ottoman Empire. One was that when a European king called Constantine married a Sophie, then a new dawn of Christianity would begin in Constantinople. Constantine I ascended to the throne of Greece in 1913, and his wife was called Sophie. The Persian prophet Baha’u’llah (1817-1892), the founder of the Baha’i movement who believed he was chosen as the ‘promised one’ of a universal Faith, was reported to have predicted the rise of German hegemony and the downfall of the French and Ottoman Empires. The Rhine would ultimately run red with German blood, he apparently foretold, and then there would come ‘The Most Great Peace’. Tudor Pole was a promoter of the Baha’i movement in Britain, and believed the war would run as Baha’u’llah prophesied.<sup>56</sup> When, in September 1918, the Ottoman army was defeated at the ancient city of Megiddo, the leader of the Baha’i movement at the time, Abdu'l-Bahá, declared that this was the Armageddon of the New Testament and welcomed

<sup>51</sup> Charles Oman, *The Unfortunate Colonel Despard and Other Studies* (London, 1922), p. 68.

<sup>52</sup> Jean Vic, *La Littérature de la Guerre* (Paris, 1918), pp. 129-31.

<sup>53</sup> Maurice Maeterlinck, *Wrack of the Storm*, trans. Alexander Teixeira de Mattos (London, 1916), p. 213.

<sup>54</sup> Giuseppe Ciuffa, *La Guerra Europea e le Profezie* (Rome 1915).

<sup>55</sup> Jonathan Green, *The Strange and Terrible Visions of Wilhelm Friess: The Paths of Prophecy in Reformation Europe* (Anne Arbor, 2014), p. 120; William Gregory, ‘German Popular Prophecies’, *Blackwood's Magazine* 67 (1850) 568; Margarete Rothbarth, ‘Zur Völkerschlacht am Birkenbaum’ *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Volkskunde*, 27/28 (1917-18) 245-7.

<sup>56</sup> Wellesley Tudor Pole, *Some Deeper Aspects of the War* (Bristol, 1914), pp. 4, 5.

the beginning of the end times.<sup>57</sup> Such biblical prophecies will be discussed in more detail later, but for the moment let us survey the gallery of First World War prophets, ancient and recent, real and legendary, beginning with the most famous non-biblical prophet of them all, Nostradamus.

The prophecies of the French physician-astrologer Nostradamus (1503-1566) were published in his own lifetime, and have been reprinted many times since. Consisting of hundreds of quatrains with odd word combinations, strange jargon, and obscure references to battles, disasters, and plagues, there is nothing obviously applicable to the First World War. But that did not stop what has been described as the ‘Nostradamian battles of World War 1’.<sup>58</sup> Little attention was paid to Nostradamus in Britain, though the British occultist Frederic Thurstan turned to the quatrains to see whether they prophesied anything about the Dardanelles campaign and the future rule of Constantinople. The results were less than clear. The Nostradamian battles were primarily between several French and German esotericists seeking to find patriotic cause in the abstruse phrases of the quatrains.

The main proponent on the French side was A. Demar-Latour, whose booklet *Nostradamus et les événements de 1914-1916*, sold for one franc and twenty-five centimes in 1916. Demar-Latour translated the quatrains into modern French and then set about unlocking their secret meaning with regard to the war. One quatrain ran as follows:

*Sous l’opposite climat Babilonique,  
Grande sera de sang effusion;  
Que terre et mer, air, ciel sera inique  
Sectes, faim, Regnes, pestes, confusions.*

Under the opposite climate of Babylon,  
There will be a great effusion of blood;  
So great indeed that the earth and the sea, the air and the sky will seem to be in revolt  
There will be disorders, famine, diseases, and overthrow of kingdoms.

According to Demar-Latour, the disorder was thought to refer to Germany and Ireland, and the famine also concerned Germany. His other revelations included apparent references to the German atrocities in Belgium, the outcome of the Battle of the Marne, the advent of German heavy artillery, the fate of Serbia, and the invention of the submarine – the latter was divined from a reference to ‘the fish living under and above water’. As to the Kaiser’s ultimate defeat, Demar-Latour found significance in this quatrain:

The great camel will drink the waters of the Danube and of the Rhine,  
And he will not repent.  
But the soldiers of the Rhône and still more so those of the Loire will make him  
tremble.

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<sup>57</sup> Adrian Gregory, ‘Beliefs and religion’, in Jay Winter (ed.), *The Cambridge History of The First World War. Volume III: Civil Society* (Cambridge, 2014), p. 426.

<sup>58</sup> Edgar Leoni, *Nostradamus and His Prophecies* (New York, 1961), p. 70. The Franco-German Nostradamian tussle over the war continued in the years after 1918. See, C. de Lamor, *La guerre de 1914-18 vue en 1555 par Me Nostradamus* (La Roche-sur-Yon, 1922); C.L. Loog, *Die Weissagungen des Nostradamus: erstmalige Auffindung des Chiffreschlüssels und Enthüllung der Prophezeiungen über Europas Zukunft und Frankreichs Glück und Niedergang, 1555-2200* (Pfullingen, 1921).

And near the Alps, the cock [France] will ruin him.<sup>59</sup>

On the German side, the astrologer Albert Kniepf unsurprisingly came to some very different conclusions. He deciphered one quatrain as prophesying that when the French passed beyond the Ligurian Sea, between Italy and Corsica, they would be beaten by the followers of Mohammed and the countries of the Adriatic.<sup>60</sup>

But this was not just some obscure battle of wits and imagination between a handful of occultists. Nostradamus aroused considerable public curiosity. So, in February 1915, the prominent German newspaper *Kölnische Zeitung* printed a heartening translation of one quatrain as:

Albion, ruler of the sea, -  
When the air mountain comes?  
And the bell in the tube,  
And the ship in the bell,  
Thy last hour shall have come.

The newspaper told its readers that this evidently referred to Germany's invention of the Zeppelin and submarine. Another interpretation of one of Nostradamus's cryptic quatrains was deciphered as 'London would be destroyed by sails coming from the sky'.<sup>61</sup> The popular influence of such newspaper predictions is indicated by a report by an American correspondent in Berlin, and by others, that the Zeppelin crews had subsequently adopted Nostradamus as their patron saint.<sup>62</sup>

Throughout the war, there were periodic flurries of British press interest in the English prophetess Joanna Southcott (1715-1814). This farmer's daughter from Devon attracted a considerable following in her lifetime, declaring she was the Woman of the Apocalypse mentioned in the Book of Revelation as appearing as 'a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars.' She also claimed, at the age of sixty four, to be pregnant with the new messiah. There was nothing in her prophetic utterances while alive that pertained to the Great War, but on her death she left a sealed wooden box of prophecies that her will dictated could only be opened in the presence of all twenty-four bishops of the Church of England, or their representatives, at a future moment of great national danger. So, with the outbreak of the First World War, there was a renewed interest in what Southcott's prophecies might have to say. Would the bishops agree to attend and so enable the opening of Joanna Southcott's Box? No, of course not. Nevertheless, shortly after the outbreak of war rumours spread that Southcott had, in fact, predicted its advent, and, indeed, the end of the world in 1914, and also that a king named George would be the last ruler of England and would give up the kingdom to God. A Southcottian disciple and historian of the movement, Alice Seymour, wrote letters to the press to scotch this rumour. She stated that there was no record of Southcott saying any

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<sup>59</sup> 'The Prophecies of Nostradamus from "Nostradamus" by A. Demar Latour', *The Occult Review* 24 (July 1916), 16-17, 21. Thanks to the International Association for the Preservation of Spiritualist and Occult Periodicals for making such historic periodicals open access: <http://www.iapsop.com>.

<sup>60</sup> Albert Kniepf, *Die Weisungen des altfranzösischen Sehers Michael Nostradamus und der jetzige Weltkrieg* (Hamburg, 1915), p. 43.

<sup>61</sup> Reprinted in the *Liverpool Echo*, 24 February 1915.

<sup>62</sup> *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 30 November 1916; *The Scotsman*, 23 August 1916.

such thing or, as according to another rumour, that she had ordered that the box be opened in 1914.<sup>63</sup>

When the hundredth anniversary of Southcott's death came around in December 1914, there was renewed media interest. A newly-launched, populist London paper, the *Daily Call*, which promoted itself as 'a penny paper for a halfpenny', and consisted mostly of war news, stories, and patriotic calls for a strong army, launched an eye-raising campaign for the box to be opened. It argued this was necessary, 'if only to avert "the terrible calamities" which some of her followers aver will follow a refusal.'<sup>64</sup> The summer of 1917 saw a final flurry of war interest in the opening of the box of prophecies. The *Daily Express* reported a rumour that the Canon of Westminster had been tasked with gathering the necessary clergy.<sup>65</sup> *The People* devoted a whole column to Southcott, observing, 'should our clergy really have decided to look into these papers their action is likely to arouse as keen a controversy as did the writings of the woman herself.'<sup>66</sup>

Nostradamus and Southcott were real people who uttered prophecies and attracted followings. But many of the venerable prophets held up as predicting the war were less concrete historic figures, thereby providing excellent foci for the fabrication of new prophecies. One of the most widely-known in France was Sainte Odile. According to legend, she was born blind in the seventh century AD. Her father, the Duke of Alsace, sent her to a monastery at the age of twelve. She prayed ceaselessly to be able to see, and on her thirteenth birthday the miracle happened. By the fourteenth century, her relics were being venerated, and she subsequently became known as the patron saint of Alsace and also of eye patients. In 1916, at the time of the battle of Verdun in eastern France, a pamphlet entitled the *Prophecies of Saint Odile and the End of the War* (1916) circulated widely that included a new legend that, at the age of thirty one, she had miraculously prophesied a great war between France and Germany.<sup>67</sup> The first of the prophecies began: 'The time is come when Germany shall be called the most bellicose nation on earth. From her bosom shall arise the terrible man who will make war on the world. The war he will undertake will be the most frightful war mankind has suffered.' She then went on to say that Paris would be saved, 'though everyone will believe it doomed to destruction'. The war would be long, but finally 'the era of peace under iron' would lead to men adoring God and the sun would shine with unusual splendour.

The prophecy was quickly denounced as a fake by a leading Alsatian scholar, and the English occultist Arthur Edward Waite independently came to the same conclusion.<sup>68</sup> But few in France heard their criticisms, and, selling for just a franc, the *Prophecies of Saint Odile* went into a second edition before the end of the year. The prophecies it contained were, moreover, also reprinted in clerical magazines and newspapers, with a knowing absence of commentary as to their authenticity.<sup>69</sup> With the Battle of Verdun grinding on in the mud and destined to become one of the cruellest battles in history, there was a collective will to bolster French morale, particularly amongst the soldiers and their families in the Franco-German eastern region of the country. Stoffler's preface ended with the rousing cry, '*Vive l'Alsace-Lorraine*

<sup>63</sup> 'Joanna Southcott and the Year 1914', *Light*, 22 August 1914, 400; Alice Seymour, 'Joanna Southcott and the Year 1914', *Light*, 3 October 1914, 478.

<sup>64</sup> *The Athenæum*, 10 October 1914, 357; 'Prophecy and the Press', *Light*, 16 January 1915, 31.

<sup>65</sup> Reported in the *Liverpool Echo*, 25 July 1917.

<sup>66</sup> *The People*, 5 August 1917.

<sup>67</sup> George Stoffler, *La prophétie de Sainte Odile et la fin de la guerre* (Paris, 1916).

<sup>68</sup> Dausat, *Légendes*, p. 203. Waite, 'Sainte Odile: The Growth of a Legend', p. 212.

<sup>69</sup> See, for example, *Église d'Albi : la semaine religieuse de l'Archidiocèse d'Albi*, 12 August 1916, 410-13; *Bulletin religieux de l'Archidiocèse de Rouen*, 29 July 1916, 692-3; *L'Indépendant du Berry*, 30 July 1916.

*française!*<sup>70</sup> The booklet was banned by the German authorities as a consequence, but the Odile prophecies quickly became embedded in French folklore.

The Prophecy of Mayence was another widely reported document in France during the early years of the war. Supposedly found in an ancient convent in 1854, it consisted of eighteen verses that depicted the course of a great war on French soil. One of them ran as follows, ‘In spite of the heroic resistance of France, a multitude of soldiers, blue, yellow, and black, shall scatter themselves over a great part of France.’ It ended with the prediction that ‘William, the second of that name, shall be the last King of Prussia.’ It was undoubtedly a recent fake, first appearing in a newspaper on 23 August 1914, and it was actually a variant of the *die Schlacht am Birkenbaum* prophecies. Germany also had its own industry of spurious prophecy-making. The ‘Prophecy of Altstaetting’, supposedly written by a monk in 1841, stated that war would break out in August 1914 and that Germany and Austria would be victorious by Christmas. The prophecy first appeared in November 1914.<sup>71</sup> In 1916, a pamphlet sanctioned by the German censors appeared that purported to be a prophecy that was written down by a Tyrolean monk in 1717 and rediscovered in 1821, which told of a world war won by a German prince.<sup>72</sup> When another new German prophecy was published in 1915, which, again, purported to be an eighteenth-century prediction of world war with Germany victorious, the mayor of Eschweiler, where the ‘original’ was said to reside, had to declare publicly that no such prophetic manuscript was kept by the town hall, and that no one knew anything about the author or the origin of the text.<sup>73</sup>

Although quite widely disseminated in England and France, the Prophecy of Pinsk was of particular interest elsewhere. It was supposedly uttered by the spirit of Andrew Bobola, a seventeenth-century Polish Jesuit martyr. One night in 1819, a monk named Korzeniecki was in his monastic cell in Vilnius dwelling on the fate of his beloved country and praying to Bobola, when the martyr appeared and told him to open the cell window and peer out of it. The view was normally over the enclosed monastery garden, but when Korzeniecki looked out this time he saw a vast plain stretched out before him. The spirit of Bobola explained it was the plain of Pinsk in northern Poland where he had been martyred. He told the monk to look once more out of the window and he would see the destiny of Poland. This time the plain was covered in a vision of warring English, French, Prussian, Russian, Ottoman and Austrian soldiers. Bobola explained that when such a future battle was over, Poland would be restored as a nation state, ‘and I shall be recognised as its patron saint.’ The earliest publication of this story was in an Italian devotional magazine *Civitta Catholica* in 1864. From here it appeared in a book of Catholic predictions and ‘impending general calamities’ entitled *The Christian Trumpet* (1873). Come the war, and the Montreal newspaper *Le Devoir* printed the account from *Civitta Catholica* in full in late August 1914, while the French Catholic papers also printed versions in August and September.<sup>74</sup> Over in Germany, several publications appeared assessing the Pinks prophecy, and knowledge of it was described as widespread in German lands, including those parts of Poland that were then in the German and Austro-Hungarian empires.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Vic, *La Littérature de la Guerre*, p. 131.

<sup>71</sup> Dauzat, *Légendes*, p. 206.

<sup>72</sup> Stephan Bachtter, ‘Nostradamus und der Mühlhiasl: Transformation und Wiederkehr von Prophezeiungen’, *Augsburger Volkskundliche Nachrichten* 5, 10 (1999) 30.

<sup>73</sup> Bachtter, ‘Nostradamus und der Mühlhiasl’, 31.

<sup>74</sup> Gaudentius Rossi, *The Christian Trumpet; Or, Previsions and Predictions* (Boston, 1873), pp. 187-8; *Le Devoir*, 29 August 1914; *La Croix*, 4 September 1914.

<sup>75</sup> Margareta Rothbath, ‘Zur Literatur der Kriegsprophezeiungen’, *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Volkskunde*, 27/28 (1917-18), 247.

National politics and propaganda also lay behind one of the more unusual war prophecies - that which concerned the appearance of the Black Pig of Kiltristan in Ireland. In April 1918, two small girls of Kiltristan, Roscommon, claimed to have seen the apparition of a black pig. It was reported to the local clergyman, who went to the spot where the ghostly porker was said to have appeared, but he saw nothing. But word soon spread, crowds began to gather in vigil, the children of the parish were frightened to go out, and people attributed their illnesses to its appearance. Rumour had it that the pig would appear three times during the war and that there would be great trouble unless it was shot by a one-eyed marksman in the field behind Kilmore Rectory. Excitement about the black pig was stoked by a poorly-written tract entitled *Prophecies of St. Columcille of the remarkable events that will happen to England and Ireland before and after the war*, which had recently spread widely in the north of Ireland. Printed in Dublin, and purportedly compiled from original documents by an eminent divine of the Catholic Church, it was basically a crude piece of political propaganda that reworked an old prediction attributed to the sixth-century saint that the Irish would conquer the English. It had previously circulated during the Irish rebellion of the mid-seventeenth century and again during the 1798 uprising.<sup>76</sup> It foretold the massacre of Catholics by either the English or Orangemen in the Valley of the Black Pig, followed by the eventual vanquishing of the English: 'the Saxons will flee beyond the sea, and not remember to come back'.<sup>77</sup>

Maurice Maeterlinck dismissed such wartime prophecies as nonsense, but considered two of those current as 'more curious and worthy of a moment's attention.'<sup>78</sup> The most famous and influential of the two is known as the 'prophecy of the *curé d'Ars*'. The *curé* of Ars, Jean-Baptiste Vianney (1786-1859), had an international reputation in his own lifetime for his pastoral work, reforming what he saw as pervasive lax morality in the aftermath of the French Revolution. By the end of his life he was receiving thousands of pilgrims every year. Prophetic utterances attributed to him began to circulate soon after his death, and were first printed in 1872 as they were thought to have predicted the French defeat during the Franco-Prussian War the previous year. But they also referred to unfinished business: 'The enemy will not quit the country altogether. They will come back again, and they will destroy everything on their line of march.' But then, 'they will retire to towards their own country, but we shall follow them up, and not many of them will ever reach home.'<sup>79</sup> Interest in the prophecy died down only to reignite in August 1914, at a moment when the first stage of the sanctification of Vianney stalled due to the war. The high profile of the *curé* would have ensured that 'his' prophecy would have risen to public attention more widely than others in France, but the fabrication of a striking new clause at the end of the old prophecy ensured it became something of a national sensation: 'much more terrible things will happen than have yet been seen. Paris will suffer, but a great triumph will be witnessed on the Feast of Our Lady.' The Feast day of the Virgin is 8 September, and so the creation of the new fake prophecy gave hope at a moment when French troops were being pushed back towards Paris by a rapid German advance.

The prophecy was reported by the English *Daily Chronicle* in early September 1914, and reprinted in the regional British press, with the observation that French confidence had been inspired by its dissemination. The publication of the prophecy in the French press was,

<sup>76</sup> Raymond Gillespie, *Devoted People: Belief and Religion in Early Modern Ireland* (Manchester, 1997), p. 138.

<sup>77</sup> *Irish Times*, 27 April 1918; Eleanor Hull, 'The Black Pig of Kiltristan', *Folklore* 29 (1918) 226-37.

<sup>78</sup> Maeterlinck, *Wrack of the Storm*, pp. 248-9.

<sup>79</sup> Thurston, *War and the Prophets*, p. 40.

however, criticised by Catholic organisations. In October 1914, the *Annales d'Ars*, the monthly magazine of the sanctuary dedicated to Vianney, complained that 'every day or nearly every day we are asked about the prophecy of the blessed *curé d'Ars* or information on the predictions that he had made concerning the current war'. It desired to state publicly, once and for all, that, the prophecy published by the newspapers was false and that they knew of no authentic predictions made by the blessed *curé*. This statement was widely reprinted in diocesan magazines across France. It was also echoed on the other side of the world by the Catholic periodical the *New Zealand Tablet*, which told its readers 'Catholics cannot defend a prophecy which is so unauthenticated as this one.'<sup>80</sup>

### ***A profusion of modern prophets***

As well as the reinterpretation, reinvention, and faking of prophecies by dead or legendary figures, there were also hordes of living prophets who staked their claim to oracular greatness – though usually with the power of hindsight. They came in many guises and professed a variety of occult inspirations. At the modest end of the scale were the likes of the seaside fortune-teller, Clementina Norton, who proudly claimed during her prosecution in 1915 that at 'Southend on a public platform I prophesied the war.' Then there were the notorious boasters, such as the ritual magician Aleister Crowley. Under the name Frater Perturabo, he wrote to the *Occult Review* in September 1914, to state that on 8 May 1910, he, along with an acquaintance high up in the Admiralty, and a well-known violinist, had conjured up the spirit of Mars, who was named Bartzabel. They asked him if there would be war in Europe, to which Bartzabel replied, yes, within five years, and that Germany and Turkey would be involved.<sup>81</sup>

There were numerous claims by mediums. Arthur Conan Doyle was impressed by the Sydney medium Mrs Foster Turner, who, in February 1914, before an audience of hundreds, apparently channelled the spirit of the well-known journalist and spiritualist W.T. Stead (1849-1912): 'I want to warn you that before this year 1914 has run its course, Europe will be deluged in blood.' The London-based 'Scottish seer', Miss McCreadie, apparently told friends that, during a trip to France several years before the war, she had felt a foreboding psychic sense of turmoil and treachery, of a great conflict triggered by Germany.<sup>82</sup> There was a stir in occult circles in 1918 when a series of mediumistic interviews with Julius Caesar, purportedly conducted in Teddington, Middlesex, in 1909 and 1912, were published that seemed to prophecy the war and its ending. The first communication in 1909 began with the question, 'What is impending?' The reply from the Roman emperor was, 'War – horrid war. Mars is king ... The weak must suffer. The strong will die. Those who are neither will suffer and live'. There followed a stream of cryptic lyrical statements, including, 'Red Poppies in the graveyard. And then Red Poppies in the smiling cornfields in the sun. Read, learn, and fear not.' Caesar returned to his poppy theme in October 1912, 'The Poppies cometh to pass before the Day of Christ. Note what we have said. Poverty and Hunger and the War-lust in every land on which lieth the shadow of the Cross. ... when Europe is exhausted the reign of Asia will begin, for there the sun is rising. So say we.'<sup>83</sup>

<sup>80</sup> For example, *Église d'Albi : la semaine religieuse de l'Archidiocèse d'Albi*, 17 October 1914, 530 ; *New Zealand Tablet*, 14 January 1915.

<sup>81</sup> *Occult Review*, 20 (1914) 174.

<sup>82</sup> Arthur Conan Doyle, *The History of Spiritualism* (Cambridge, 1926), Volume 2; 'A Scottish Seer', *Light*, 12 February 1916, 56.

<sup>83</sup> Frederick Bligh Bond, *The Hill of Vision: A Forecast of the Great War* (Boston, 1919), pp. 15, 16, 19.



In France today, Mme Fraya is sometimes cited as the grand prophetic dame of the Great War, due in large part to a biography published in the 1950s that contained highly dubious claims about her war-time prowess and political clients.<sup>84</sup> Fraya's real name was Marie-Valentine Dencausse (1871-1954). Born in the Landes region of southwest France, she made her name as a chiromancer and graphologist, but also professed clairvoyant powers. She became a well-known figure amongst psychical researchers, and in 1913 the doctor and psychical researcher Eugène Osty published a book on metapsychic cognition in which he explored Fraya's powers and her 'very advanced' brain.<sup>85</sup> Her consulting room in Rue d'Edimbourg, Paris, was frequented by international high-society figures. Just before the war, the Paris journal of the Radical Ottoman Party liked to mention the visits of its political rivals to the clairvoyant's rooms. She received press interest in December 1914 for her analysis of the Kaiser's handwriting, which, she stated, exhibited the signs of a strongly unbalanced mind, and that he was vain, slow to comprehend, and would offer a sad spectacle when he was inevitably defeated.<sup>86</sup> But look through the international literature of the war period and one name stands out above all the rest: Madame de Thèbes. Indeed, after the War the French press referred to Mme Fraya variously as the 'new Mme de Thèbes' or her 'proclaimed heiress' in the public consciousness.<sup>87</sup>

Madame de Thèbes was born Annette Savary at 52 Rue des Envierges in the hamlet of Ménilmontant, in the commune of Belleville, around 1844. Her father was a carpenter, and at the time of her birth Ménilmontant was a small village on the outskirts of Paris that would soon be swallowed up into the twentieth *arrondissement* of the expanding city. She began working as a cashier in a gentleman's outfitters near the Palais-Royal, then around 1877 as a private tutor for a bourgeois family.<sup>88</sup> From around 1882 she was drawn to the stage and appeared in small roles in provincial tours under the stage name of Mlle Dhalyle. Then, in 1884, she became a *confidante* of the actress and notorious courtesan Léonide Leblanc (1842-1894), herself a former primary school teacher. Leblanc, who was nick-named 'Madame Maximum' for her prodigious sexual appetite, had many high-profile lovers included George Clémenceau, who would later lead France through the last two years of the First World War.

It was in 1890 that Savary took her first big step towards celebrity and power, when she adopted the name Madame de Sauval and established herself as a card-reader or *cartomancienne* at 46 Rue Laugier. She then learned the more 'scientific' art of chiromancy, influenced by the work and fame of the Parisian artist and well-known chiromancer Adolphe Desbarrolles. He had published an influential manual on the subject in the 1850s, which went through numerous editions in several languages over the ensuing decades. Desbarrolles died in 1886, and a gap appeared in the firmament of high-society prognosticators. Still, prognostication was a crowded market in Paris. An ambitious young woman trying to make her way in the business required an influential patron, and he appeared in the form of Alexandre Dumas, son of the famous novelist, and a successful dramatist in his own right. Dumas *filis* had a long-standing interest in chiromancy having learned the art from

<sup>84</sup> Simone de Tervagne, *Madame Fraya m'a dit: Les confidences de la plus grande voyante du siècle* (Paris, 1955).

<sup>85</sup> Eugène Osty, *Lucidité et intuition: étude expérimentale* (Paris, 1913).

<sup>86</sup> Gabriel Cabannes, *Galerie des Landais* (Hossegor, 1931), vol. 5, pp. 123-6; *Mècheroutiette* 26 (1912) 63; 18 (1911) 47; 13 (1910) 60; *Le Figaro*, 10 December 1914.

<sup>87</sup> *La Revue hebdomadaire*, 10 January 1920, 7; *Le Petit Parisien*, 29 August 1931; *Echo de Bougie*, 16 December 1934.

<sup>88</sup> Details of her early life were investigated by her contemporary the theatre journalist Louis Schneider. See his pieces in *Gil Blas*, 13 June 1906; *Le Petit Parisien*, 12 August 1932. See also *L'ami de Ménilmontant: Organe de la paroisse Notre-Dame de la Croix* 104 (1919) 2-6.

Desbarolles. Savary and Dumas were introduced by a mutual acquaintance, the son of the popular painter of cats, Louis-Eugène Lambert. Savary was invited several times to Dumas' home in Paris and his country mansion at Marly. There is no evidence as to whether their relationship was sexual, however. Although a public critic of society-climbing courtesans, Dumas was not averse to sleeping around. The first public mention of their relationship concerned a dinner party hosted by Dumas that included several eminent doctors and members of the *Académie Française*, and involved a discussion on and session of palm reading. The nature of the dinner party and its guests was reported with a raised eyebrow by *Le Figaro* in March 1893.<sup>89</sup> A few days later, the conservative daily newspaper *Le Gaulois* mockingly compared Savary to the mussel and potato salad that had come into vogue in Paris salons after its description in Dumas' play *Francillon*, referring to 'this Madame de Thèbes, who Dumas has just thrown at us, as, not long ago, the indigestible *salade japonaise!*'<sup>90</sup> But Savary proved no flash in the pan.

It was Dumas who suggested to Savary that she adopt the professional name 'Madame de Thèbes' in reference to a play he had been working for years called *La Route de Thèbes*, a psychological drama centred on a mysterious woman. He never finished the play but the creation of Madame de Thèbes was completed to great effect. By the time Dumas died in 1895, de Thèbes' business was well established, and for the next two decades the elite of Parisian society made their way to her consulting rooms at 29 Avenue de Wagram. There were several clients from the literary world. Marcel Proust once went to consult her after feeling ill. She read his palm, gave him a worried look, and sensibly told him go 'far away for a rest'. There were international royal and political clients. A Serbian diplomat recalled in 1917 how in the early 1890s Queen Nathalie of Serbia had taken two female acquaintances to see Madame de Thèbes, one of them, Draga Mashin, who was to become her daughter-in-law. Mashin and her future husband Alexander, now the king of Serbia, were assassinated in a coup in 1903 – an event Mme Fraya claimed to have predicted. Apparently de Thèbes had, likewise informed Mashin, 'that she [Mashin] cherished very high ambitions, that she would see the desire of her heart fulfilled, but that very fulfilment would lead to a catastrophe in which both she and her husband should perish.' Writing of his time in Haiti the travel writer Harry Franck observed the influence of Madame de Thèbes amongst the Caribbean island's tumultuous political elite: 'If the stories which gradually leak out from the confidences of returning natives to their friends are trustworthy, she tells all Haitians that they are someday to become president of their country, not a bad guess under old conditions ... More than one revolution has been started on the strength of her Prophecies.'<sup>91</sup>

Madame de Thèbes had a successful publishing career, with titles such as *L'Énigme de la main* (1901). The vehicle for her First World War prophecies, though, was her *Almanach de Mme A. de Thèbes*, the first volume of which appeared in 1903. It was released at Christmas and unlike British predictive almanacs at the time, its contents were largely based around her divinatory investigations as a chiromancer, though numerological and astrological observations were included.<sup>92</sup> In her *Almanach* for 1913, de Thèbes had predicted, 'Germany menaces Europe in general and France in particular. When the war breaks out she will have willed it, but after it there will be no longer Hohenzollern or Prussian domination.' She was

<sup>89</sup> *Le Figaro*, 31 March 1893.

<sup>90</sup> *Le Gaulois*, 2 April 1893.

<sup>91</sup> Chedomille Mijatovich, *The Memoirs of a Balkan Diplomat* (London, 1917), p. 195; Harry A. Franck, *Roaming Through the West Indies* (New York, 1920), p. 163.

<sup>92</sup> Nicole Edelman, *Histoire de la voyance et du paranormal du XVIIIe siècle à nos jours* (Paris, 2006), pp. 100-101.

far from alone in her confidence. Several prominent French diviners and occultists also indicated war would break out in 1913, including the influential Gérard Encausse, otherwise known as Papus. In January 1913, he predicted in the occult magazine *Mystéria* that the year would be dark, bringing many tears, blood shed, and cruel bereavements, ‘never have the signs of war been so numerous’. ‘I am no prophet’, he declared, but ‘the hour is dangerous and the future menacing’. This was certainly true for himself, as he died from tuberculosis in 1916 while working in the French army medical corps.<sup>93</sup> J.-H. Lavour, had published a range of prophecies that collectively pointed to the end of the German empire in 1912 and 1913. In the preface to his 1914 edition, he accepted that 1913 ended without the predictions being realised, but he said his conclusions remained absolutely justified in that 1913 ‘was the beginning of a period of two years in the course of which the said events would infallibly occur!’ This edition would go on to be published in Spanish and Romanian.<sup>94</sup> The supposed prophecy of Count Leo Tolstoy, which circulated in England and France, foretold that Europe would be consumed by a destructive calamity in 1913. In Germany, meanwhile, gloomy predictions were made about the number 13, as it was in 1813 that the bloody campaign with Napoleon was fought. The centenary heralded a new conflict.<sup>95</sup>

War obviously did not come that year, but deeply puzzled by the strength and number of the war predictions, several occultists suggested there was a crucial reason. The compiler of prophecies of the Great War, Countess Zalinski, wonder in 1917 whether ‘some great occult force or power interposed in an effort to stay the calamity, but which was able only to postpone it for a single year.’ Electrical engineer and ‘Thought power’ advocate, F.L. Rawson, believed the delayed outbreak of war was due to the many prayers that had been said by ‘mental workers’ striving for peace.<sup>96</sup>

As 1914 loomed, several French diviners rolled back on the ominous predictions. Mme Andréé, who read the coffee grounds, and the tarot reader Mme Lorenza, assured readers that there was no reason to worry, and that 1914 might even be a prosperous period. ‘I do not foresee any particularly serious events – such as war – for the year 1914’, divined the latter.<sup>97</sup> But de Thèbes stuck to her claims, with her *Almanach* for 1914 warning:

This year we shall pass through the gravest and most decisive hours. It will be a year especially happy for France, in spite of blood, in spite of tears, and in spite of uneasy omens, victory! Victory! We have nothing to fear from the trials of fate. France will emerge renewed in strength, reconstituted by war.

Regarding Germany: ‘All is disquieting in her destiny. The person of the Emperor is most threatened by fate. It is not the eagle of victory he bears on his helmet.’

<sup>93</sup> “‘Année sombre’ dit le docteur Papus’, *Mystéria* 1 (1913) 95-6.

<sup>94</sup> J.-H. Lavour, *Comment se réalise en ce moment même la fin de l'Empire allemand, annoncée par plusieurs prophéties célèbres, précises et concordantes* (Paris, 1915), p. 5. J.-H. Lavour, *Cómo llega en los actuales momentos el fin del Imperio alemán*, trans. Juan García Valladolid (Madrid, 1915); J.-H. Lavour, *Cum se indeplinește chiar în momentul acesta sfârșitul Imperiului german prevestit prin mai multe proorociri celebre, precise și concordante*, trans. Scarlat Ion Ghica, (Bucharest, 1919).

<sup>95</sup> *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, Vol. 9, p. 473.

<sup>96</sup> Countess Zalinski, *Noted Prophecies, Predictions, Omens, and Legends Concerning the Great War* (Chicago, 1917), p. 83; F.L. Rawson, *How the War Will End* (London, 1917), p. 43.

<sup>97</sup> Le Naour, *Nostradamus*, pp. 43-4.

During the early months of the war these pronouncements were repeated in the international press from New Zealand to America, Britain to Germany.<sup>98</sup> The French press regularly reported on and criticised the activities of Madame de Thèbes. Her almanac for 1914 was a popular seller on the streets of Paris. ‘Men lend an ear to prophecies,’ wrote one reporter from the capital, ‘and books containing the predictions of Madame de Thèbes and the Prophecy of Mayence are for sale on the boulevards.’<sup>99</sup> There was also a trade in bogus prophecies under her name. She wrote to the newspapers several times during 1914 and 1915 to complain of the ‘audacious jokers’ who were peddling such street literature. The only predictions on the war she had published, spoken about, and authorised, she stated, were her *Almanachs* for 1913 and 1914.<sup>100</sup>

While one Austrian newspaper dismissed ‘the famous Madame de Thèbes’ as being a mere agitator for the ‘Pan-Slavic’ clique in Paris who sought to unify the Slavic nations of eastern Europe, she was widely feted as an extraordinary international figure.<sup>101</sup> Such was her fame due to her war prophecy, that in 1915 the Finnish-Swedish film director Mauritz Stiller made a romantic drama about an ambitious politician who does not realise that he is the illegitimate son of none other than Madame de Thèbes, but this knowledge falls into the hands of a political rival. By this time, de Thèbes sought a degree of refuge from the media scrutiny and glare, and bought a farm in Meung-sur-Loire, southwest of Orleans, where she raised turkeys. The French press did not miss a trick in mocking her flight to the countryside. *Le Cris de Paris*, observed that she ‘who can announce the fall of empires and the death of kings, a dozen months in advance, cannot foresee from one week to another the rise or fall in the price of eggs’.<sup>102</sup> She died alone in her country home in December 1916, her adopted son having died of an illness sometime before - a fate she said she had read in his palm. Her demise was global news, reported in newspapers from Austria to Australia and America.<sup>103</sup> She left a bequest that the capital from the sale of her farm be used to provide a dowry for one of the poorest and most deserving girls born in Ménilmontant who agreed to marry that same year, the recipient to be chosen by the parish priest. Fitting for the resting place of a global superstar, she was buried in the celebrity-laden Père Lachaise cemetery, not far from her birthplace.

### ***Looking to the stars***

During the war, as at other times of conflict down the centuries, people pondered the portent of unusual astronomical occurrences in the sky. Italian and Serbian soldiers were keen interpreters of meteors, shooting stars, and halos. A total eclipse of the sun across the Baltic and Russia on the 21 August 1914 was taken by some as a bad omen about the nascent war. And when the white dwarf Nova Aquilae was detected by telescope in June 1918 it led to speculation in the press as to whether it heralded anything for the conflict’s end.<sup>104</sup> Then there were the planets; the brightness of Venus was the focus of particular attention in Italy as the ‘star of peace’. One planet, above all, was thought to preside over the outcome on the battlefields – Mars. ‘Was it the influence of Mars, the god of war, which drove the wind on

<sup>98</sup> See, for example, *Evening Post* (New Zealand), 12 December 1914.

<sup>99</sup> *British Review* 8 (1914) 227.

<sup>100</sup> *La Lanterne*, 29 October 1914.

<sup>101</sup> *Wiener Journal*, 19 November 1915.

<sup>102</sup> *Fortnightly Review*, 5 May 1916, 156.

<sup>103</sup> See, for example, *The Argus* (Melbourne), 24 February 1917; *Boston Daily Globe*, 27 December 1917; *Der Tiroler*, 5 January 1917;

<sup>104</sup> Dauzat, *Légendes*, p. 253; Nikola Marković, “‘Od kopile kočicu i pobeg-zrno od kukuruz’”. Sujeverje u srpskoj vojsci tokom Prvog svetskog rata’, *Godišnjak za društvenu istoriju* 13 (2006) p. 65; Le Naour, *Nostradamus*, pp. 53-4; *Huddersfield Daily Examiner*, 19 June 1918.

the warpath'? Pondered the *Whitby Gazette*, in its report of a lecture at the London Royal Institution, entitled, 'Wireless Messages from the Stars'. The lecturer observed how the position of Mars in relation to the constellation Leo was just the same as at the time of the Crimean and Boer Wars. This was surely no coincidence. In France, the bellicose astrologer Raoul Larmier, predicted the fall of the Hohenzollerns in 1913 or 1914 because of the conjunction of the malign planet Saturn with Mars in the House of Taurus.<sup>105</sup>

The scanning of the skies for portentous comets and shooting stars was an aspect of natural astrology, but most of the astrological ruminations about the war concerned the 'science' of natal and horary astrology. In simple terms, the former concerns the calculation of the position of the planets and constellations in the heavens at the exact moment of a person's birth. A horoscope or birth chart can then be constructed that indicates what the future holds based on the qualities of the most influential planets and constellations. Horary astrology involves calculating the position of the planets at the moment a question is asked, such as, 'When will the war end?'

On the eve of war, there was little apparent public preoccupation with astrology in France and Germany, and there were only a handful of manuals and guidebooks compared to those explaining other occult sciences such as palmistry and cartomancy. Most of those who published on the astrology of the war, such as the Frenchman Albert Faucheux (F. Ch. Barlet), were Theosophists who practised astrology more as an aspect of mystical occultism than a practical 'science'.<sup>106</sup> At the centre of the very small astrological fraternity in Germany was the Austrian actor and occultist Karl Brandler-Pracht who set up astrological societies in Vienna, Munich, and Leipzig between 1907 and 1910. He and several others, such as Otto Pöllner, Wilhelm Becker, and Ernst Tiede would be central to the popularising of astrology in Germany during and after the war.<sup>107</sup> Britain was recognised as the superpower in the astrological world, and the renaissance of popular astrology in Germany was based, in part, on German translations by the likes of Brandler-Pracht and Becker of English astrological manuals. Before setting up his professional astrological service in Berlin in 1910, for instance, Becker had gone to England to learn astrology from Alan Leo, a Theosophist and the founding editor of *The Astrologer's Magazine*. While there, he acquired the German rights to several of Leo's numerous popular astrological books.

The vast majority of the population never consulted an astrologer in person, but many people read or heard about their war predictions, which were set out in numerous pamphlets, such as *The Great Devastation; A Prophecy of the Times that are coming upon Europe, Astrologically Interpreted by Sefharial* (1914). While British newspapers only began to produce the now very familiar horoscope columns from the 1930s, during the First World War they periodically reported on the latest astrological pronouncements, sometimes with a disapproving air, sometimes with tongue firmly in cheek, but often without comment. Astrologers also gave numerous public lectures. In February 1915, for instance, the press reported on a public talk at the Picture Palace in Wells, Somerset, in aid of the Red Cross by the president of the Cardiff Astrological Society, Mr T. Gould, entitled 'Astrology and the Great War', in which he observed that eclipses were the most potent causes of conflict. Later that year, Mr H.B. Hammond lectured at the Arthur Hall, Dover, on 'Astrology as a Guide to

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<sup>105</sup> *Whitby Gazette*, 21 January 1916; Naour, *Nostradamus*, p. 44.

<sup>106</sup> Edelman, *Histoire de la voyance*, p. 104 ; F. Ch. Barlet, *L'astrologie et la guerre* (Paris, 1917).

<sup>107</sup> Ellic Howe, *Urania's Children: The Strange World of the Astrologers* (London, 1967), pp.77, 82-4; Kocku von Stuckrad, *Geschichte der Astrologie: von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich, 2003), pp. 321-36.

Life', and fascinated his audience by revealing the Kaiser's horoscope and what it meant for Germany's destiny.<sup>108</sup>

But it was Britain's venerable astrological almanacs that had the widest influence on wartime popular culture. The main titles were: *Zadkiel's Almanac*, named after the *nom de plume* of its founder Richard James Morrison (1795-1874); *Raphael's Almanac or the Prophetic Messenger*, which dated back to the 1820s; and the granddaddy of them all, *Moore's Almanac* or *Vox Stellarum* ('Voice of the Stars'), founded by the astrologer-physician Francis Moore in the 1690s. *Moore's Almanac* sold in its hundreds of thousands every year during the nineteenth century and became deeply rooted in folklore.<sup>109</sup> Its pronouncements for the coming year were a perennial fascination for the press. As to the war, *Moore's* certainly gains first prize for the most understated prediction of the coming conflict, with its advice for August 1914 reading: 'The vacation is likely to be disturbed by adverse events, in which the travelling public are involved.'<sup>110</sup> Out on the battlefield, one officer reminisced, in 1921, about his Cockney army driver, who called one of his horses Old Moore because 'e knows every blinkin' fing like Old Moore's *Almanac*.' One evening they were warned of a gas attack, and the recently supplied nose-bag gasmasks for horses were put into action. When the officer walked back to the rear of the column labouring in his own gas mask he saw that his driver had taken his off already. When he asked why he was not wearing his, 'he leaned over the saddle and replied, in a confidential whisper, "Old Moore chucked his orf, so there ain't no blinkin' gas abaht - 'e knows.'"'<sup>111</sup>

As the war clouds gathered, and during the early months of the conflict, the race was on to calculate and unpick the horoscopes of the European aristocracies and the leaders of the combatant countries to see what lay in store for their subjects. The German astrologer Ernst Tiede concluded from his examination of the horoscopes of Europe's statesmen that there was a two-to-one chance that the Central Powers would be victorious.<sup>112</sup> Not surprisingly, British astrologers read the same horoscopes very differently. In September 1914, E.H. Bailey gave his assessment in the periodical *Old Moore's Monthly Messenger*. The President of France had 'a fatalistic horoscope', concluded Bailey. The Sun was conjoined with the Moon, and in square to Mars and Venus, which were 'terrible influences, indicative not only of war but of personal violence'. The King of Italy was born with Mars and Saturn conjoined, however, which denoted that he was keeping out of conflict, though an impending solar eclipse could change things. As to the Kaiser, he had 'Mars in square to the radical Sun' – 'another evil ray'. Bailey concluded with the stirring news that there was every indication from the stars that, 'the greatest victory in the annals of the British Army and the ultimate crushing of the German Empire' were in prospect.<sup>113</sup>

As the war progressed, the almanac compilers applied their calculations to mapping out the twists and turns of the military campaigns. A digest of the war predictions in *Moore's*

<sup>108</sup> *Devon and Exeter Gazette*, 24 February 1915; *Wells Journal*, 26 February 1915; *Dover Express*, 1 October 1915.

<sup>109</sup> Patrick Curry, *Prophecy and Power: Astrology in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 101-2; Owen Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture, 1736-1951* (Manchester, 1999), pp. 153-57. In Ireland there was also *Old Moore's Almanac* founded by the eighteenth-century Dublin astrologer Theophilus Moore.

<sup>110</sup> Allan Haywood Bright, 'The Prophetic Literature of the War', *Proceedings of the Literary and Philosophical Society of Liverpool* 64 (1916) 88.

<sup>111</sup> *500 of the Best Cockney War Stories* (London, 1921), pp. 114-5.

<sup>112</sup> Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism: Secret Aryan Cults and their Influence on Nazi Ideology* (London, 1985), p. 103.

<sup>113</sup> E.H. Bailey, 'The Armageddon of Nations', *Old Moore's Monthly Messenger* 7 (September 1914), 227-8.

*Almanac* for 1916 is typical. The ‘Voice of the Stars’ predicted violence and further bloodshed in Italy in January, and that ‘the legions of Germany will be rolled back to the borders of their own country.’ For February, however, it appeared that ‘our enemies will be active, and may gain temporary advantages’. The centre of Europe would be, by then, a scene of ‘carnage and devastation.’ In May, the position of Jupiter to Mars presaged a ‘brilliant victory’ for the British Navy. In August, the new moon falling on the Kaiser’s Saturn signified the beginning of Germany’s downfall. Aviation would also make great strides. As for December, ‘the end of the year does not, to my judgement, see the end of the war ... So far as our own country is concerned, continued progress and victory are assured’. Unsurprisingly, Old Moore’s long-standing, though less popular, astrological competitor *Raphael’s Prophetic Almanac*, followed in a similar vein for 1916. There was no immediate end in sight to the bloodshed and sacrifice, but the stars assured a glorious victory whenever it would come.

In 1915, the Jesuit priest Herbert Thurston analysed the content of a range of astrological almanacs and their myriad war predictions up to that date, including *Old Moore* and *Zadkiel’s Almanac*. His explanation of the ‘system’ used by almanac compilers was spot on. As he noted, they worked on the balance of probabilities: ‘an immense number of shots are made – that many of them are mutually inconsistent matters little – and it is hoped that a fair proportion of these will go near enough to the mark to be claimed as successes.’ He noticed how they made prognostications three times over in each issue. First, the headline predictions appeared in the general outlook for the year, then in the monthly calendar of events, and also in the horoscopes of important people. The forecasts in each could be quite divergent from one another and even contradictory, as a means of covering a range of prognosticatory possibilities. Statements were also phrased with ‘judicious hedging’ – ‘we are not told positively that a war will take place, but that peace is seriously menaced; we are not informed that the Emperor of Austria, for example, will die, but that he ought to take care of his health.’<sup>114</sup> *Raphael* rather gave the game away when ‘he’ apologised as follows: ‘My Almanac is published on the first day of August in each year, and the great war broke out in 1914 a few days afterwards, consequently I was unable to make special reference to it in the 1915 edition.’<sup>115</sup>

If the British almanacs were unanimous in their predictions of ultimate victory, they were remarkably coy about when that would happen. After giving a brief overview of *Old Moore’s* predictions in ‘his’ almanac for 1918, one British newspaper grumbled humorously in August 1917 that “‘Old Moore’ does everything but tell us when the war will end.”<sup>116</sup> This was very true, but people also read what they wanted into astrological predictions. An Essex vicar noted in his diary for September 1917, ‘many of the country people have absolute faith in the predictions of ‘Old Moore’s’ *Almanac*. Several have told Dr Smallwood how relieved they are to know that the war will be over in 1918; Old Moore says so.’ This was actually because *Moore* predicted that in April ‘the foe will be pressing at the gates’, so villagers were quite sure that the Germany would launch a failed invasion of Britain that month.<sup>117</sup> *Zadkiel’s Almanac* for 1915 - one of the few almanacs for that year to be printed *after* the outbreak of the war – thought that with Uranus setting, Russia would swiftly defeat Germany, and the war would likely end before 1915 arrived. It was less confident in subsequent years.

<sup>114</sup> Herbert Thurston, *The War & the Prophets* (London, 1915), pp. 108-9.

<sup>115</sup> Bright, ‘The Prophetic Literature of the War’, 88.

<sup>116</sup> *Newcastle Daily Journal*, 14 August 1917.

<sup>117</sup> James Munson (ed.), *Echoes of the Great War: the diary of the Reverend Andrew Clark 1914-1919* (Oxford, 1985), p. 211.

Writing in January 1915, Sepharial, the pen name of astrologer Walter Gorn Old (1864-1929), critiqued the astrological efforts to date, and announced that according to his own meticulous mathematical calculations the war would not end ‘until Saturn comes to the opposition of the Sun in the Kaiser’s horoscope’, and that would happen in August 1917. This conflicted with the verdict of an Austrian astrologer, Karl Zanolovsky, who after months of calculations reported to the Austrian press that the war would end on the 17 August 1916, with three emperors and three kings being victorious. In March 1918, German occultist and astrologer Oskar Ganser had a dream: ‘I was with my deceased father. He said to me, “my dear son, you have calculated carefully, but you have not considered various factors; the war will not be over on 2 May 1918, but on 19 August 1919. You will experience that.”’<sup>118</sup> Then, in the autumn of 1918, a Bombay newspaper printed the latest calculations of the Calcutta astrologer Manmatha Bhattacharjee who forecast that the Allies would enter Cologne by the 1 July 1919 and the Germans would finally capitulate by 5 September 1919.<sup>119</sup> I have not come across any astrological predictions that accurately predicted either the armistice or the eventual end of the war.

Each time the stars failed, the astrologers would go back to their charts. It was questioned how the horoscope of one man could foretell the fate of a whole empire. But Alan Leo was bullish, ‘To say that the horoscopes of monarchs have no national influence is to deny the truth of Astrology.’<sup>120</sup> They returned over and over again to see how past developments in the war had related to the horoscopes of the rulers and the position of the planets and constellations at the time. The successful astrological matches were taken as firm proof, while the many inconsistencies and failures were rarely discussed. Ralph Shirley stuck his neck out into deep astrological space in January 1917 by suggesting that as well as employing horoscopes, the course of the war could even be mapped out by assessing the signs of the zodiac governing the different combatant countries. ‘There have been some curious confirmations,’ he observed, ‘though we are still left in doubt with regard to very important points in this connection.’<sup>121</sup> ‘Twice over have we had confirmation of the rule of Libra over Austria,’ he concluded for example. The first proof was that Mars transited Libra at the time of the victories of the Russian General Brusilov against the Austrians in the spring of 1916. The successful German campaign against Rumania led by Field Marshal Mackensen was corroboration that Leo ruled over Rumania.

### ***Armageddon and the new world order***

While much time and thought went in to proving that the war had been predicted in old prophecies or by the application of occult sciences, as the horrific nature of the conflict unfolded, the war came to be seen as an omen, in itself, of a far more momentous transformation of the world to come, a metaphysical crisis of spiritual destiny. For Christian occultists such as the French mystical philosopher and electrical engineer Michael Forhan, the war was a spiritual conflict in which Germany and Turkey would be defeated, because Jesus would finally bless those who he loved. Members of the British ritual occult organisation, the Golden Dawn, talked expectantly of a war that would herald a magical new

<sup>118</sup>Sepharial, ‘The End of the War. A Contest of Astrological Opinion’, *The British Journal of Astrology* 8 (January 1915) 74-5; *Mittags-Zeitung*, 23 February 1916; ‘Wann ist der Krieg zu Ende?’, *Zentralblatt Okkultismus*, 11 (1918) 473.

<sup>119</sup> *Leamington Spa Courier*, 25 October 1918.

<sup>120</sup> Alan Leo, *Mars: The War Lord* (London, 1915), p. 44.

<sup>121</sup> ‘Notes of the Month’, *The Occult Review* 25 (1917) 9.



age.<sup>122</sup> Numerous authors reached for their Bibles to see what the Old and New Testaments had to say. One argued that the war was playing out the ancient Biblical struggle between the Assyrians and the Israelites. The British were gifted a special providence by God, like the Israelites, and Germany harboured the poison of jealous hatred in their breasts, like the Assyrians. Their fate would be the same.<sup>123</sup>

The apocalypse predicted in the Book of Revelation, with the antichrist descending to wreak catastrophic death and destruction on the battlefield of Armageddon, proved the most obvious analogy. It was depicted and described in numerous artistic and literary representations of the Western Front. The German painter Max Beckmann repeatedly dreamed of the destruction of the world. While serving as a hospital orderly he came across a cemetery blown to pieces by grenade fire, and wrote home to his wife of the tombs ripped open and bones and skeletons hurled into the air and exposed, as if in some mocking pantomime of the Resurrection. The work of fellow German artist and machine gunner Otto Dix similarly borrowed from the biblical imagery of sixteenth-century art in portraying life in the trenches as a modern Armageddon.<sup>124</sup> A vision of the apocalypse was also the creative key to the international best-selling novel by Blasco Ibañez, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1916). This novel about an Argentinian family with German and French members who are drawn into the war on opposite sides, also includes Tchernoff, a wild Russian mystical-socialist living in Paris, who on seeing the French troops heading for the front, prophesizes that ‘when the sun arises in a few hours, the world will see coursing through its fields the four horsemen, enemies of mankind’. He goes on to describe a vision of the horsemen, the emissaries of German militarism, leading the apocalypse: ‘The blind forces of evil were about to be let loose throughout the world.’<sup>125</sup>

For some, the apocalypse was not a metaphor for the war: the war was truly the end times of the Book of Revelation. While that meant the near annihilation of humankind, it also heralded the return of Christ on earth and a wonderful future – a new millennium. Only a small percentage of humans, the elect, would survive to repopulate this New Jerusalem or Kingdom of God on earth. While the Book of Revelation had long been either ignored or quietly disputed in Christian theology, over the centuries profound upheavals, such as the German Reformation or the British Civil War, inspired episodes of millenarianism that gripped sections of the population. The First World War was no exception, and it fuelled pre-existing millenarian strands in evangelical Christianity and western occultism. In America, several popular evangelists were vocal in their conviction that the war was the ultimate sign of the apocalypse. The Baptist minister G.R. Eads, wrote in the Arkansas newspaper *Baptist and Commoner*, ‘the end of the age is approaching with lightning speed.’ The African-American Pentecostal leader Charles Mason, likewise explained, ‘present events proved that we are

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<sup>122</sup> YRAM (Michael Forhan), *La Guerre et le Merveilleux. Prophéties connues et Prédications inédites. Apparitions célèbres. Les Nombres. Une clef de l’histoire de France. Causes de la Guerre* (Paris, 1915).; Marcus Osterrieder, ‘Der prophezeite Krieg’, *Gegenwart. Zeitschrift für Kultur, Politik, Wirtschaft* 2 (2010) 25-34; Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago, 2004), pp. 221-3.

<sup>123</sup> Marr Murray, *Bible Prophecies and the Present War* (London, 1915). See also, for example, Georg Greite, *Was bedeuten die Weissagungen d. Propheten Daniel* (Lorch, 1916); F.P. Argall, *The Prophet in War Time: Isaiah’s Message for To-day* (London, 1916).

<sup>124</sup> Jay Winter, ‘Painting Armageddon’, Hugh Cecil and Peter Liddle (eds), *Facing Armageddon: The First World War Experienced* (London, 1996), pp. 859-66.

<sup>125</sup> Philip Jenkins, *The Great and Holy War: How World War I Changed Religion For Ever* (Oxford, 2014), pp. 143-4.

living in the last days and the end was near.’<sup>126</sup> While most equated Germany with the forces of the antichrist, the Iowa pastor D.W. Langelett produced a pamphlet in German and in English, published by the German Literary Board, in which he expressed ‘not the slightest doubt that the present European war is a manifestation of the wrath of God’, concluding that ‘England is the Gog of Prophecy and is Therefore Doomed to be Defeated’. The people or peoples referred to in Revelation as Gog and Magog, the sworn enemies of God according to the Old Testament, were the servants of Satan who the Messiah would finally defeat to usher in the new millennium. Langelett wrote the pamphlet with the ‘object of warning the small remnant of God’s people in England of the approaching doom’, but grumbled that not one of his fellow ministers with whom he discussed the unfolding prophecy were responsive to promoting his anti-British interpretation.<sup>127</sup>

Charles Taze Russell, the founder of the Watch Tower Society (Jehovah’s Witnesses), dedicated much time to calculating from Biblical references when the world would end and concluded it would be the year 1914. By the time of the war, there were over a thousand Russellite communities and millions of copies of his books and sermons had been printed. The advent of war gave a further boost to Russell’s aura of prophetic wisdom. He confirmed to his followers that ‘the present great war in Europe is the beginning of the Armageddon of the Scriptures.’<sup>128</sup> When the apocalypse clearly failed to happen, he had to revise his predictions. Before his death in 1916 he declared that Christ had, indeed, returned in spirit, but that the apocalypse would happen sometime hence.

These American influences enflamed millennial tensions across the Atlantic in colonial Africa where several African evangelical prophets, influenced by Baptist missionaries and the Watch Tower Society, prophesied that the German army would come and destroy the hated colonial rulers, enabling Africans to control once more their own lands and destiny under a supreme African ruler. In the Witwatersrand, near Johannesburg, prophets preached that the war was a sign to reject Western customs in preparation for salvation in a new era.<sup>129</sup> In Malawi (Nyasaland), around 1908, Kenan Kamwana, a subscriber to the Watch Tower Society, echoed Charles Russell by publicly predicting that the Second Coming of Christ would happen in October 1914. The British would be driven out and Christ would end taxation in the country. Concerned that Kamwana’s followers might rise up in preparation for this glorious millennium, the British authorities deported him to South Africa. With the advent of war in Europe, the authorities’ fears were confirmed when, in January 1915, the American-trained Baptist missionary John Chilembwe led a messianic revolt against British conscription of Africans that was inspired by a blend of millennial expectation and colonial repression.<sup>130</sup>

Millenarian evangelism regarding the war was not as influential in Britain, but there was evidently considerable public interest in the issue. Pamphlets appeared with titles such as,

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<sup>126</sup> Matthew Avery Sutton, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism* (Cambridge, Mass., 2014), p. 69.

<sup>127</sup> D.W. Langelett, *Gog und seine Niederlage : Hesekiel 38 und 39 ; ein Nachweis, daß England der Gog ist, von welchem der Prophet geweissagt hat, und darum in diesem Kriege unterliegen muß* (Luzerne, Iowa, 1915); Langelett, *The World-War in the Light of Prophecy* (Luzerne, 1915), pp. 3, 4.

<sup>128</sup> Tony Wills, *A People for His Name: A History of Jehovah's Witnesses and an Evaluation* (New York, 1967), p. 52.

<sup>129</sup> Albert Grundlingh, *War and Society: Participation and Remembrance: South African black and Coloured Troops in the First World War, 1914-1918* (2014), pp. 16-17.

<sup>130</sup> Assa Okoth, *A History of Africa: African societies and the establishment of colonial rule, 1800-1915* (Nairobi, 2006), pp. 393-4; John McCracken, *A History of Malawi, 1859-1966* (Woodbridge, 2012), pp. 135-7.

*The Great War--in the divine light of prophecy: Is it Armageddon?*<sup>131</sup> Similar questions were posed in local newspapers. It was observed in 1915 that ‘the word “Armageddon” has now become a household word; it appears in the Press, and is used by the “man in the street”’, and the French professor of literature, Fernand Baldensperger, confirmed from experience three years later that the British ‘specially indulged’ in such war-time literature.<sup>132</sup> Numerous clergymen gave sermons and talks on the subject. In November 1917, Pastor W.W. Foulston preached on the matter to an audience at the Congregationalist Church in Aylesbury. He was inspired to do so because he had received numerous enquiries about the Book of Revelation in relation to the war.<sup>133</sup> The Rev. Henry Charles Beeching, preaching in Norwich Cathedral in September 1914, was quite clear in his views that the country was engaged in ‘a war of Christ against anti-Christ’, and that ‘the battle is not only ours, it is God’s, it is indeed Armageddon. Ranged against us are the Dragon and the False Prophet.’<sup>134</sup> But it would appear that most clergy refrained from such dramatic prophetic judgements. The Rev. J.W. Genders, for instance, told a large audience at Ilfracombe, Devon, that with three grandsons in the forces and two grand-daughters in army hospitals abroad, he took a special interest in this question. He concluded that as dreadful as the war was, it was not the Armageddon of Scripture.<sup>135</sup> Foulston quoted approvingly from the Irish biblical scholar, Robert Henry Charles, who had written that, ‘Never in the whole history of Christianity has the power of Anti-Christ asserted itself so triumphantly as in the last three years’, but Foulston was ultimately not convinced that the apocalypse was imminent.<sup>136</sup> The war was, nevertheless, considered a profound intimation of the metaphorical Armageddon that *could* befall humanity. When Bishop D’Arcy preached on the subject in Belfast Cathedral in December 1915, he explained that the Book of Revelation was not concerned with the course of history: it was a warning from God, and as such, it ‘possessed for them here and now, a value beyond all estimation.’<sup>137</sup>

The most vocal expressions of wartime millenarianism in Europe issued from the burgeoning theosophical movement. The Theosophical Society was founded in 1875 by the mystic Helena Blavatsky (1831-1891). She constructed a faith that blended Western occult traditions with Eastern religion, Buddhism and Hinduism in particular. She claimed to possess her wisdom and secret knowledge from mysterious spiritual masters known as the Mahatmas who resided in Egypt and the Himalayas. The concepts of karma and reincarnation were central to the theosophical faith and how the movement would come to view the war. Although by 1914 global membership of the Theosophical Society only stood at around 25,000 (2905 of them in Britain), its cultural influence was significant. A prodigious amount of theosophical literature was produced during the war included the battlefield paper *Kurukshetra*. A ‘Soldiers and Sailors Literature’ fund was created. Staff at the Society’s offices reported receiving letters from the front line expressing gratitude for the courage and strength such literature gave them.<sup>138</sup>

<sup>131</sup> W.F. T. Salt, *The Great War--in the divine light of prophecy: is it Armageddon?* (Bristol 1915); Augusta Cook, *Is it Armageddon? The present War in the light of divine prophecy* (London, 1917).

<sup>132</sup> Henry Sulley, *Is it Armageddon? Or Britain in Prophecy* (London, 1915), p. 5; Fernand Baldensperger, ‘Propheying in Time of War’, *Columbia University Quarterly* 20 (1918) 108.

<sup>133</sup> *Bucks Herald*, 3 November 1917.

<sup>134</sup> Henry Charles Beeching, *Armageddon. A sermon upon the war preached in Norwich Cathedral* (London, 1914), p. 14.

<sup>135</sup> *North Devon Journal*, 20 January 1916.

<sup>136</sup> *Bucks Herald*, 3 November 1917.

<sup>137</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, 27 December 1915.

<sup>138</sup> Maria Carlson, *No Religion Higher Than Truth: A History of the Theosophical Movement in Russia, 1875-1922* (Princeton, 1993), p?; Herman A.O. de Tollenaere, *The Politics of Wisdom: Theosophy and Labour*,

Following Blavatsky's death, the leadership of the Society adopted a more millenarian outlook, particularly as expressed by the former Anglican clergyman, Charles Leadbeater. When he met an adolescent Indian boy named Jiddu Krishnamurti at the headquarters of the Theosophical Society in Madras, Leadbeater, who professed to have clairvoyant powers, received the revelation that the boy was destined to be the vehicle for the awaited World Teacher - Christ reborn, who would establish a new world religion on earth. Krishnamurti was brought from India to Britain in 1911 and on the outbreak of war he and his brother were removed to Cornwall for a year, and then he was looked after by the Theosophist Gertrude Baillie-Weaver and her husband in a house in Wimbledon.<sup>139</sup> A new branch of the Theosophical Society called the Order of the Star in the East was set up to welcome the World Teacher, with Krishnamurti at its head. The cataclysm of the war indicated that the triumph of spirituality over materiality that would herald the arrival of the World Teacher was imminent: the new spiritual age would begin in England.

The war was interpreted as a great cosmic movement, an inevitable battle between the powers of Good and Evil - sometimes referred to as the White Lodge and the Black Lodge. The supernatural 'Intelligences' of each were believed to draw upon the thoughts and desires of men and women for spiritual sustenance. While many Theosophists downplayed the role of supernatural or semi-divine beings other than the Mahatmas, others, such as Alfred Percy Sinnett (1840-1921), sought to delineate the nature, history, and purpose of the Black Lodge and its role in the war. For Sinnett, the crisis represented by the conflict lay beyond the national karma of the countries concerned. To understand the cosmic significance of the war it was necessary to understand the great age of Atlantis that began millions of years before the earliest civilisations recorded in history. The first people of Atlantis were guided by the semi-divine members of the great White Lodge. But some mere mortals began to foster covetous and selfish desires for power, and so these dark devotees generated a new Lodge to serve their purposes. The human dark host may have been wiped out with the rest of Atlantis by the great flood, but the karmic restoration of their collective evil was destined to manifest itself one day. Humankind would avail itself of the Black Lodge again. In Atlantian times, the dark magical forces had existed in the astral plane, but as now manifest in the Great War, they had descended to the mental plane, and were all the more destructive for it. Germany had drawn down this evil, of course. 'The fate of the world depends upon the final extermination of that enemy,' Sinnett warned, 'the banishment from this world finally and altogether of those mighty entities aiming at its ruin.'<sup>140</sup>

Considering such views, it is hardly surprising that the war fundamentally challenged the principle of 'a universal brotherhood of humanity, without distinction of race' espoused by Theosophists. In 1915, the Theosophical Society convention in America discussed a resolution to be agreed across all national societies with regard to the war:

- (a) The war is not of necessity a violation of Brotherhood, but may on the contrary become obligatory in obedience to the ideal of Brotherhood.
- (b) That individual neutrality is wrong if it be believed that a principle of righteousness is at stake.

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*National, and Women's Movements in Indonesia and South Asia 1875-1947* (Leiden, 1996), pp. 153, 156-60; Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (Baltimore, 2001), p. 88.

<sup>139</sup> RADHA RAJAGOPAL SLOSS, *Lives in the Shadow with J. Krishnamurti* (London, 1991), p. 36.

<sup>140</sup> A.P. Sinnett, *The Spiritual Powers and the War* (London, 1915), p. 23. For a theosophical critique of these views, see N.D. Khandalavala, 'The Great War and the Dark Powers', *The Theosophist* 37 (1916) 65-75.

The Berlin theosophical bookseller Paul Raatz, Secretary of the Union of German Branches of the Theosophical Society, wrote to the Convention Committee expressing bitter criticism of the political nature of the resolution. He argued that it was still too early for the principle of Universal Brotherhood to be fully defined, and ‘the Committee is not justified in passing resolutions which bind the whole Society to one view.’ The 1916 Convention considered Raatz’s letter at length, but resolved that, ‘it is the conviction of the Convention that the powers of good are now raged against the powers of evil: that, among the nations, France is leading the charge of the White Lodge against the attack of Germany supported and directed by the Black Lodge and all of the evil forces of the world.’ Several German-American members spoke up in support of this resolution, but considering the sensitivity there was general agreement to postpone a vote indefinitely.<sup>141</sup>

A mystical revolution was in the making, and the conduct of the war would be decisive. As one contributor to the *American Theosophical Quarterly* wrote in 1916, ‘tolerated evil in us now may mean sinister world events twenty centuries hence. Sacrifice and aspiration now will without doubt bring spiritual fruit for centuries to come.’<sup>142</sup> There was a common view amongst British and American Theosophists, though, that the fight was against German militarism and materialism and not the German people *per se*, many of whom they recognised were privately against the war. Their good karma would ensure that Germany would prosper spiritually and culturally once the bad national karma had played its course. Germans, as much as any other peoples, would contribute spiritually to the new age of Universal Brotherhood that would come after.<sup>143</sup> It was also argued by some, that, through its pursuance of war and supposed atrocities, the German state was actually making good karma by uniting the decency of the world against the country. German troops would not die in vain. ‘We were content with material progress, and Germany, by showing us how vile a thing material progress can be, turned our minds and hearts to spiritual values and to everlasting truths’, wrote one Theosophist. As a karmic consequence, ‘the powers of evil are foredoomed: their success will become their undoing’.<sup>144</sup>

Theosophy was a ‘broad church’, and despite the principle of Universal Brotherhood, nationalist and racist interpretations of Theosophy became prominent during the war. The Russian Theosophical Society had been founded in 1908, and during its early years it produced a flurry of literature to cater for its few thousand members and the growing public interest in their message. The environment in Russia was receptive, with the country being described as ‘a continuous battle-field of prophecies’ since the war’s outbreak.<sup>145</sup> The Society was confident that its rapid growth was a sign of the spiritual renewal of the world in the depths of conflagration. The writings of Anna Kamenskaia, one of the leading contributors to the main Theosophical journal *Vestnik Teosofii (Herald of Theosophy)*, which ran from 1908 to 1917, pushed a popular predictive view that Russia was destined to play a superior occult role in the war. The nation’s karma was linked to the war-time suffering it would endure by cleansing the cosmic soul of the world. Traditional Slavic spirituality was destined, through

<sup>141</sup> *Theosophical Quarterly* 14 (1916) 84, 85, 90.

<sup>142</sup> ‘Some Spiritual Issues of the War’, *Theosophical Quarterly* 14 (1916), 115.

<sup>143</sup> F. Hallett, ‘The Inner Side of the War’, *The Theosophist* 36 (1915) 533-47. See also, C.W. Leadbeater, ‘The Great War’, *The Theosophist* 37 (1916), 511-28.

<sup>144</sup> ‘On the Screen of Time’, *Theosophical Quarterly* 13 (1915) 287.

<sup>145</sup> Baldensperger, ‘Prophesying in Time of War’, 110.

Theosophy, to conquer and rescue the decaying, egotistical, and materialist West.<sup>146</sup> Wellesley Tudor Pole was one British spiritualist who was in agreement, stating in late 1914, that in the midst of the current Armageddon, ‘the Slav child-soul is destined to bring illumination to us all.’<sup>147</sup> But three years later, such millennial enthusiasm was smothered by the Russian Revolution: the materialists had struck back. Still, as an article in the *Theosophical Quarterly* in January 1918 explained, the Revolution was clearly a manifestation of German karmic evil. Most of the Petrograd Bolsheviks talked a dialect of German, it claimed, ‘and they still think in that German dialect’.<sup>148</sup>

Germany had its Christian evangelical prophets, such as the spiritual healer and clairvoyant, Joseph Weibenberg (1855–1941). The Berlin authorities, concerned by the destabilising effect of his pronouncements and the growth of his following, temporarily incarcerated him during the war claiming he was insane, and continually hampered his activities. After the war, he made international headlines in May 1929 by prophesying that the Archangel Gabriel had told him that Britain was imminently doomed by an earthquake and would sink beneath the waves of the subsequent apocalyptic flood.<sup>149</sup> However, the most influential, nationalist millenarian tendencies in Germany and Austria were fuelled by Theosophy.<sup>150</sup> In the latter country, the war was enthusiastically embraced by its leading occultist Guido von List (1848–1919), whose ideas would go on to influence the ideology of the early Nazi Party. An ardent nationalist, von List had spent decades piecing together what he believed to be the true religion of the ancient Germans, and endeavoured to unlock the mystic powers of the runes. He sought the renewal of a pure Arian race and its pre-Christian faith and believed such a momentous time would inevitably come. This notion followed a long tradition of predictions of an age of Teutonic hegemony that date back to the medieval period. For List and his followers, the First World War heralded this long-awaited prophetic moment. In April 1915, he delivered a speech to the organisation he had recently founded, the *Hohe Armanen-Orden* or Higher Armanen Order (HAO), in which he welcomed the conflict as the beginning of a millenarian struggle, which after much apocalyptic woe, would herald a new, true German age wiped free of corrupted Christian religion. A ‘Strong one from Above’ would institute a totalitarian regime that would end the corrosive influence of inferior non-German peoples. Influenced by his Theosophist views, he believed that karma would ensure that the hundreds of thousands of German and Austrian war dead would be reborn as the elite shock troops of this new world order. One of List’s disciples, the fantasist and racist Jörg Lanz von Liebenfels, embellished the vision, seeing the war as heralding the beginning of a bloody chaotic period that would ultimately lead to an ‘ario-christian’ New Age. Inferior races would be wiped off the face of the earth and a mystical priesthood would govern a supranational Aryan state led by super humans imbued with holy electronic power.<sup>151</sup>

Another leading figure in Austrian and German occultism, Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925), founder of the Steiner School movement, argued publicly and repeatedly that the war was ‘a

<sup>146</sup> Maria Carlson, *No Religion Higher Than Truth: A History of the Theosophical Movement in Russia, 1875–1922* (Princeton, 1993), pp. 77–8.

<sup>147</sup> Tudor Pole, *Some Deeper Aspects of the War*, p. 15.

<sup>148</sup> ‘The Karma of the Russians’, *Theosophical Quarterly* 15 (1918) 201.

<sup>149</sup> Ulrich Linse, *Geisterseher und Wunderwirker: Heilssuche im Industriezeitalter* (Frankfurt am Main, 1996), pp. 118–9; *The Irish Times*, 24 May 1929.

<sup>150</sup> See Ulrich Linse, ‘“Universale Bruderschaft” oder nationaler Rassenkrieg – die deutschen Theosophen im Ersten Weltkrieg’, in Heinz-Gerhard Haupt and Dieter Langewiesche (eds), *Nation und Religion in der deutschen Geschichte* (Frankfurt, 2001), pp. 602–45.

<sup>151</sup> Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism*, pp. 86–9, 90–104.

conspiracy against German spiritual life.<sup>152</sup> Although not formally a member of the Theosophical Society, he was responsible for leading its first German section in 1902. The Society flourished under Steiner's industrious leadership, but he was all the while reformulating and reinterpreting aspects of Blavatsky's teachings. He rejected Krishnamurti, and in 1912 he co-founded the Anthroposophical Society, which soon had some three thousand members. Its aim was 'to nurture the life of the soul, both in the individual and in human society, on the basis of a true knowledge of the spiritual world.' The Anthroposophical Society was run from a village in Switzerland, but Steiner spent much time in Austria and Germany during the war spreading his message and views. These included the belief that the conflict was the earthly manifestation of a cosmic spiritual battle, 'a world of demons and spirits which works through humankind when nations battle one another.' The war was necessary for the salvation of mankind, and 'Germandom' must conquer the spiritually bankrupt nations of the West and the spiritually immature Slavic foe in the East. It would result, he affirmed in early 1916, with the German people leading 'the entire realm of human spiritual culture.'<sup>153</sup>

### ***666: The sign of the Kaiser***

And there was given unto him a mouth speaking great things and blasphemies; and power was given unto him to continue forty and two months. (Revelation 13:5)

Here is wisdom. Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast: for it is the number of a man; and his number is six hundred threescore and six (Revelation 13:18)

And I saw the beast, and the kings of the earth, and their armies, gathered together to make war against him that sat on the horse, and against his army. And the beast was taken, and with him the false prophet that wrought miracles before him ... These both were cast alive into a lake of fire burning with brimstone (Revelation 19:20)

If the war truly heralded the imminence of the apocalypse then for allied evangelicals, Christian occultists, and prophets one did not have to look far to identify the personification of the antichrist. Reviewing a book entitled *Ancient Babylon and Modern Germany*, a Scottish newspaper commented in May 1916, 'there is an epidemic of this sort of thing just now, and attempts to identify Germany with Babylon and the Kaiser with Anti-Christ form a prominent feature of the literature of the war.'<sup>154</sup>

In September 1914, the national French newspaper *Le Figaro* published the sensational revelations of a recently discovered prophecy attributed to an early seventeenth-century monk called Johannes. No other details of this mysterious personage were forthcoming, though one English medium reported received a psychic message that he was an Italian.<sup>155</sup> The prophecy was given to the paper by the well-known art critic, novelist, and occultist Joseph Péladan (1858-1918), who claimed to have found a translation of it amongst his father's manuscripts

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<sup>152</sup> Quoted in Peter Staudenmaier, *Between Occultism and Nazism: Anthroposophy and the Politics of Race in the Fascist Era* (Leiden, 2014), p. 68.

<sup>153</sup> Staudenmaier, *Between Occultism and Nazism*, pp. 65, 66. See also, Peter Staudenmaier, 'Esoteric Alternatives in Imperial Germany: Science, Spirit, and the Modern Occult Revival', in Monica Black and Eric Kurlander (eds), *Revisiting the "Nazi Occult": Histories, Realities, Legacies* (Rochester, 2015), pp. 23-42; Markus Osterrieder, *Welt im Umbruch. Nationalitätenfrage, Ordnungspläne und Rudolf Steiners Haltung im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Stuttgart, 2014).

<sup>154</sup> *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 23 May 1916.

<sup>155</sup> 'The Prophecy of Johannes', *Light*, 21 November 1914, 559.

on his death in 1890. His father had been a journalist with a preoccupation with ancient prophecies, who had apparently obtained it from a French clergyman. According to Johannes's prophecy, 'the veritable Antichrist will be one of the Monarchs of his time; a son of Luther; he will invoke God and call himself His messenger.' This was clearly none other than Kaiser Wilhelm. Thankfully, Johannes predicted that this antichrist will 'lose his crown and will die demented and alone'.<sup>156</sup> The prophecy disseminated widely, and was published in pamphlet form in Switzerland and France, leading one critic to grumble in 1916 that 'it has sold for far too long on our boulevards'.<sup>157</sup> In England, translated extracts were printed in the press under the heading, 'Is the Kaiser the Antichrist?'<sup>158</sup> The occultist Ralph Shirley published his own edition entitled *The End of the Kaiser* (1915), and a cheap penny tract also appeared with the title *Doom of the Kaiser 'Anti-Christ'* (1914), which was offered on credit to the first two hundred purchasers in London and the provinces.<sup>159</sup> Speculation, rumour and lies gave the prophecy a more venerable history of dissemination than it had. A correspondent to *Light*, Alderman Ward of Harrogate, said he had seen a copy in the hands of a Belgian judge he met in a London hotel, who said he had been in possession of it for many years. A correspondent to the *Daily Call* said he knew the prophecy had circulated in Dublin in 1868.<sup>160</sup> The general reception was understandably negative and sceptical. The prophecy was widely dismissed as a fraud, though Ralph Shirley thought it so remarkable in its prophetic accuracy, that even if Péladan was its author 'its extraordinary character would hardly be diminished'.<sup>161</sup>

The occultist Arthur Trefusis took a different prophetic inspiration to reach the same conclusion about the Kaiser. He focussed on the early Christian author Lactantius, who wrote in the early fourth century about a prediction, then in circulation, that the despotic emperor Nero (*d.* 68AD) would return as 'a messenger and forerunner of the Evil One, coming for the devastation of the earth'. Trefusis drew parallels between the brutality and cruel acts of Nero with those of the purported German atrocities in Belgium. 'The order to sink the *Lusitania* is in strict accord with Nero's record', he decided, and 'asphyxiating gases, flame projectors, and corrosive liquid all show the mind of Nero'.<sup>162</sup> There was only one conclusion to be drawn: the Kaiser was Nero reincarnated, who in turn was the Beast of Revelations. The prophecy had been fulfilled. But all the Kaiser's schemes would fail, the Hohenzollern dynasty would end, and a terrible revolution would plague the German nation.

In June and July 1915 a number of British newspapers reported that a Montreal student had discovered firm proof that the Kaiser was indeed the Beast of Revelations.<sup>163</sup> He had deciphered 'the number of the man' by giving a sequential number to the alphabet (A = 1 through to Z = 26), totting up the value of each letter in the word 'Kaiser', and adding a six to each number - six being the number of letters in 'Kaiser':

K: 11 + 6 = 116

<sup>156</sup> *Le Figaro*, 10 September 1914.

<sup>157</sup> Julien de Narfon, 'Prophéties de guerre', *La Guerre Mondiale* 23 February 1916, 3658.

<sup>158</sup> Thurston, *War & the Prophets*, pp. 47-68; Le Naour, *Nostradamus*, pp. 110-13.

<sup>159</sup> *The People*, 6 December 1914; *West London Observer*, 30 October 1914.

<sup>160</sup> *Light*, 24 October 1914, 506; 14 November 1914, 547; C. de Vesme, 'Petite excursion critique à travers les prophéties de la guerre', *Annales des Sciences Psychiques* 25 (1915), 238.

<sup>161</sup> Joanny Bricaud, *La Guerre et les Prophéties Célèbres. Etude Historique et Critique* (Paris, 1916); Ralph Shirley, *Prophecies and Omens of the Great War* (London, 1914), p. 28. See also Ralph Shirley, 'The Kaiser and Antichrist', *Occult Review* 20 (1914) 354.

<sup>162</sup> Arthur Trefusis, *The War in a New Light* (London, 1915), p. 41.

<sup>163</sup> See, for example, *Taunton Courier*, 14 July 1915; *Evening Despatch*, 24 June 1915.



A: 1 +6	=16
I: 9+6	=96
S: 19+6	=196
E: 5+6	=56
R: 18+8	=186
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	666

This revelation was also printed in the French press the following year, where it was attributed to an English researcher.<sup>164</sup> In December 1916, a new calculation promulgated in Moscow, did the rounds. According to this, it was worked out from a formula involving the lunar and calendar months, that the war would last three years, three months and six days, or 1193 days. If that number was subtracted from the number representing the Kaiser's birth year, 1859, the result was 666.<sup>165</sup>

The Kaiser calculations were given a full blown national airing in the Spring of 1916 by the jingoist and propagandist Horatio William Bottomley (1860-1933). He was the editor of the popular patriotic newspaper *John Bull*, and an attention-seeking politician and demagogue, similar to a couple of figures in England today, who was finally brought low by a fraud conviction shortly after the war. Bottomley, who was critical of government propaganda efforts, used *John Bull* to spout a constant stream of crude, xenophobic rhetoric against what the paper called the 'Germhuns'. The Kaiser was described as the 'Potty Potentate of Potsdam' and the paper printed spurious stories such as that the Kaiser had been certified insane. Bottomley went so far as to call for a vendetta against all Germans in Britain.<sup>166</sup> His old personal assistant, Henry Houston, recalled in 1923 how, in early 1916, he and his master had met an old acquaintance of the latter called Mr Pritchard who was somewhat obsessed with the 666 prophecy. As Pritchard wrote down the calculation and cited the relevant passages from Revelation, Bottomley gave Houston 'a look that plainly indicated he had found his subject for the next week's article. The Beast of Revelation, the mystery of the ages, had been solved'. After Pritchard had left, Bottomley turned to Houston and asked, 'This is all right for next Sunday, but what shall we make the title? "The Mystery of 666"?'<sup>167</sup> A three-quarter page article by Bottomley duly appeared under that title in several national papers in April 1916. He told readers that the revelation had been revealed to him by an 'interesting acquaintance' while snowed up in a Midlands hotel without telephone or post the previous week. After explaining the references to the antichrist in Revelation and the numerological prophecy, he remarked, 'A fascinating theme, isn't it? Upon my word, the more you study the Book, the more remarkable the vision becomes. I confess it haunts me.' He ended on a lighter note, though, exclaiming, 'Phew! I must never get snowed up again!'<sup>168</sup>

German occultists came to very different conclusions, of course, when applying similar numerical divination. An article in the occult periodical *Zentralblatt für Okkultismus* in 1916 totted up the number of the Kaiser from relevant astral dates and came to the conclusion that the emperor was, in fact, the instrument of God and destined to destroy Germany's enemies who obviously had very bad karma. The author concluded that Germany would win and 'the ancestors would look down proudly from the sky'.<sup>169</sup> Meanwhile, by no means all occultists

<sup>164</sup> Dausat, *Légendes*, p. 174.

<sup>165</sup> *Western Gazette*, 29 December 1916.

<sup>166</sup> Julian Symons, *Horatio Bottomley* (Looe, [1955] 2001), p. 140.

<sup>167</sup> Henry J. Houston, *The Real Horatio Bottomley* (London, 1923), pp. 161-2.

<sup>168</sup> *Sunday Pictorial*, 2 April 1916.

<sup>169</sup> F.B. Naga, 'Deutschlands Krieg und die Zahlenmagie', *Zentralblatt für Okkultismus* 9 (1916) 4-6.

and evangelists in allied countries were convinced that the Kaiser was the antichrist either. In 1915, Marr Murray explained in his *Bible Prophecies and the Plain Man*, that although the Kaiser bore resemblance to the antichrist he was not the real deal. This was because, Murray reasoned, the Kaiser had shown he was no military genius: ‘if we imagine a blend of Napoleon and Kaiser then we have an idea of what the real Antichrist will be like.’<sup>170</sup> Most American evangelists also concluded that the Kaiser was a herald of the Antichrist but not the prophetic man himself. They kept more of an eye on the pope and an alliance between the Vatican and the Germans as the firmest sign of the coming apocalypse.<sup>171</sup>

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In the autumn of 1915 the vice-president of the *Société Universelle d’Etudes Psychique*, Edmond Duchatel, proposed to hold a conference after the war to subject to close scrutiny all the predictions and prophecies that had been published about the conflict, and to clarify the actual dates of their publication or references to them.<sup>172</sup> Come the end of the war, there was little appetite, however, for treating the raft of dubious and failed war prophecies to further scientific inquiry. They were largely discredited as a body of evidence for psychic, occult, and scientific insight. But there was academic interest in how the prophecies had impacted upon society. In his book *Propaganda Technique in the World War* (1927), the young American sociologist Harold Lasswell, who would go on to become a pioneer of communication theory, noted the value of prophetic announcements in bolstering morale and undermining that of the enemy nations. ‘It was safe to predict that they would carry reassurance to the most superstitious and credulous strata of the population,’ he observed, but that the sophisticated would contemptuously dismiss them. As a consequence, he thought it ‘perfectly safe to launch the crude and sophisticated together, for the people capable of reacting to the latter will not be estranged by the former; they will merely remain indifferent and condescending.’<sup>173</sup> Lasswell noted, in particular, the morale-nourishing influence of the *Almanach de Madame de Thèbes* amongst the French public during the early years of the war. But how complicit were the prophets and astrologers in producing propaganda?

There is a long history of state-inspired employment of prophecy in wartime, and France, Germany, and Britain had sophisticated propaganda machines during the war.<sup>174</sup> But, despite the overwhelming biases of the wartime prophecies, there is very little indication that the authorities in any of the combatant countries were involved in producing or commissioning such literature. In Britain, for instance, the National War Aims Committee, set up in 1917, was assisted by clergymen who produced patriotic rhetoric about the spiritual superiority of the British and their divine destiny to defeat the foe.<sup>175</sup> But there is no evidence that prophecies and astrologers were similar co-opted. Horatio Bottomley’s piece of 666 propaganda was clearly his own initiative, for instance, and, in other respects, the government found his jingoistic mouthing and methods highly distasteful. Religious interests, if not Church authorities, were clearly involved in using prophecy for propaganda purposes,

<sup>170</sup> Cited in the *Belfast News-Letter*, 27 July 1915.

<sup>171</sup> Sutton, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism*, p. 69.

<sup>172</sup> ‘Les documents sur les prophéties de la guerre’, *Annales des Sciences Psychiques* 25 (1915), 241.

<sup>173</sup> Harold D. Lasswell, *Propaganda Technique in the World War* (New York, 1927), p. 201.

<sup>174</sup> See, for example, Lesley Ann Coote, *Prophecy and Public Affairs in Later Medieval England* (Woodbridge, 2000); Ottavia Niccoli, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane, *Prophecy and People in Renaissance Italy* (Princeton, 1990), ch. 1; Jürgen Beyer, *Lay Prophets in Lutheran Europe (c. 1550–1700)* (Leiden, 2016), ch. 6.

<sup>175</sup> David Monger, *Patriotism and Propaganda in First World War Britain: The National War Aims Committee and Civilian Morale* (Liverpool, 2012), pp. 97-8.

though. Sometimes religious motives were wrapped up in national interests, but sometimes the prophecies were intended for purely confessional promotion and advantage.

Did the astrologers and almanac-makers shape their predictions for the greater good of their respective countries out of patriotic zeal? It is most likely, otherwise how else could astrological calculations so predictably follow the narratives of glorious victory? But there were also commercial forces at play. While governments and military authorities did not actively produce morale-boosting prophecies, they certainly were not going to allow the propagation of ominous predictions detrimental to public confidence. In short, there was little latitude for publishing troubling national forecasts - and no commercial incentive either. Good news sold in wartime, and for the compilers of almanacs and the authors of astrological literature, the astral science was their livelihood. As long as the commercial and national imperatives aligned, the *public* soothsayers were largely free to go about their business. But, as we shall see in Chapter Three, the *private* discourse around wartime divination, and the myriad conversations in fortune tellers' consulting rooms across the combatant countries, was much less bullish in tone, and more worrying for the authorities.