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1914-1918 [Georg Kreis]

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A straightjacket from the Waldau psychiatric hospital near Berne

like Friedrich Engels, a social theorist and close friend of Marx, who had foreseen a “world war of unprecedented scale and severity” as early as 1887: “eight to ten million soldiers will slaughter one another”.

The exhibition organisers’ claim that a “firm belief in peace and security” prevailed at the time is therefore questionable. On the other hand, the same applies to the exhibition as to Blom’s book – the emphasis is placed not on analysis, but rather on impressions. And there are more than enough of those – five hundred exhibits represent the sensations and confusions of that era and do not produce a linear path but rather come together to form an associative colourful kaleidoscope. Freud’s dream interpretation and the x-ray of a chameleon, a straightjacket and the Titanic, feminism and twelve-tone music, fitness equipment and the genocide in the Belgian Congo, Einstein and the wanted posters of hunted anarchists, tin cans and Monte Verità, the 1900 World Fair in Paris and the polar explorer Xavier Mertz from Basel. He died in the ice of the Antarctic on 7 January 1913, possibly of an unbalanced diet after he and his companion had begun to eat their sled dogs – exciting times indeed.

Talk of “dipping” into the past and the “atmosphere” of an era gives historians worry lines. Not without justification. The time machine has after all still not been invented: The present is always the prism through which history appears and, as in any era, manifestations of not just new departures and upheaval but also stagnation and regression were also found in the period from 1900 to 1914. However, the “frenzy” (Blom) caused by the accelerated rate of change – one of many experiences people had at that time – is conveyed by both the exhibition and Blom’s book.

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INFORMATION

Philipp Blom: “Der taumelnde Kontinent. Europa 1900–1914”; DTV, Munich 2014 (fifth edition). 528 pages; CHF 21.90.

The exhibition at the National Museum Zurich with various supporting events runs until 13 July. www.landmuseum.ch. Accompanying book from Verlag Scheidegger & Spiess, 204 pages, CHF 39.

Switzerland during the First World War

While our nation was not directly involved in the First World War with millions of dead and wounded, the events that took place between 1914 and 1918 – also referred to as the seminal catastrophe of the 20th century – nevertheless left deep scars behind. In the recently published book entitled “Insel der unsicheren Geborgenheit” (Island of Uncertain Security), Georg Kreis, an historian from Basel, traces developments during this period.

“The black cloud that floated menacingly for years in the political skies” has released a deluge, wrote the Federal Council in a dispatch on 2 August 1914. In a response to the outbreak of war, two days later Switzerland declared to the warring powers that it would not shift from its position of complete neutrality under any circumstances. At the same time, the contentious, German-friendly Ulrich Wille was appointed general and 220,000 men were mobilised to defend the borders. Divisions opened up within the nation itself – the German-speaking Swiss sympathised with the Central Powers led by the German Reich, while the French-speaking Swiss leaned towards the Entente led by France and Great Britain. The war being waged around the country drove inflation up, supply problems emerged, the people lost confidence and a real test of society took place: between 250,000 and 400,000 workers took part in the general strike. The army was deployed against them.

However, Georg Kreis’ book, engagingly written as usual, does not just focus on these largely familiar events. He also presents the results of more recent research. For example, the reasons behind the “complete neutrality” which – in view of the significant level of economic interdependence even then – was actually impossible. Kreis



also examines the ethically dubious but lucrative trade with the warring nations and reveals how xenophobic the mood was within national borders. This book is an insightful overview of the war years in Switzerland that is well worth reading.

BARBARA ENGEL

GEORG KREIS “Insel der unsicheren Geborgenheit. Die Schweiz in den Kriegsjahren 1914–1918”; Verlag NZZ-Libro, Zurich 2013, 304 pages with numerous illustrations; CHF 44; www.nzz-libro.ch