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Book review

The Everyday Nationalism of Workers: A Social History of Modern Belgium

by Maarten Van Ginderachter, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2019, 265 pp., ISBN 978 1 5036 0969 3

The work of Maarten Van Ginderachter has greatly enriched the historiography of European nationalism during the past decade. The Belgian social historian has edited and contributed to several anthologies and special issues that give fresh theoretical and empirical insights into everyday nationalism, nationhood from below, and national indifference. Against this backdrop, it is interesting to observe how he tackles the same topics in a full monograph focusing on the Belgian working class in the long nineteenth century.

The relationship between the burgeoning labour movements and nationalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Europe has received considerable attention in scholarship. However, rarely has this research succeeded in moving from the level of party leaders and intellectual authorities to the views and practices of the rank and file of the labour movement. This serves as a starting point for Van Ginderachter's book, which explores how ordinary workers encountered the nation in their everyday lives.

The book is divided into three parts. The first section provides an overview of the social history of Belgium in the long nineteenth century with a focus on nation building. This section introduces previous scholarly interpretations and makes the book usable also as a textbook of Belgian history.

The second section covers the resonance of trickle-down nationalism by examining the nation-building machinery that affected workers' lives through elections, classrooms, the military, and various commemorations and festivities. It also addresses the topical question of King Leopold II's colonial agenda in Congo. Van Ginderachter argues that while the government's colonialist propaganda did not turn Belgian workers into unthinking supporters of the exploitation of Congo, it succeeded in normalizing ideas of Belgium as a colonial, racially superior European civilization.

In the third section, the author turns his attention to workers' mundane experiences of the nation. These experiences manifested themselves, for example, in socialist workers' accidental encounters with the national flag and the national anthem. This section shows that as the nineteenth century closed, the socialist rank-and-file were generally more unwilling than the party leadership to embrace the Belgian tricolour and the national anthem. The Flemish-speaking workers of the industrial city of Ghent were a case in point, as they rejected the flag and the anthem not only as bourgeois tokens, but also as symbols of reactionary and anti-Flemish Belgianness.

The sources through which Van Ginderachter traces workers' experiences include materials familiar from many histories from below: police interrogation files and court testimonies, songs, poems, letters to the party press, and workers' autobiographies and memoirs.

However, the book also introduces a unique source, the so-called proletarian tweets. These short written statements were published as a subscription list of the party newspaper, and they allowed workers to express their views. For this reason, Van Ginderachter views these tweets as 'a unique window into workers' values and loyalties' and a means to capture everyday nationalism 'without nationalist militants or middle-class bureaucrats intervening' (p. 8). Most interestingly, the author has been able to analyse the tweets of a Ghent socialist newspaper quantitatively, counting the relative frequency of various social categories in this material. The analysis indicates that workers wrote in abundance about the bourgeoisie, priests, and Catholic anti-socialist workers with whom they had daily contact. By contrast, some categories – such as revolution, language, ethnicity, and nation – are relatively invisible in the material. This is revealing of the issues that were relevant in workers' everyday lives.

Although gender is not at the core of Van Ginderachter's analysis, he notes that gender was a frequent category in the sample of proletarian tweets under examination. The tweets of female writers sometimes commented critically on the machismo and the corresponding gender roles of the Belgian Workers' Party, whereas men's tweets often constructed martial masculinity.

Gender and sexuality were also present in the way numerous tweeters excoriated the Catholic clergy for sexual harassment and child abuse. This criticism drew on anticlericalism, which was nourished in turn by the strong grip of the Catholic church on Belgian society and politics.

*The Everyday Nationalism of Workers* has much to offer to the burgeoning fields of the history of experiences and emotions. Van Ginderachter does not specify how he understands experience, but his approach clearly highlights the relational and spatial aspects of experiencing, even if he underlines that workers' nationalist behaviour and everyday interests were mediated through language.

Similarly, the book does not engage in a dialogue with emotions history literature, but it contains plenty of evidence about the role of feelings in workers' everyday encounters with the nation. For example, the analysis of the proletarian tweets highlights the rich emotional vocabulary of working-class writers.

Van Ginderachter does not refute the idea of the top-down transmission of nationalism but nuances it by drawing on regionalism research and the recent scholarship on national indifference. The concept of national indifference serves in the book to question the correlation between the pervasiveness of nationalist discourse and its impact on ordinary people, and to draw attention to specific instances where workers expressed ambivalence to or disregard for national symbols. However, the author also notes the limits of the category of national indifference (p. 105). He suggests that the notion of *Eigensinn*, coined by the historian Alf Lüdtke, may in some instances work better to explain Belgian workers' subversive appropriation of imposed values. He also argues that national indifference or *Eigensinn* could exist side by side with banal nationalism, which manifested itself, for example, in the way workers unreflectively 'divided the world into separate nationalities with distinct qualities' (p. 154).

If one needs to find a weakness in Van Ginderachter's argumentation, it might be his claim that the nation evolved into a dominant point of identification among Belgians as a result of the First World War. This claim is presented in the introduction and echoed in the epilogue, but little new

evidence is introduced to support it. While the claim is plausible, fleshing it out would require more work on primary sources that specifically shed light on how rank-and-file attitudes towards the nation evolved during and after the war.

Overall, *The Everyday Nationalism of Workers* is a splendid extension of the existing literature on national identification in the long nineteenth century. With its methodological insights and theoretical reflections, the book will hopefully inspire researchers to explore ordinary workers' lived experiences of the nation also in other European contexts and beyond.