In 1920 the Tübingen student corporation Igel was so poor it could no longer afford to buy toilet paper, while students at Cambridge continued their pre-war life of plenty. This difference in material living conditions, argues Sonja Levsen in this book, was matched by a difference in political mentalities between Tübingen and Cambridge students that could hardly have been stronger. Whether this divergence of British and German student cultures and mentalities in the interwar period was the result of long-term pre-existing differences between Britain and Germany or the different experiences of war is the subject of her book.

The result of Levsen’s travails is a very ably written book. Her study is the published version of her Tübingen Ph.D. thesis comparing the self-images and identities of Cambridge and Tübingen students—whom she sees as representing national elites—both before and after the First World War. Her argument in a nutshell is that pre-war differences have generally been overdrawn and are insufficient to explain what happened during the interwar period. For Levsen, nothing is more significant in explaining the differences between interwar students at the two universities than the fact that Britain had won the war while Germany had been defeated. Because Britain had come out of the war on top, the deaths of so many Cambridge students had not been in vain. The survivors who returned to their Alma Mater on the Cam after the war had thus found closure. Hence they were happy to endorse the post-war political order. Levsen tells us that over time Cambridge student culture stripped off its militarist, masculine characteristics, as Cambridge sports lost the dominance they had commanded before the war. By contrast, Tübingen students never demobilized after 1918 because they had lost the war. Levsen’s argument is that they felt they owed it to their fallen peers to continue the fight until final victory was achieved. For the decade following the war they thus defined themselves as student soldiers, always prepared to go into action. Levsen sees post-war students at Tübingen as brutalized and drunk on orgies of violence.1

1 While Levsen’s post-war chapters are truly original, her pre-war chapters
Levens’s approach is strongly influenced by the new cultural history and gender history. She carries out a textual analysis of student publications that exist in printed form to examine how male students constructed themselves as national elites. For the Cambridge side she relies primarily on student newspapers and the like, while for Tübingen she uses mainly annual reports, the newspapers of student corporations, and speeches given at official functions of student corporations. She argues that male students at both universities were more often than not misogynists whose male student cultures ensured that they resisted change. She also contends that they contributed to a culture that produced the abyss of the First World War—a war which students on both sides of the English Channel were eager to join.

While she argues against the existence of a German Sonderweg, Levens’s argument owes more to Hans-Ulrich Wehler and Konrad Jarausch than to David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley in that she sees Cambridge’s pre-1914 students just as darkly as Konrad Jarausch saw German students in his seminal and masterful 1982 book on the advance arguments reminiscent of Paul Deslandes’s 1990s Toronto Ph.D. thesis (published in 2005 as Oxbridge Men: British Masculinity and the Undergraduate Experience), Patricia Mazón’s 1995 Stanford Ph.D. thesis (published in 2003 as Gender and the Modern Research University), and my own contribution to the subject. Levens refers to my D. Phil. thesis, ‘Oxford and Heidelberg Universities before the First World War: British and German Elite Institutions in Comparative Perspective’ (University of Oxford, 2003); ‘Anti-Semitism and Philosemitism among the British and German Elites: Oxford and Heidelberg before the First World War’, English Historical Review, 118 (2003), 86–119; and ‘Studenten’, in Gerhard Hirschfeld et al. (eds.), Enzyklopädie Erster Weltkrieg (Paderborn, 2003), 910–12. Her lack of engagement with Mazón’s and Deslandes’s dissertations is easily forgivable as she does not seem to have been aware of their existence. Levens graciously acknowledges my work where our interpretations differ, yet is at times slightly more selective in referring to my research where our interpretations are similar. Readers of her book could indeed be forgiven for assuming that Levens is the first scholar to argue that pre-war British and German elite student cultures were more similar than different, that student duelling was not an individualistic sport, that British elite students were rather militarist, that ‘militarism’ was, indeed, not always used as a negative term in pre-war Oxbridge culture, that Germany was not seen as an imminent threat, and that group mechanisms among students explain high rates of volunteering in 1914.
growth of illiberalism among German students. For Levsen, in the pre-1914 academe on both sides of the English Channel the glass was thus not half full but three quarters empty. Both British and German elite student cultures became ever less liberal: gender and racial hierarchies were reinforced, change was opposed on principle, and nationalism and militarism were on the rise.

Hers is a powerful argument. However, occasionally it runs the risk of using twenty-first century standards to judge the early twentieth century. After all, despite the worrying and troubling aspects of British and German elite universities, they were slowly moving towards greater equality and modernity. Was the pre-war generation of British and German students really sliding into an abyss of intolerance, as Levsen suggests? Or did elite universities in both countries experience a dialectic of stasis and change? It is important to remember that even though the opponents of change generally shouted most loudly, more often than not they failed to win the day. Similarly, one might ask whether British and German universities really did see a meteoric rise of confrontational nationalism amongst students, as Levsen contends, or whether national and transnational identities at British and German elite universities often overlapped? Significantly, even the Deutsche Burschenschaft supported the Rhodes scholarships. One might thus question whether British and German student militarism pushed for any specific war or even for a cataclysmic remaking of the world the students inhabited. Or does British and German elite student militarism ‘merely’ explain why, in a situation of war, students would be willing to take up arms. Likewise, if Levsen is right that gender hierarchies were reinforced and racism was on the rise at Cambridge and Tübingen, how do we make sense of the slowly improving conditions and opportunities for women, Jews, and foreigners at British and German universities?

Levsen also argues that although the pre-1914 students of both universities had been ready to take up arms, Tübingen students turned war into a heroic and mythic endeavour, while Cambridge students took part in ‘war games’ and thus saw war as a game. Moreover, she claims that Cambridge students used more sombre and rational language than their Tübingen counterparts when discussing

nationalism. The problem with this assertion is that ‘war games’ were not the pre-First World War equivalent of the board game ‘Risk’. ‘War games’ were exercises conducted by all professional armies at the time. At any rate, ‘war games’ were hardly a British peculiarity, as the term was a direct translation of the German ‘Kriegsspiel’. Furthermore, membership of the Officer Training Corps at both Oxford and Cambridge was far more significant than membership of the war game societies. Oxbridge students regularly talked about wars using a heroic and mythic code borrowed from ancient Greek poets and writers that was certainly not sombre and rational. As the popularity of Henry Newbolt’s poems or the entries in undergraduate poetry competitions show, Oxbridge students saw war as both a heroic endeavour and a game.

If this reviewer has doubts about some of Levsen’s interpretations, these are almost exclusively driven by a difference in opinion about how evidence should be weighed. Levsen’s heavy reliance on qualitative data, sometimes at the expense of quantitative data, might also have influenced her argument. Most significantly, Levsen compares Tübingen student corporations with Cambridge colleges, rather than the entire student bodies of the two universities. There is a problem with comparable units in this approach because in almost all German universities less than half of the male students belonged to a corporation. Even at Tübingen about half the student body did not belong to a corporation. In other words, Levsen compares a self-selected minority of the student body in one case, with the entire student body in the other. One might wonder what her comparison would have looked like if she had compared, for instance, only the members of the Cambridge University Officer Training Corps with the entire Tübingen student body. I suspect that in that case the German peculiarities of her book would become British ones.

Another problem is that many German universities housed a considerable number of Jewish and Catholic corporations which were often attacked as un-German (or worse) by the kind of corporations Levsen writes about. She is thus writing about an even smaller subsection of the German student body than her figures suggest. Finally, major differences existed even between the nationalism of the Society of German Students and that of, for example, the Corps or Burschenschaften. Thus to take a quotation from a publication of the Society of German Students as *pars pro toto* for all German student corporations.
and, by extension, the entire German student body, is not without its dangers.

Comparing Cambridge with Berlin or Heidelberg rather than Tübingen might also have produced different results. While their student bodies made Berlin and Heidelberg national universities, Tübingen was a provincial university. Three out of four students at Heidelberg University, for example, came from outside Baden, while three out of four students at Tübingen, well into the twentieth century, came from inside Württemberg. Nineteen Imperial senior government ministers had indeed been educated at Heidelberg, while only four had attended Tübingen. Furthermore, there were about four times as many foreign students at Berlin and Heidelberg as at Tübingen. We also need to know more about the political character of Cambridge. Levsen describes Cambridge as a conservative university. What criteria does she employ here? The fact remains that compared to Oxford, Cambridge was far more likely to attract Liberal than Tory students.

Levsen’s reliance on student journalism and student corporation magazines at the expense of more personal, private papers is also significant. Not only can we question how representative these magazines were, but the realities behind the façades of Cambridge and Tübingen student cultures erected by student magazines were rather more complex than Levsen’s book allows. For a start, we need to bear in mind that British student discourse was more gentlemanly than its German counterpart. In other words, the fact that a Cambridge student was less likely than one from Tübingen to yell out that he hated Jews, foreigners, or women does not necessarily mean that he did not hate them. We also have to take into account that Oxbridge university authorities were more likely to censor student publications than their German counterparts. Moreover, contrary to the image created by articles in student corporation magazines, many women studying at German universities before the First World War described positive interactions with male students. Student diaries from the first days after the outbreak of war do not support Levsen’s belief that students immediately joined up, but suggest that many initially had doubts, and went through a process of adaptation towards the war.

Levsen’s book greatly advances our understanding of interwar Britain and Germany in showing how students in nationalist student corporations in the one case, and at colleges in the other, engaged in
a fundamentally different public discourse about the meaning of the First World War. Yet questions also remain about Levsen’s argument that because of the different outcomes of the war for the two groups, students at Cambridge became ever less militarist, while at Tübingen the opposite was the case. While reporting some troubling incidents of anti-Semitism and anti-Bolshevism at Cambridge, Levsen portrays a Cambridge student body that was at ease with itself, embracing progress, individualism, modernization, and the League of Nations. By contrast, her portrayal of Tübingen is dark and gruesome. Tübingen students returning from the front, Levsen tells us, became hostages to the fallen and would be set free only once they had fought a successful war of national liberation. The majority of German students thus supposedly joined the Free Corps, and both fought against the Weimar Republic and dreamed of a future war with France. The author describes vividly how a Tübingen student battalion helped to crush the short-lived Munich Soviet Republic and fight Communism in the Ruhr and the Baltic. Her central thesis is that Tübingen students had been brutalized by the First World War and were thus eager to worship violence. According to Levsen, their political mentalities were unchanged between 1918 and 1929. The radicalization of German students was thus a result not of the conditions of Weimar, but of the war. She acknowledges the work of scholars such as Richard Bessel, Frank Becker, and Dirk Schumann, 3 but argues that it does not apply to students. Unlike veterans as a whole, she claims, students really were eager to join Free Corps; they were anti-republican, anti-modern, collectivist, uniformist, völkisch, anti-Semitic, and, above all, brutal.

Much of this is very persuasive. And yet, I remain to be convinced of parts of Levsen’s argument. If we take the entire Tübingen male student population as a point of reference for a comparison with Cambridge, then we will see that, in fact, more than half of Tübingen’s students did not join a Free Corps. Moreover, to look only at self-

selected groups (that is, collectives) is perhaps not the best way to identify individualism at Tübingen.

Even with regard to student corporations, questions remain. Do the poems that Levsen quotes to suggest a brutalization of students really support her argument? Can, for instance, a student poem in which the poet argues that his student battalion had not committed the atrocities of which Socialists had accused them really be taken as evidence that students celebrated violence? Similarly, can a 1927 satire from a Cambridge student magazine about a soft and decadent Oxford, where students no longer row but have all become aesthetes, really be taken as evidence that Oxbridge male identities had been demilitarized? Or should it be taken as showing that the old playful contempt and rivalry between Oxford and Cambridge students had survived the war? Moreover, many of the examples Levsen cites suggest that, contrary to her argument, the conditions of Weimar did indeed matter and that the war experience was not as central as she thinks. It is true that a significant number of corporation students fought against Communist insurrections as early as 1919. However, at that time they were fighting on the instigation of the democratically elected Reich and state governments. Only much later did they start to fight against the government. This leaves open the possibility that only the experiences of 1919 and after changed the students Levsen writes about. Significantly, in many of the sources she quotes, anti-Bolshevism is far more dominant than any references to the fallen of the First World War. Furthermore, the fact that students at Irish universities were heavily involved in the Irish civil war suggests that in both Germany and the United Kingdom, post-war conditions and not merely the war experience of the First World War determined the political mentalities of students. Another problem with using the war as a master variable to explain British liberalism and German reaction is that it does not explain why victorious countries such as Italy, Greece, or even France, and countries uninvolved in the war such as Spain, witnessed an anti-liberal tide after the war.

There is a persistent sense in this book that the student body Levsen engages with is rather too homogeneous to be completely representative, that her approach is rather too teleological to be wholly convincing, and that her source base not wide enough to do justice to the complexities of life at British and German elite universities. Nevertheless, Levsen’s book provides a wonderful source of intellec-
tual stimulation. It raises exactly the right questions and almost always provides original answers. No one interested in the impact of the First World War on the twentieth century can afford not to read Sonja Levsen’s book.

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