Germany 1916-23: A Revolution in Context

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Historical scholarship has experienced a number of ‘shifts’ over the last three decades, with traditional concerns about politics and economics increasingly vying with newer ‘cultural-historical’ questions around language, meaning and subjectivity. Other innovations, such as spatial and transnational approaches to history, have also come to the fore. But as the editors point out in the introduction to this collection of essays, the German Revolution of 1918/19 has not yet been meaningfully analysed with these new tools of historical inquiry. Indeed, since the ‘boom years’ of the 1960s and 1970s, relatively little has been written about it at all, as the Goettingen historian Dirk Schumann points out in his commentary at the end of the book (p. 257).

This collection of essays explicitly bills itself as an attempt to address this problem, to ‘update’ the scholarship on the German Revolution and ‘resituate’ it within the ‘broader context of recent methodological trends’, especially cultural and transnational history (p. 16). The book’s origins lie in a 2013 conference intended as a first move in this direction: the papers given there more or less form the basis of the book, with the three organisers also serving as editors. All three have published extensively on 20th-century Germany – Anthony McElligott recently completed a well-received monograph intended as a ‘rethinking’ of the Weimar Republic, Kirsten Heinsohn has made a key contribution to our understanding of the involvement of German women in conservative politics after the First World War, and Klaus Weinhauer has focused mainly on post-1945 German history, particularly terrorism. In their introduction, the editors first state the book’s overall aim before outlining its structure, with the various chapters organised around three themes: ‘Violence, state and order’, ‘Communication and imaginaries’ and ‘Subjectivities and social movements’.

The first section focuses on the German state’s monopoly on violence and the profound challenges it underwent in the immediate aftermath of the First World War. Mark Jones, a historian at University College Dublin, begins with an analysis of ‘The crowd in the German November Revolution’, which turns out to be a highly thought-provoking piece of spatial history. Jones characterises cities as centres of symbolic communication: their very architecture and layout, he argues, are attempts to convey cultural norms and values. Seen like this, events in November 1918 become exceptionally alarming; urban centres in Germany
were taken over by enormous crowds who thereby ‘inverted the spatial order’, which would have been inconceivable before 1914. But Jones rejects simplistic notions of crowd behaviour and ‘mass psychology’, instead developing a ‘typography’ of different crowds that behaved differently according to context. Only rarely, he says, did they turn violent, but nonetheless, their incursion into the ‘public arena’ was intolerable to the state, which felt its control over the course of the revolution threatened and acted quickly to muscle ‘the crowd’ out of the picture. Thus, though there was no ‘formal counter-revolution’ – indeed, though the monarchy collapsed and was replaced by a nominally ‘Socialist’ provisional government – there was a kind of ‘spatial’ counter-revolution which involved the elimination of ‘the crowd’ as a political factor.

In Nadine Rossol’s chapter, attention shifts away from the crowd and toward one of those formal organs of the state whose power they were conceivably challenging: the police. And, indeed, she first shows how severely compromised police authority was by the events of November 1918: the force simply ‘melted away’, offering minimal resistance to the formation of Soldiers’ and Workers’ Councils or the gathering of crowds. Officers were frequently stripped of their weapons by revolutionaries and, even where this didn’t happen, they were often less heavily armed than some sections of the population. The perceived weakness of the police was compensated for (and made painfully apparent) by the formation of ‘Home Guards’, anti-communist paramilitary groups intended to ‘protect property’ from the ‘red hordes’, as well as by the creation of a new, better equipped ‘Security Police’ that would in future deal with large-scale revolutionary threats to public order. Despite this rather jarring loss of authority and status, however, Rossol spends much of her chapter highlighting some of the debates that played out within the police force around the topic of ‘democratic self-organisation’. Police officers, she says, organised into unions and genuine attempts were made to build a pro-Republican culture within the force: the police, she says, had ‘discovered its democratic heart’ and now sought to style itself as a servant of the people. The argument in the final part of Rossol’s chapter is less easy to discern than in its earlier sections, but it seems that the attempt to create a new ‘pro-Republican’ police culture foundered both on continued mistrust among the working classes as well as a ‘radicalised quest for authority’ on the part of the state, which continued to view the police not as an instrument of democracy but as part of its own monopoly on violence.

The third and final contribution to the section on ‘Violence, state and authority’ is Florian Grafl’s chapter on ‘Labour conflict and everyday violence’ in Barcelona after the First World War. This is nominally a work of transnational history: Grafl first argues in his introduction that events in Spain have largely been excluded from the discussion on the massive violence that engulfed parts of Europe after the War. He then vividly describes how the social and political fault lines that had cleaved Spanish society for decades produced considerable violence in Barcelona after 1918, when huge marches for Catalan separatism, pistol fights between employers’ groups and workers, and an anarchist bombing campaign plunged the city into five years of violence. Overall, this chapter would probably benefit from a more sustained attempt to link developments in Spain with Germany – which is mentioned only once – or wider European events such as the Russian Revolution. How were these revolutionary upheavals perceived in Spain? Did they have a knock-on effect in terms of revolutionary violence in Barcelona? Such questions, unfortunately, do not figure here. However, Grafl does make the very important point that post-1918 Spain could be taken as a corrective to the oft-cited thesis that the experience of the war itself led to the ‘brutalisation’ of European societies and thereby produced post-war violence. Spain, after all, remained neutral during the First World War.

The second section of the book, which concentrates on ‘Communication and imaginaries’, begins with a chapter by Kathleen Canning, who has spent much of her scholarly career focusing on women’s experiences during the Weimar Republic. Canning has argued in the past that the First World War had an overwhelmingly empowering effect on women and produced a fundamental transformation of gender, but her argument here is more subtle. She acknowledges that, in purely political and economic terms, the German Revolution ‘scarcely initiated or fulfilled anything like a sexual revolution’, but she then argues for an extension of our definition of what a ‘revolution’ is, to go beyond seeing it as ‘a series of strictly political events’ and instead think of it as an ‘imaginary’ which had a profound effect on the way contemporaries perceived the world and themselves (p. 112). She points to a number of examples in both high and popular culture which suggest that the Revolution altered the (self-)representation of women: they were now
perceived as more forthright, independent and, indeed, uncontrollable entities in the wake of the First World War. This manifested itself in their entry into political parties and unions, as well as widespread (male) anxieties about sexual hygiene and rates of childbirth. This is a thoughtful and thought-provoking contribution: while it perhaps goes too far to characterise the German Revolution as the site of a ‘shattering of the gender order’ (p. 112), Canning’s argument about an ‘impending crisis of gender and sexuality’ (p. 111) on the level of culture and ‘the imaginary’ is innovative.

From Canning’s essay, it is clear that large numbers of people invested significant hope in the revolution, at least initially. Norma Lisa Flores’ chapter, however, suggests that the German Revolution could also be a source of fear and a spur to repressive action in countries far beyond Europe. She focuses on the ‘Palmer Raids’ in the post-war United States of America. In 1919, with President Wilson in France thrashing out the Treaty of Versailles and thus absent from domestic politics, some of his more zealous (or less scrupulous) officials were able to accrue considerable power and launch a wide-ranging crackdown on domestic communists (proven or merely suspected). Investigative committees were formed, huge deportations took place and, Flores argues, even the origins of the FBI lay in this ‘Red Scare’. But she also shows how the ‘anti-communist’ hysteria of some officials was partly stimulated by events in Europe, especially Germany. It was feared that the January 1919 Spartacist Uprising could be the beginning of a ‘worldwide communist assault’ masterminded by Soviet Russia that would engulf Europe, and if Bolshevism could prevail in a cultivated, advanced, industrialised nation such as Germany, it could surely prevail in the USA. The beginnings of a possible investigation into the links between the German Revolution and the ‘Red Scare’ in post-1918 America are certainly visible in this chapter but, as with Grafl’s essay, it might benefit from a more sustained transnational focus and a more substantial inquiry into how exactly US policy makers perceived and were influenced by events in Europe.

The German Revolution, as the editors point out in the introduction, was marked by ‘intensified processes of communication’, which in many cases meant the development of coherent narratives in an attempt to make sense of the utterly unprecedented situation Germany found herself in. One of the most potent and notorious of these narratives was the ‘stab in the back’ legend, the idea that the German army, at the moment of ultimate victory in Northern France, had been sabotaged by perfidious political radicals on the German Home Front. Historians have generally dismissed the ‘stab in the back’ as a piece of right-wing propaganda: Germany, it is usually claimed, lost the war because it had fewer troops and fewer weapons than the Allies, especially as large numbers of American soldiers began to arrive in July. Oliver Haller’s chapter, however, constitutes a fascinating and highly provocative reassessment of the last months of the war. For Haller, the ‘stab in the back’ narrative was not purely a lie or a cynically constructed fiction – it was an attempt to answer the ‘perplexing question’ of why the ‘German military organisation broke apart so suddenly in 1918’ (p. 178). Instead of pointing to either Allied material superiority or revolutionary turmoil inside Germany, however, Haller instead emphasises something overlooked by most other historians: the deleterious effects of a pandemic, the ‘Spanish Flu’ influenza that swept much of Europe in 1918 and 1919. After a painstaking analysis of the origins and effects of this influenza, Haller argues that the German army was most severely infected in early summer 1918, leading to the total failure of Ludendorff’s offensive and allowing the Allies to achieve a last, decisive victory. The stab-in-the-back, Haller says, was a misguided attempt to explain this seemingly inexplicable situation, but one with more ‘basis in reality than the mechanistic assumptions’ of subsequent historiography. No doubt military historians will have their own opinions on the precise role played by the influenza in the collapse of Germany’s last offensive. But the most interesting and provocative aspect of this chapter, from the point of view of an analysis of German political culture, is its implications for the ‘stab-in-the-back’ myth. Could this have perhaps been a rather bewildered attempt to explain the seemingly inexplicable rather than merely a cynical manoeuvre on the part of a High Command looking to absolve itself of blame for Germany’s defeat? Haller’s chapter is, at least, food for thought.

The third part of this collection concentrates on ‘Subjectivities and social movements’ – the self-conceptions and self-organisation of political actors. Gleb J. Albert begins this section with perhaps the most effective piece of transnational history in the volume – about how lower-level Bolshevik functionaries in Soviet Russia perceived the revolutionary events in Germany. As Albert points out, though we know how keenly
Lenin, Trotsky and their ilk followed what was happening in Germany, we know much less about what the vast network of Bolsheviks scattered across small towns and villages in provincial Russia thought. Albert first lays bare the rather unenviable predicament that these provincial functionaries found themselves in – geographically isolated, frequently despised within their own communities, and increasingly surrounded by aspirational ‘careerists’ jumping on the bandwagon of the new ‘revolutionary’ state. Albert argues that, for these idealists, expressing solidarity with international revolutionaries was one way of proving their ‘true’ Bolshevik credentials, as well as enabling them to feel that their thankless toil in the Russian backwaters was part of a great international movement. Albert uses diaries, provincial newspapers and personal correspondence to prove that these low-level functionaries really were animated by the ‘charismatic idea’ of ‘world revolution’, a central pillar of which was revolution in Germany.

One of the most important social formations that appeared during the German Revolution were the Räte, the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils that sprang up across the Reich in the last months of 1918. Ian Grimmer’s article, however, focuses on a very specific kind of Räte: the ‘Councils of Intellectual Workers’ which were established in some German-speaking towns and cities. These were bodies of academics, artists and intellectuals who saw their primary purpose in the extension of the revolution beyond the labour movement and the fomenting of a ‘cultural revolution’ to accompany the economic and political revolution. Overall, Grimmer shows how much difficulty these institutions had in building a common front. The Berlin Council formulated a detailed (and strikingly left-wing) programme which was loosely adopted by similar institutions in Vienna and Munich, but many other such Räte distanced themselves from it, with some even speaking a fairly conservative language. Overall, Grimmer argues that these councils provided a space within which intellectuals could ‘preserve their independence’, the ‘source of their authority’ during the revolutionary turmoil then engulfing Germany (p. 226). But, based on this article, the tangible effects of their ‘authority’ are not readily apparent. Aside from a three-day stint working in the German Reichstag, it seems that the ‘Councils of Intellectual Workers’ struggled to exercise any meaningful influence at all over political developments during the revolution.

The final article, written by Jens Boysen, is another piece of compelling transnational history about ‘German social revolution and Polish national revolution’ in the wake of the First World War. Boysen charts the origins and course of the post-war Polish uprising in East Prussia that left parts of this territory in Polish hands by the mid-1920s, with his chapter focusing mainly on the relationship between the Majority Social Democrats, now in power in Berlin, and the leading Polish nationalists themselves. He argues that the MSPD made a fatal error: they had been used to seeing the Poles as bedfellows in the struggle against the Imperial monarchy, and they viewed revolution in social, rather than national, terms. The Polish leaders, by contrast, were ‘arch-conservatives’ (p. 246) for whom revolution was a ‘nationalist’ affair – whether they were seceding from a German monarchy or a German social democracy was immaterial: what mattered was that it was German. The Social Democrats, then, unlike the Polish nationalists, failed to ‘update’ their ‘friend-foe’ categories to fit with new realities (p. 233), a fact that was ruthlessly exploited by Polish nationalists on the ground in East Prussia. Boysen reserves a parting shot for the Allies themselves who, by allowing the Poles to seize some territories never guaranteed to them under the Versailles Treaty and not even historically Polish, called into question their commitment to the principle of ‘self-determination’ (and not for the first time).

The book concludes with commentaries from two prominent German historians – Stefan Berger and Dirk Schumann. Berger mainly concentrates on situating the German Revolution in a historical and international context as ‘one spatial variant’ in an ongoing ‘crisis of capitalism’ that ran from 1905 until the mid-1920s (p. 252), the most volcanic manifestation of which was the Russian Revolution itself. On the one hand, this might minimise the revolution’s short-term causes a little too much: if the First World War had never broken out, if chronic food shortages and war weariness had never driven the German people onto the streets, would the monarchy have collapsed in 1918? Probably not. However, such short term factors don’t entirely explain Germany’s descent into revolutionary turmoil and ideologically driven civil war after 1918. Such conflicts, as Berger points out, had indeed been brewing since the turn of the century. Schumann, meanwhile, concerns himself more with pointing toward possible new research avenues opened up by this volume, and there is
more than one excellent idea for a PhD thesis here: the effect of revolutionary propaganda on German frontline soldiers, for example, or German media coverage of left-wing turmoil in other parts of Europe after the First World War.

As with any collection of essays of this nature, some of the chapters here are much better anchored in the overall theme of the volume than others. However, there are enough thought-provoking contributions to suggest that the editors have fulfilled their brief to provide an impetus for new ‘cultural-historical’ directions in research on the German Revolution. Such research will surely be well-served if it is guided by Stefan Berger’s thesis that the 1918 Revolution can be historicised as one ‘spatial variant’ in a long-term crisis of capitalism, a 20-year-long ‘red’ period of revolution and counter-revolution that had various flash points across the world, with Germany only one of them.

The editors would like to thank the reviewer for his generous and detailed review.

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