Heligoland: Britain, Germany, and the Struggle for the North Sea

Review Number: 2111

Publish date: Thursday, 25 May, 2017

Author: Jan Rüger

ISBN: 9780199672462

Date of Publication: 2017

Price: £25.00

Pages: 370pp.

Publisher: Oxford University Press

Publisher url: <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/heligoland-9780199672462?cc=gb&lang=en&>

Place of Publication: Oxford

Reviewer: John R. Davis

The cover of Jan Rüger's *Heligoland* shows a small, forbidding and desolate rock surrounded by inclement seas and with no sign of human habitation. This unwelcoming glimpse of land from afar – as so often the case with islands – will prove to be misleading. It gives no sense of the history on a grand scale that is to come. The author's chronological sweep in this volume will cover two centuries down to the present. The red sandstone cliffs will serve as a promontory for observing the turbulent ebb and flood of Anglo-German relations as well as European and global history. Thematically, the subject ranges across military and naval history, inter- and transnational cultural connections, migration, the history of Empire and commerce, nationalism and national rivalry, warfare and alliance. Despite first impressions, Heligoland also proves to be host to a dynamic, shifting and determinedly robust population. Light will be cast on the life of the islanders, and the changing fortunes of its population are recorded. Heligoland's geographic location certainly provides focus as well as distance. Yet, as Rüger shows, its insular position just off the German coast and at the mouth of several major Continental waterways ensures its people are always open to the elements, both meteorological and historical. At times, indeed, they will be exposed to the devastating damage of the international environment just as they are to the onslaught of a hurricane. Heligoland is both an excellent base for Rüger's microhistory and a vantage point to observe Anglo-German relations and European history over time. Despite its unprepossessing thematic anchorage, therefore, the reader of Rüger's volume will be fascinated, surprised, horrified and moved.

As we step onto dry land for the first time in chapter one, we find ourselves in the midst of the Napoleonic Wars. Rüger explains the acquisition of Heligoland by Britain from Denmark in 1807 as part of British effort to shore up security against Napoleon. Already, several themes are introduced that will be developed throughout the volume. Heligoland is presented as one among many parcels of land to be swapped back and forth between states as a consequence of war in Europe and with little consultation of the indigenous population. The transfer of administration included stipulations allowing the continuity of Danish laws and island custom under British administration. With this Rüger introduces a theme of the legal complexity on Heligoland that is destined to bamboozle future administrators, whether in London or Berlin. In parallel, there also emerges as a feature in the territory's history the independent and tenacious influence of its inhabitants, who repeatedly exploit the administrative uncertainties and ambiguities of sovereignty to their own ends.

By focusing in on events on Heligoland, Rüger is able to provide excellent new information on the mechanics of the British Napoleonic campaign. Heligoland, as Rüger reveals, provides a central point for smuggling activity to the Continent during the Continental Blockade, and there is here excellent detail on the means by which this took place and surprising new information about the growth of the merchant community benefiting from smuggling on Heligoland. Rüger explains how hundreds of merchants congregated there. He also provides astounding statistics regarding the number of ships entering and leaving Heligoland, bound for mainland Europe with British and colonial produce. Similarly, Heligoland's crucial significance is uncovered to the British government's information-gathering, spying and subterfuge activities. Rüger also describes island's place within the system of financial transfers from London to the Continent that would be so vital in sustaining opposition to Napoleon on the Continent.

In all these respects, and by focusing on one territorial position, Rüger makes an important contribution to our understanding of the complexity of the British war effort up to 1815. He also, significantly, highlights the substantial extent to which this involved British-German collaboration, with a British-German merchant community on the island, islanders signing up for British naval service, the use of Heligoland as a recruiting base for the King's German Legion, and German banking houses providing supplies for insurgency on the Continent. Indeed, central themes of the book are the fluidity of identity and transnational (or perhaps rather pre-national) contact, influence and exchange that takes places on Heligoland and the way in which this fluidity is eroded by nationalism and national rivalry.

Rüger presents interesting detail on the mode of British rule between 1815 and 1890. He makes a useful addition to the history of British foreign policy with the thesis that Heligoland was viewed in Whitehall – along with, for example, Gibraltar and Cyprus – as part of an overall European policy focusing on naval and maritime presence and remaining an external balance of power. He also argues convincingly that Heligoland was administered within a colonial framework that was global and imperial. Discussion of legal and constitutional matters on the island often took place with reference to developments elsewhere in Britain's colonial empire rather than as an extension of British domestic discussion. The constitution of Heligoland replicated that of other colonies. Governors came from and went to other colonies, bringing administrative teams with them.

Rüger shows how, on the one hand, Britain's benign administration of Heligoland attracted a stream of political fugitives from the autocratic *Vormärz* German states in the 1830s and 1840s, including Heinrich Heine. German radicals migrated to the British mainland in this period in large numbers. However, Heligoland offered geographic proximity to their homeland as well as – importantly for Heine and others – fresh air, and Rüger paints an alluring picture of gatherings of radicals on Heligoland partly conspiring, partly recuperating. With radicals coming predominantly from intellectual and cultural circles, the island soon also took on significance within German culture. Rüger's willingness to consider international relations in a broader sense than is conventionally the case is admirable. Significant attention is paid, for example, to migration and culture. In a critique of Paul Kennedy's *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism*, and drawing on several decades of research since Kennedy unearthing the complexities and positives of Anglo-

German relations prior to the First World War, Rüger provides a wealth of information regarding Heligoland's treatment in art, literature and music. The island's dramatic landscape and skies assumed an important position within the German Romantic movement, as Rüger shows, with minor British echoes, for example in the painting of J. M. William Turner. As so often happens, where culture leads, money follows, and by the late 1840s German visitors to Heligoland were increasing in number and consisted of the wealthier variety. Heligoland, as Rüger shows, is part of the blossoming of the spa tourist industry in the period, with royal visitors from the German states as well as increasing numbers from the wealthy elite.

Yet Rüger's account is not a contradiction of Kennedy, but presents rather a more nuanced interpretation of the Anglo-German relationship. The presence of political refugees on Heligoland could be an irritant to the British government and the subject of protest from reactionaries such as Metternich. Rüger captures successfully the contradictions and difficulties of the British position. While British colonial administration provided respite for German radicals, it would frustrate them too and gradually lead to wider opposition within German liberalism as well as, not least, from the islanders themselves. Gladstone's attempts to introduce greater democracy on Heligoland in return for financial accountability in 1866 – in keeping with his approach more widely to Empire – led to opposition on the island to what was claimed to be a legal and historical right to be tax free. The revocation of the new Heligoland constitution in 1868 in the face of islander recalcitrance and the return of colonial rule led to protests among German national-liberals, by now a powerful political force in Berlin, regarding anti-democratic British colonial administration.

The German cultural interest in Heligoland, meanwhile, strongly linked to liberalism and Romanticism, evolved into cultural nationalism. Rüger, using Heligoland, traces the change in discourse. Goethe's interest in Heligoland in the 1820s was academic and scientific and framed in terms of the 'world spirit', rather than nationalism. Heine, however, expressed consciousness of national difference in his observations on island life. The text of the German national anthem was written by Hoffmann von Fallersleben while attending a radicals' gathering on Heligoland. Romantics, Rüger shows, viewed the Heligolandians as a purer form of Germans – an *Urvolk* – fitting in with wider intellectual developments in German philology and history. Thus Heligoland, under Danish rule until 1807 and British thereafter, gradually became identified by nationalists as German. As Rüger shows, the revolutionary year of 1848-9 and war between Germany and Denmark over Schleswig and Holstein – the closest neighbouring landmass – encouraged German nationalists to an additional appreciation of Heligoland's strategic significance in that conflict. This would be recognised anew when German-Danish conflict erupted again in 1864, and from this point on was an *idée fixe* of Prussian and German foreign policy too.

Rüger explains how, culturally, economically and administratively, the absorption of Heligoland into Germany moved apace after unification in 1870-1. German nationalism expressed itself ever more forcibly in the press in favour of acquisition of Heligoland from what was depicted as illiberal and hegemonic British rule. While Bismarck might not have appreciated Heligoland in nationalist terms, he clearly recognised its strategic significance, particularly when connected with attempts to link the Baltic and the North Seas via the Kiel Canal. However, his priority primarily was with defence of the *Reich*, particularly against Denmark and France, in order to allow political consolidation, and he hoped for British cooperation to this end. Rüger explains how informal discussion regarding an Anglo-German deal, conceding German colonial territories and rights in eastern Africa to the British in return for the acquisition of Heligoland, already began under Bismarck in the early 1880s. Nevertheless, Bismarck quickly realised that Gladstone felt no particular need for German assistance in Africa and instead was increasingly reluctant to strengthen Germany's position in Europe. He therefore pursued a longer-term strategy: preventing any official request to Britain regarding Heligoland while gradually ratcheting up German colonial presence.

Bismarck's strategy required keeping nationalist fervour and soon also, more challengingly, the new Kaiser, Wilhelm II, under control. Unlike Bismarck, Wilhelm saw Heligoland in ambitious terms of potential growth in German naval power which, in turn, he hoped to use to extort concessions from Britain. In 1889, a possible Anglo-German deal was again discussed, again to no avail. With Bismarck's resignation and Salisbury's entry to office, the matter was pursued again. Acquisitions in eastern Africa and a firmer Anglo-

German partnership were looked at more favourably in London, particularly with Joseph Chamberlain's backing. Rüger points to the fact that a British colonial mind-set and some selective information-gathering meant the viewpoints of the islanders on Heligoland were not treated as particularly important, though most contemporary accounts reported their continued loyalty to Britain. The current reader will be able to appreciate multiple ironies in Rüger's explanation of official opposition to any consultation of the islanders on the basis that 'plebiscites were un-British and a threat to the Empire'. Indeed, the strongest voice in support of the islanders heard in Rüger's account, and expressed in surprisingly strident and direct tones, was that of Queen Victoria. But the deterioration of her constitutional position in the process of foreign policy decision-making in Britain is made apparent by the lax provisions inserted into the Anglo-German agreement to protect the islanders' British identity. Crucial in British acquiescence to the deal, meanwhile, was the voice of the Admiralty, which pointed out that Heligoland had little value in terms of British security and in fact its ownership committed Britain to the defence of an indefensible outpost.

Rüger provides some significant and interesting arguments relating to the strategic value of Heligoland to both Britain and Germany in the lead-up to the First and the Second World Wars. The decision to exchange Heligoland for Zanzibar was presented both at the time and in retrospect as mistaken. As Anglo-German relations deteriorated after the turn of the century, many shared the view of Admiral Sir John Fisher, expressed to Winston Churchill, that there should be 'no more Heligolands'. Rüger provides fascinating detail regarding the swift militarisation of Heligoland after its acquisition by Germany, and description and dimensions of the gigantic naval fortifications constructed under Wilhelm II's leadership as well as, again, by Hitler in the 1930s. Yet as Rüger's account shows, strategically, the British Admiralty's judgement would prove to be true. Despite providing safe harbour for substantial naval and submarine forces before the First World War, the German naval threat was controlled and quickly neutralised, leaving Heligoland a lame, and extremely costly, duck. For the Nazi regime too, Heligoland's strategic value would turn out to be limited. The RAF put paid to notions of invasion of Britain by sea. Hitler's decision to turn east to attack the Soviet Union in 1941 left Heligoland a relatively becalmed though thoroughly unpleasant outpost of the Nazi regime. Multiple projects to seize Heligoland by force in both conflicts were repeatedly dismissed in London as not worth it.

During the first half of the 20th century, militarisation on Heligoland was, intriguingly, accompanied by a tourist industry that was in places limited by increasing security concerns but which also continued to attract British visitors and was only fully displaced during actual conflict. Rüger's book provides excellent detail on the popularisation of the Heligoland trip in German culture and the continued presence of high-society life on the island which attracted socialist leaders, Jewish financiers, and later sojourning Nazi officials, including Hitler's entourage. An interesting subtheme is the significance of Heligoland for scientific research. Anglo-German scientific cooperation continued into the twentieth century. The Royal Biological Institute (founded 1893) and the Heligoland ornithological station (1910) brought British and German researchers together on the island. However, nationalist interest in Heligoland as the home of an *Ur-Volk* transmogrified into scientific research into the island's importance as an Aryan Atlantis, led by none other than Heinrich Himmler. Rüger's treatment of this casts new light on such madness.

War did eventually come to dominate life on the island. The islanders were removed during the First World War for a mixture of concerns regarding their safety and worries about their divided Anglo-German loyalties. Rüger provides evidence of how, given the fluidity of their Anglo-German identity, islanders did, in fact, participate on either side in both World Wars. During the Second World War, as well as the heavy military presence, prisoners of war were placed on the island. Rüger presents a detailed account of life on the island under Nazi rule which illustrates its moral complexities and awful realities. Evidence testifies to some islander sympathy with prisoners. Expressing continued suspicions about the islanders' loyalties, the Nazi regime controlled the population through terror and, at times, brutally violent measures. To some extent, the islanders benefited economically from the Nazi regime and Hitler personally protected their hallowed tax-free status. Yet as Rüger astutely concludes, 'what they had in common was not any ideological or political stance, but the fear of denunciation and deportation'.

War would also, ultimately, obliterate any trace of human life on Heligoland. The British bombed it heavily in the closing stages of the war. After German capitulation, all humans were removed. On 18 April 1947, after eight months of work setting 6,700 tons of explosives, and faced mainly by opposition in Britain from birdwatchers, the British triggered one of the largest explosions ever seen in order to destroy all fortifications and armaments and this time ensure once and for all that there would be 'no more Heligolands'.

Rüger illustrates how, with surprising and notable rapidity, efforts began within Germany to regain and rebuild Heligoland. His research demonstrates how the voice of the Heligolandians again emerges as a political force, this time locating itself within the wider movement of displaced people in German society – those longing for restitution of their *Heimat*. Taking an admirably dispassionate perspective, Rüger argues that 'the demand to return home and the accusation of Allied immorality was entirely de-coupled from any talk about the Nazi past'. Moreover, knowledge of the willingness of Adenauer to draw on Nazi processes and functionaries is reinforced by Rüger's account of the appointment of Theodor Oberländer to record damages inflicted by the Allies in preparation for compensation. German nationalism also reappeared and, with it, support for the return of Heligoland to Germany. In this context, Rüger provides a highly valuable account of the way in which the East German government sought to encourage agitation in support of the return of Heligoland as a way of creating dissent between West Germany and the Allies as well as portraying itself as the true representative of the German *Volk*.

In the end, the British government acceded to the return of Heligoland to (West) German control in the pursuit of the greater goal of Western alliance against Communism. Rüger's account finishes with a somewhat rueful reflection that, after a long history of divided loyalties and fluid identity, it was only now that the Heligoland islanders fully identify themselves as German.

To some extent, and possibly reflecting the limitations of microhistories or else considerations of readability and cost, aspects of broader Anglo-German relations might have been covered in greater depth. More space might have usefully been devoted for example to: German economic nationalism; the theme of maritime and naval strength within this; the extensive history of German conservative irritation with liberal mid-Victorian Britain; Prussian policies of commercial aggrandisement before 1871; the revolutions of 1848; German migration to Britain more broadly; and the significance of political developments in Berlin in 1878. Queen Victoria's appearance in the account, if striking and impressive, is momentary: one wonders about the roles of other royal family members in this regard – Empress Victoria and Emperor Frederick III of Germany, for example, and members of the Coburg family (who are fleetingly mentioned as visitors to the island). The island's history prior to 1807 receives little attention, even if perhaps justifiable on the grounds that island life maintains a high degree of continuity and quietude. The book contains many highly useful illustrations. Particularly, however, where the subject is art, propaganda and marketing material, it would have been better to see images in colour. Discussion of Heligoland's position in the history of British colonialism is valuable and convincing. However, it might have been worthwhile to draw on the experiences of the Channel Islands, particularly in later sections dealing with German occupation and fortification. A final point – and one which constitutes praise more than criticism – is the book's title: this might imply the work is a piece of naval history. It is, however, about far more than the struggle for the North Sea. It is the history of an island but also a new and intriguing evaluation of the Anglo-German relationship and of European history in cultural and political senses. As Britain leaves the European Union, meanwhile, Rüger's book offers an opportunity to reflect further on the history of Britain's continental relations as well as, for example, on the British presence in Gibraltar and Cyprus. As Adenauer envisaged, Heligoland remains a monument to the follies and ramifications of national rivalry.

The author is happy to accept this thorough and extensive review.

Other reviews:

Times

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/books-heligoland-britain-germany-and-the-struggle-for-the-north-sea-by-jan-rueger-pkvq57ph0> [2]

Islan Review

<http://theislandreview.com/content/heligoland-jan-ruger-north-sea-germany-british-empire> [3]

Literary Review

<https://literaryreview.co.uk/sea-changes> [4]

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/2111>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/257475> [2] <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/books-heligoland-britain-germany-and-the-struggle-for-the-north-sea-by-jan-rueger-pkvq57ph0>

[3] <http://theislandreview.com/content/heligoland-jan-ruger-north-sea-germany-british-empire>

[4] <https://literaryreview.co.uk/sea-changes>