

# H-Net Reviews

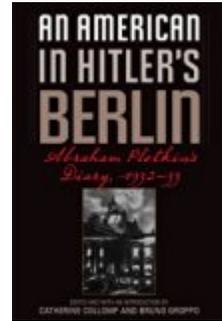
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Abraham Plotkin.** *An American in Hitler's Berlin: Abraham Plotkin's Diary, 1932-33.* Edited and with introduction by Catherine Collomp and Bruno Groppo. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009. xlix + 206 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03361-2; \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-07559-9.

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## Witnessing the End of Organized Labor

On October 25, 1932, just having departed for Germany, American labor organizer Abraham Plotkin wrote in his diary about the journey on which he embarked: “Here is to prayer that my hindsight will prove to be as exciting as my lack of foresight” (p. 3). He could not know then what a tragically crucial period in German history he was about to witness, how—over the next few months only—he would see the complete destruction of the mighty German labor movement he came to study. When he left Germany in May 1933, all he could do was inform the world of the violent nature of German fascism and provide at least some relief to German unionists now under persecution by the Nazi regime. This recent book, edited by Catherine Collomp and Bruno Groppo, makes Plotkin’s diary available to the public for the first time. It serves as a fascinating testimony in mostly two ways: by offering a close-up of German trade unionism and Social Democracy through Plotkin’s countless encounters with key figures as well as foot soldiers; and by appealing to a wider readership by attempting to interweave well-known political events with intriguing glimpses at everyday life in Berlin during the world economic crisis and the Nazi takeover.

Plotkin, a lifelong Jewish labor organizer of Ukrainian descent who had lost his job with the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union at the end of 1931 (he had been the Pacific Coast organizer), was tireless in his efforts to study what he perceived as the most pow-

erful labor movement at the time. His visit to Berlin led him to encounters with a veritable “who’s who” of Berlin union leaders. In the city, he devoured whatever information he could find, on industrial to agricultural matters, with unemployment (and unemployment benefits) as his most pressing concern. As the editors point out, the value of the diary stems not least from the fact that it was not commissioned by anyone, and, in his conversations with German labor leaders such as Martin Plettl, president of the German Needle Trades Union, whom he befriended, Plotkin maintains some degree of critical distance. As a socialist reformist, however, Plotkin is in full agreement with trade unionists in denouncing communism. He had had a bad experience himself in 1927, when communists forced him to resign from his position at Los Angeles Local 52. With communists jointly organizing a Berlin transportation workers’ strike with the Nazis, Plotkin felt confirmed in his antipathy toward the more radical Left.

In addition to the wealth of conversations with members of organized labor, often related in a unique style that blends various voices together, the end of the book offers a more coherent examination of the demise of the German labor movement. Plotkin’s essay, “The Destruction of the Labor Movement in Germany,” which appeared in *The Federationist* (the American Federation Labor’s monthly organ) in August 1933, is one of seven essays he wrote on the German situation (the only other

essay printed in the volume, “The Last Social Democratic Meeting in German, *Berlin bleibt rot*,” is closer in style to a diary entry than to systematic analysis). In this essay, Plotkin, who declared Marxism impractical after his experience in Germany, defends trade unionism and the course of the Social Democratic Party during the final days of the Weimar Republic. Predictably enough, he puts the blame on too much, rather than too little, revolutionary fervor: “Only nit-wits or those who are blind, therefore, will condemn the German trade union leaders for being without a program.... If their program was smashed, and the trades unions along with it, it should be remembered that the error in their calculations resulted from the assumption on the left wingers’ policy and not from too much conservatism” (p. 193). At the same time, in his January 1 entry, he had critically suggested himself that German Social Democracy might have been closer to liberalism than to socialism. Not surprisingly, the essay also shows a characteristic inability on the side of unions and Social Democrats to come to terms with the problem of unemployment. The decision of most of the unemployed to side with the KPD against the SPD, Plotkin simply takes as ultimate proof for insignificance of communism, rather than questioning why the unemployed found so little appeal in Social Democracy at the time. He is critical of the militarization of labor initiated by the Nazis, but still seems to view full employment as the ultimate standard of a successful economy himself. As he states approvingly on December 7, 1932: “In the first place there have been periods within the capitalist sys-

tem when there was employment for everyone” (p. 45).

While his contacts with, and analysis of, organized labor make the work valuable reading for labor historians in particular, his observations about all matters of everyday life—housing in working-class neighborhoods like Wedding, price levels in comparison to the United States, being beaten by the Berlin police, political rallies of various parties, antisemitic incidents, sometimes directed at himself—will provide a more general readership with a first-hand account of this critical period. Its immediacy makes for a both informative and suspenseful read that—at least at times—assumes literary qualities, as the editors correctly point out. I am not convinced—given his activist stance—of the editors’ characterization of Plotkin as a *flâneur*. But their invocation of the expressionist prose of Alexander Döblin’s *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929), which Plotkin had read prior to his trip to Germany, is certainly justified: “From encounter to encounter, a multivoiced evocation of life in Berlin emerges, finally silenced by the blasting violence of Nazi takeover” (p. xxxvii).

Introduced by a thorough article by the editors that provides detailed background on Plotkin, the American and German labor movements, and the methodology of the editing process (only a selection of the diary entries is printed), and carefully footnoted and illustrated, *An American in Hitler’s Berlin* makes a valuable contribution to the field of labor history and a vivid account for anyone with an interest in this pivotal moment in history.

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