

In Search of Revolution, 1916-1923: Germany and its European Context. Klaus Weinbauer, Fakultät für Staats- und Sozialwissenschaften, Universität der Bundeswehr München; Anthony McElligott, Department of History, University of Limerick; Kirsten Heinsohn, Forschungsstelle für Zeitgeschichte in Hamburg, 21.03.2013-23.03.2013.

Reviewed by David Marshall

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In Search of Revolution, 1916-1923: Germany and its European Context

How ought one to think about a revolution like the one beginning in Germany in November 1918 from a historical point of view? For historians, a revolution may appear as something like a test: here is an event, a series of events, a period in which change is unmistakably front and center. If historians have a place in the universe of research, it is as analysts of change in human societies. If they cannot speak convincingly to the nature of such a revolution, one might suppose, what can they do? And yet, a revolution is also something that may appear to confound historical modes of analysis. Precisely because of the day-to-day - indeed, at times, minute-to-minute - analyzability of historical objects like the German Revolution, historians can become strangely aware of the sheer contingency of the events themselves. The more they focus on particular scenes of political conflict (particular street confrontations and particular escalations in violence, for example), the more conscious they sometimes become that small, even ostensibly innocuous, alterations could have had outsize effects upon the course of history. Simply relaying what happened - which, other things being equal, seems like an entirely reasonable (if difficult to achieve) goal for historical inquiry - appears to become a kind of willful blindness. Historians are bound to privilege what happened over what did not happen. This seems unavoidable and right. But, in a revolutionary context, it seems as if time itself becomes characterized by a heightened unpredictability. And any given moment therefore seems to be describable only in terms of what it *might* have become. The "might-have-beens" thus seem to be both central and essentially unknowable. This feels like a problem.

The established historiography for the 1918-1919 period in Germany history appears to confirm this somewhat speculative description of the historian's task in analyzing a revolution. One can narrate the history of histories of the revolution up until the 1970s or so as the

supplanting of a necessitarian paradigm by another one characterized by the modality of possibility. In the immediately post-1945 context, the revolution could be seen as a choice between *either* the Bolshevization of Germany *or* the tactical alliance of the center left with elements of the old order. But research conducted in the 1960s and expanded upon in the 1970s then seemed to show that the MSPD had considerably more room for maneuver than had been previously thought. At first, a tragic historiography of contingent necessity: *if* the Weimar Republic was to be born at all, *then* it had to collude with elements of the old order, a reliance that compromised the Republic in the eyes of its most natural constituencies and led eventually to its demise. Hence the topos, a Republic without Republicans - a defenseless, a compromised, a misbegotten Republic. Then, a prismatic historiography of contingent possibility: at crucial junctures and in particular periods, certain constituent factors limited the range of options, but from beginning to end, there were genuine alternatives. Attention thus shifted to changing balances of power on the workers' and soldiers' councils, to the opportunities forgone for a more decisive re-fashioning of the institutions of the state, and to a periodization of the points at which possibilities not grasped became ungraspable. If such orientations to the possible threatened to contravene the strictures of historical inquiry, then historians like Eberhard Kolb could reply that, although one could not in any real sense "run" the alternative scenarios implied by counterfactual questions, one certainly could depict situations in terms of the diversity of potential futures extrapolated from them by different groups (and by different factions within groups), and one could also analyze the ability of any given group to realize the particular future it desired. What might one need in order to effect such a program, one could ask, and what capacities characterized the particular historical agencies in question?

This, broadly speaking, was the situation confronting scholars at “In Search of Revolution, 1916-1923: Germany and its European Context,” a conference organized by KLAUS WEINHAEUER (Munich), ANTHONY MCELLIGOTT (Limerick), and KIRSTEN HEINSOHN (Hamburg). The organizers also offered formal comments on particular panels, a task in which they were joined by DIRK SCHUMANN (Göttingen), KATHLEEN CANNING (Ann Arbor, Michigan), and STEFAN BERGER (Bochum). Roughly, the desire of the organizers was to reexamine the German Revolution with historical methods and interests that have emerged in the thirty years or so since the last great wave of innovative historiography. Participants thus focused less on the political narratives of the choices that were made and that could have been made. They focused more on the environmental historical role of disease in German military defeat (OLIVER HALLER, Waterloo, Ontario), on the transnational contexts in which the Revolution might be situated (NORMA LISA FLORES, Bowling Green, Ohio; JENS BOYSEN, Warsaw; and FLORIAN GRAFL, Gießen), on the new kinds of citizens that the Revolution brought into being, including a new electoral majority of newly enfranchised female voters (Kathleen Canning), on the kinds of subjectivities thrust upon, experienced by, and developed by the various constituents of the Revolution (MORITZ FÖLLMER, Amsterdam), on the performative and communicative dimensions of violence in revolutionary contexts (MARK JONES, Dublin; and CHRISTINE HIKEL, Munich), on the kinds of spaces for intellectual work brought into being by the Revolution (IAN G. GRIMMER, Burlington, Vermont), on the communicative networks within which news of the Revolution circulated (HEIDI TWOREK, Cambridge, Massachusetts), on the practices of law, order, and disorder beyond explicitly revolutionary situations (NADINE ROSSOL, Colchester; and SARA SOPHIE STERN, Tübingen), on the cultural and legal impact of the revolution upon sexuality, same-sex sexuality in particular (LAURIE MARHOEFER, Syracuse, New York), and on the ways in which aspects of the revolutionary period were subsequently memorized (PETER DANYLOW, Hamburg).

What are the *aperçus* uncovered by the conference participants and in the course of the conference itself that can function as interests, hypotheses, or points of departure for future research?

Older conceptions of the contingencies of the revolutionary period can be taken up by contemporary interests in histories of disease and emotion. If Oliver Haller is right that in 1918 the German army was disproportionately debilitated by the influenza epidemic (an epidemic

that would eventually claim the lives of 50 million people worldwide), then the military collapse that precipitated the revolution might seem to have its origins in the sheer chanciness of viral contagion. (That said, even if Haller’s hypothesis is correct, quite *why* German exposure to the disease differed from that of their opponents would remain an open question). Moreover, as Kathleen Canning and Möritz Föllmer intimated, if revolution is a state of being that - like, or indeed *qua*, crisis - is distinguished by the immense pressures it places on perceptual, affective, excogitative systems existing within a complex and swiftly changing array of relevant pasts, witnessed presents, and potential futures, then the emotions of desire and aversion, hope and fear, conquest and submission - in short, dreamland and nightmare - become not merely characteristic symptoms of the historical landscape but also generative factors in the transformation of that landscape.

One can speak also, with Canning, of “rupture” as a kind of narrative element that will be important to historians of revolution, because revolutionary time is a time in which, often, radical discontinuities become common. (Note, however, McElligott’s countervailing arguments that the genuinely revolutionary period was relatively brief and that, broadly speaking, the institutions of the state - he emphasized the judicial system - remained intact.) The “gradual and imperceptible transformation” is a narrative element adored by many an elegant historian. Rightly so. But equally refined is the juxtaposition of states between which there was no continuity. One moment, Wilhelm II is Kaiser. The next moment, Prince Max von Baden has - without the Kaiser’s consent - announced abdication. The situation is such (and, as Heidi Tworek argued, the mode of communication is such) that the announcement cannot be countermanded. Ostensibly crucial intermediate stages are absent. There was no conviction on the part of Wilhelm that he must abdicate. There was no explicit public enactment of such a conviction. But these absences were, simply, immaterial. Equally, one can speak with Laurie Marhoefer of the sense in which gays and lesbians simply began to live *as if* the Revolution had ushered in a new age - not just in politics conventionally conceived but also in sexual politics. That such a presumption may be wrong is relevant but perhaps not decisive, for, in this kind of historical context, a mistake can render itself true.

“The rupture” as a primarily temporal category has a primarily spatial analogue in “the gap,” in, one might say, the dislocation of spectacle and spectator. The conspicuousness, indeed, shockingness, of many revolutionary events and undertakings reflects disruption in habit, for

habit is a measure of the human capacity to be in the presence of things without taking account of them in such a way that their distinctiveness becomes an issue. And the fetishization of a “return” to “normality” is, in part, an incapacity to live in a state of radical possibility, as Christine Hikel implied in her comments on discourses of *Ruhe und Ordnung* and as Nadine Rossol might have said in her discussion of the police and conceptions of policing. This gap is, in turn, the space that can open up in the course of collective deliberation, where the multiplicity of things that a “we” could be becomes explicit. Indeed, it is in confrontation, in *Auseinandersetzung*, that “space” in the sense of “gap” comes into being. As Ian Grimmer surmised, the *Räter geistiger Arbeiter*, the intellectual workers’ councils might be *spaces* for intellectual experimentation in the sense that there were relatively indeterminate expectations about what would take place in their discussions. A built and inhabited environment might be a matrix of habitual byways, that is, a matrix of elicited muscle-memories. Such an environment might also be a “space,” but in a different sense to the councils. Just so, when Mark Jones spoke of “space” in Berlin, he meant not so much the infrastructure of streets and squares in which the confrontations of the revolution took place as what one might call “the means of conspicuousness.” Schloßplatz was a means of conspicuousness not only because of its centrality or name recognizability but also because of the possibility of transgressing its habitual ways of bringing people together. An overwhelming and disproportionate state-deployed violence might exceed its utilitarian function in such a context and become something symbolic. This might be, for example, a violence of the machine gun, the flame-thrower, the artillery shell - or, as rumor had it, the poison gas canister - being brought to bear on the *Volksmarinedivision* in December 1918. Or even, as Jones pointed out, such a violence might *fail* to achieve its immediate goal and yet *succeed* in reconfiguring the protocols existing between state, people, and force.

No conference can exhaust the possibilities it brings into being. What, then, are the open questions that remain after the end of the conference?

One of the aims of the conference was to deploy recently developed sensitivities to the transnational dimensions of historical processes in order to situate the German Revolution in a wider array of contexts. And certainly, the German Revolution can be explored from a variety of extra-German perspectives: in revolutionary Russia, the German situation appeared as a crucial index of the possibility for world revolution; in the United States, it was part of the risk perception underwriting the

Palmer raids by the Department of Justice against elements of the political left; for Polish political parties in German-Polish regions - such as the National Democrats - the German revolution might be read as an effect of military defeat, something that therefore could not be of immediate relevance for Poles qua victors. And so on. One might ask, however, what precisely is the motivation for transnational contextualization? Indeed, one might ask, what precisely is meant here by “transnational”? One can compare the ways in which different nations experienced the end of World War I, situating the German revolutionary experience among an array of “comparables.” One can investigate transnational organizations like the Comintern (or the League of Nations) in terms of their attitudes towards the German Revolution. One can examine German understandings of the varieties of revolution that seemed possible or that had been actualized in the early twentieth century. One can look at the border zones and peripheries reassigned from the German state to others in the wake of the war and ask how they experienced exclusion from the Revolution. And one can recover the experience of non-German nationals within Germany - an estimated two million Russian prisoners of war, for example. These are all slightly different issues, and, while they are all intrinsically interesting in their own right, bringing them together in such a way that they may alter our basic understanding of the Revolution itself is an ongoing challenge.

Conference Overview:

Keynote lecture: Anthony McElligott, “1918: Authority between ‘Revolution from Above’ and ‘Revolution from Below.’”

Panel 1

Christine Hikel: (In)Security: Political Assassinations and Attempts at Revolution and in the Early Weimar Republic

Mark Jones: Violence and the German Revolution of 1918-19

Nadine Rossol: “Unable of Securing Order...?” The Police and the German Revolution 1918/19

Norma Lisa Flores: In the Wake of General Hysteria: The Spartacist Uprising, the Palmer Raids, and the Impasse of 1919

Panel 2

Kathleen Canning: Gender, Citizenship and the Imaginary of Revolution

Laurie Marhoefer: Fomenting Sexual Revolution in Germany, 1916-1921

Panel 3

Moritz Föllmer: *In Search of the Revolutionary Subject in Germany, 1918/19*

Ian G. Grimmer: *Intellectual Workers and Cultural Revolution: Räte geistiger Arbeiter in Central Europe, 1918-1919*

Heidi J. Tworek: *Spreading the Revolution: News Agencies and Politics in Weimar Germany, 1918-20*

Panel 4

Oliver Haller: *The Influenza Pandemic of 1918 and the Dolchstoßlegende*

Peter Danylow: *The Barricades of Hamburg (Larisa*

Rejsner) - (De)constructing Revolutionary Truth

Panel 5

Jens Boysen: *Simultaneity of the Un-Simultaneous: German Social Revolution and Polish National Revolution in Germany 1918/19*

Florian Grafl: *Labour Leaders, Gun Men, Bomb Dropers - Revolution in its Everyday Setting During the Years of the Pisterismo in Barcelona*

Sara Sophie Stern: *Rebellious Regions in Revolutionary Times: Riots and Strikes in German and British Mining Regions in the Early 1920s*

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