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Conan Fischer. *The Ruhr Crisis, 1923-1924.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. viii + 312 pp. $80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-820800-6.

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The Limits and Lessons of Occupation

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Conan Fischer's new work makes a timely appearance and offers important lessons in the difficulties and long-term costs, both material and human, of military occupation. Within contemporary historiography, the French occupation of the German Ruhr Valley from 1923 to 1925 has generally been given short shrift, often accorded only a few pages within larger treatments of the interwar period.[1] Fischer rightfully restores the centrality of this event to the larger history of Weimar Germany and interwar Europe.[2] In assessing the Ruhr Crisis, Fischer does not view the occupation itself as a symbol of Weimar's endemic weakness. Instead, he stresses that the willingness of the Ruhr population to engage in a passive resistance campaign (January-September 1923) against the occupation highlights the widespread legitimacy that the Weimar Republic actually enjoyed in the eyes of its populace. Popular identification with republican values awakened by the crisis, in fact, held the potential of solidifying the gains of the 1918 Revolution and allowing an "other Germany," based on liberal democratic values, to take root permanently. Additionally, Fischer suggests that the conflict offered the opportunity, given the political will to compromise, of creating a new western European economic order along the lines of the post-World War II European Coal and Steel Community, in which trade and industrial links between Germany and France would be strengthened.

Unfortunately, as Fischer emphasizes, hopes for a new Europe were dashed as neither Germany nor France was prepared to reconcile its disputes. The German government under William Cuno was ill-prepared for the occupation and during the crisis vacillated between open defiance and diplomatic pleas for negotiation that were not especially substantive. After assuming power in mid-August 1923, Stresemann's government developed a more coherent strategy designed to forge a compromise. However, new initiatives from Berlin were, if not necessarily too little, then nevertheless much too late. The central government had already lost control of events in the Ruhr by the early summer and, given the meteoric inflation, now held a poor hand with which to bargain–a situation that the French subsequently used to their advantage.

Even more damaging to any prospect for a lasting settlement were the attitude and actions of the French, who come off badly in this account. Fischer argues that the French took a particularly hard line towards Germany because of the widespread feeling that France had won the war, yet was losing the peace. Supposed allies appeared more concerned with France's wartime debt than with Germany's reparation obligations and German economic power seemed resurgent even as French industry continued to struggle. This state of affairs aroused deep-seated security fears. By 1923, French premier Raymond Poincare grew determined to bring the "Ruhr barons to heel [...] regardless of the price that France's violation of the 1919 peace settlement might demand and regardless of the damage his onslaught might inflict on the fledgling German republic" (p. 290). Fischer suggests that such revisionism ultimately blinded French authorities to genuine efforts by German representatives to accommodate them on reparations and larger security concerns. It also had life and death consequences for those living in the occupied Ruhr.

The true value of this book is fully revealed in the exacting analysis of everyday life in the Ruhr under French occupation. In examining the high politics between the French and German governments, Fischer relies largely upon published primary and secondary sources, whereas his exploration of the actual occupation exploits a vast array of hitherto unknown evidence culled from regional German archives. Such materials include internal German and Prussian government correspondence, newspaper accounts and industry records.

In reconstructing the occupation, Fischer highlights

the intensification of the already wretched conditions most Germans experienced, including declining real wages and increasing malnutrition, under French administration. Taken aback by the strength of the largely homegrown passive resistance movement, the French and their Belgian allies soon engaged in a war of attrition designed to break the will to resist. French authorities erected customs barriers that cut economic links and later limited physical movement between the Ruhr and the rest of Germany. Occupation officials also began to expel 8,500 senior German officials, police officers, postal workers and railwaymen, most often with their families, from the Ruhr. Germans deemed to be dangerous though valuable, such as Fritz Thyssen and Gustav Krupp, were imprisoned and subjected to court martial. The Ruhr population was harassed and brutalized. Women were sometimes singled out for especially harsh treatment and during the course of the occupation, hundreds of rapes and sexual assaults were reported to local authorities.

While arrests and harassment made life difficult, Fischer makes clear that the greatest hardship faced by Ruhr inhabitants was the lack of adequate food supplies. As an industrial region, the Ruhr needed to import food from the surrounding countryside; however, customs barriers and the ongoing inflation created shortages. Moreover, as Fischer aptly illustrates, French officials were willing to use food as a tool of coercion, delaying or limiting shipments to particularly troublesome areas, while simultaneously opening French-run food outlets under the belief that the quickest way to a Ruhr inhabitant's heart was through his stomach. The food crisis in the Ruhr soon led to one of the most interesting, if little known, aspects of the occupation, namely, the evacuation of approximately 300,000 children from the Ruhr to non-occupied parts of Germany during the spring, 1923. While this evacuation should in the future warrant a separate monograph treatment, especially for its effect on national identity development, Fischer does a superb job highlighting the trauma of the removal as well as its role in strengthening commitment to passive resistance within the general population.

Nevertheless, over the long term resistance had its limits and the increasing harshness of daily life took its toll. By late summer 1923, strikes arose among workers directed not at the French but instead at German employers, who had, as Fischer notes, "assumed new social roles" (p. 121) during the occupation. For their part, managers found it increasingly difficult to pay their workers because of the increasing worthlessness of the mark and a French campaign to seize company payrolls. Further, employer resolve in favor of passive resistance was also declining as some industrialists, such as Otto Wolff, began broaching the subject of collaboration. These factors, taken together with the growing realization in Berlin that hyperinflation and growing political discord in Germany made support for passive resistance untenable, eventually led to the abandonment of the campaign at the end of September 1923.

The collapse of passive resistance had far-reaching consequences. As Fischer highlights, while France enjoyed a brief victory of sorts, it gained little lasting benefit. The Dawes Plan of 1924 soon superceded the more favorable MICUM (the Inter-Allied Mission for the Control of Factories and Mines) accords negotiated directly with German industry in late 1923 and early 1924. Dawes obligated France to evacuate the Ruhr by 1925, scuttling French hopes that the Ruhr occupation would lead to the creation of an independent Rhineland buffer state. To add insult to injury, France walked away from the Dawes agreement without gaining debt relief or other significant compensation in return for leaving the Ruhr. The Ruhr occupation also contributed to the downfall of Poincare's government in elections during Spring 1924. Over the long term, Fischer finds that the French adventure in the Ruhr "demonstrated the limitations of French power and indicated in the future that any lasting peace in Europe would depend ultimately on German goodwill. The first intimations of the catastrophe of May 1940 were already gathering on the horizon" (p. 290).

Precious little goodwill remained in Germany by the end of 1923. Fischer finds that the ignominious end of the passive resistance campaign set the stage for the eventual collapse of the Weimar order. The decision of the Stresemann government to capitulate was met with widespread hostility among ordinary workers, who accused officials, including their own socialist representatives, of discarding their sacrifices in the name of political expediency. The fragile peace between German big business and the working class of the Ruhr also quickly fell by the wayside, as employers utilized the need to meet the increased production demands of MICUM to try to abolish the eight-hour day. Ultimately, Fischer argues that both of these developments helped inflict a "fatal wound" to the republic since those most supportive of the Weimar order, i.e. industrial workers, felt betrayed by the actions of business and their own government. Anti-democratic forces, particularly of the right, subsequently took advantage of this general disillusionment to gain a firmer foothold in German society.

On the whole, Fischer's arguments and use of evidence is persuasive. However, some elements of his

study could have been explored in greater detail. First and foremost is the issue of culpability. This book attributes the lion's share of the blame for fatally weakening a nascent democracy through an unnecessary, malicious invasion to the French, thus tending to obscure, and in some ways rehabilitate, the equally disastrous actions of the German government and big business both prior to and during the occupation. Gerald Feldman's work on early Weimar and the great inflation reveals more fully the failures on the German side.[3] In addition, Fischer's finding that Germany's defeat in the Ruhr signaled the beginning of the end of the Weimar Republic is a bit teleological. Clearly, the outcome of events in the Ruhr dealt a significant blow to the legitimacy of the regime and, in some ways psychologically conditioned the German people for the later victory of National Socialism. Nevertheless, the German state managed, remarkably enough, to survive the Ruhr crisis and the other events of 1923 intact. While the economic "recovery" of the mid- to late-1920s was not particularly robust, hope remained for attaining greater stability. Politically, Germany was integrating itself into the multilateral structures of Europe. Only with the knockout punch of the Depression was the fate of Weimar more or less sealed.

In more specific areas, Fischer's assessment of the psychological impact of the occupation on ordinary workers would have been strengthened through a greater use of worker memoirs as well as the limited number of oral histories available for this period. I was surprised that in his analysis of the local component of the occupation, Fischer did not gather any evidence from French archives, instead relying almost exclusively on primary materials found in Germany. A more precise exploration of the role of the Belgians both in planning for and participating in the occupation as well as a greater discussion of the French use of imported foreign labor during the crisis would have added to this study. The narrative would also have benefited from a better sense of the overall chronology of the occupation (a matter that may be particularly acute for the general reader). The thematic focus of most chapters, while essential for such a study, tends to obscure at times the progressive stages of the occupation and resistance campaign.

These comments, however, should not detract from Fischer's altogether excellent work. Through his account of the Ruhr occupation, Fischer provides the reader a cautionary tale in the dangers of unilateralism and an in-depth look at the early struggles of Germans to defend a viable Weimar democracy. Overall, *The Ruhr Crisis, 1923-1924* is indispensable reading for any historian interested in better understanding the socio-political climate of the early inter-war period in Europe.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, Detlev Peukert, *The Weimar Republic* (1987; New York: Hill and Wang, 1993); and Anthony Adamthwaite, *Grandeur and Misery: France's Bid for Power in Europe, 1914-1940* (London: Arnold, 1995).

[2]. For other recent accounts of the Ruhr Crisis see, Stanislas Jeannesson, *Poincare, la France et la Ruhr (1922-1924): Histore d'une occupation* (Strasbourg: Presses universitaires de Strasbourg, 1998); *Elspeth Y. O'Riorden,* Britain and the Ruhr Crisis *(New York: Palgrave, 2001); and Barbara Mueller,* Passive Widerstand im Ruhrkampf_ (Muenster: Lit., 1996).

[3]. Gerald D. Feldman, *The Great Disorder: Politics, Economics, and Society in the German Inflation, 1914-1924* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). Also useful is the recent work by Theo Balderston, *Economics and Politics in the Weimar Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); H-German review, October 2003, at http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=98201066101037.

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