

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Robert Blobaum.** *A Minor Apocalypse: Warsaw during the First World War.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017. 320 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-5017-0523-6.

**Jesse Kauffman.** *Elusive Alliance: The German Occupation of Poland in World War I.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015. 320 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-28601-6.



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**Published on** H-Poland (July, 2018)

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As the centenaries of the landmark events of the First World War march past, we have seen a wave of excellent new work on the First World War and its aftermath, including perspectives that have until now received scant treatment. New studies shine light on the alliances, like Alexander Watson's *Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I* (2014); reconsider the Russian Revolution, like Laura Engelstein's *Russia in Flames: War, Revolution, Civil War* (2017); and explain the ragged end of the conflict, like Robert Gerwarth's *Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End* (2017). Thankfully, due to the work of Jesse Kauffman in his *Elusive Alliance: The German Occupation of Poland in World War I* and Robert Blobaum's *A Minor Apocalypse: Warsaw during the First World War*, the "Polish Question" during the war—and the failed German and Russian answers to it—will also take its place in this larger body of reconsidered scholarship. More even than a question of military victories or defeats, the Polish story during the war is one about the strength of the states and alliances that fought, since the territory of the early modern Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth sprawled across lands divided among

the Central powers and the Entente. Questions of Polish postwar independence turned on which states were victorious, and on how they endured the conflict and with what sort of Polish policy—or policies.

Kauffman's *Elusive Alliance*, which looks at the Polish territory imperial Germany occupied and Blobaum's *Minor Apocalypse*, which focuses on the once and future capital of Warsaw, work against the nostalgic picture of Poland's First World War as a "good" war that brought longed-for independence and that compared well to the "bad" Second World War that followed. Abandoning the diplomatic perspective that hinges the new Poland on Woodrow Wilson's all-important Thirteenth Point, both books place the weight of events in and around Polish lands. Kauffman focuses on the still-formidable German presence and puzzles through what the Germans were trying to do—and why they could not do it—and Blobaum's study shows in detail what the failure of those German policies meant for the civilians of Warsaw. The usual suspects for Polish agency—Józef Piłsudski and his Legions—are not the central focus of either monograph.

Instead, they are repositioned as peripheral forces that seized on the opportunities provided by the vicissitudes of the war and German incompetence.

Kauffman sets himself up to understand this first German occupation on its own terms, aware that it is often considered merely as a preface to the German occupation of World War II, an earlier and less dramatic episode mined for parallels and then set aside. His narrative turns around the figure of the governor-general, Hans von Beseler, whom Kauffman clearly respects. Von Beseler, a devout German patriot, was condescending toward the Poles and their politics, but no racist, and he fostered local governance. His schemes jeopardized his reputation in Berlin, where he was seen as “soft” and foolishly pro-Polish. In the heady atmosphere of the war, and with the buildup of Piłsudski’s Legions as an alternative locus of loyalty, most Poles had come to see von Beseler’s offers of concessions as too little, too late—the feeble offer of a foreign power clinging hopelessly to tenure on Polish land. The result was a governor who could please neither his own people nor the Poles he ruled, and who was not taken seriously by either side (then or since). Kauffman recontextualizes von Beseler—with whose ignominious escape he is nevertheless unimpressed—in an impossible military-diplomatic situation. The imperial playbooks (both German and Russian) for managing the Poles were insufficient for the unprecedented post-1915 situation and von Beseler attempted to move beyond them and try something new. That he failed was the result of the endless appetites of the German war machine, which demanded enormous economic and material concessions of German-held territory and vanished the perks that von Beseler sought to distribute to win Polish support.

What did von Beseler have in mind for Poland? Not the independent state of 1918, but a quasi-sovereign entity, a sort of mandate Poland with a “special relationship” with imperial Germany—not completely unlike the Russian-sponsored Congress Kingdom of yore. Kauffman looks at German planning in wartime Poland through the lens of two institutions: the army (or the armies created using Poles and fighting on Polish soil) and the educational system, especially the Polish flagship, the University of Warsaw. The *Polnische Wehrmacht* is a fumble, a Polish army called into existence to solve a German manpower crisis, but that logically provokes demands for a parallel Polish state to direct it, further undermining German control and building up Polish institutions. Kauffman sees von Beseler’s resurrection of the university, however, as a signal of the sincerity of his intentions toward the Poles (and notes Russian fury at

the success of this gesture). These themes build a persuasive study, drawing mainly on German but also on Polish sources, that looks at the institutional “teeth” of German promises to Poles and the reasons why these promises went unfulfilled because of the economic demands of the war.

Blobaum looks at both Russian and German behavior in Warsaw, aiming to draw attention to the initial Polish support for the Russian war effort and the contrasting unpopularity and mismanagement of the Germans. The focus is on the day-to-day experience of the city’s population and its suffering, and Blobaum’s rich detail and enormous source base are able to fill in the picture Kauffman sketches from the German side of why von Beseler’s policies failed, and what the war felt like for Poles. A host of different players, from the political elite to laborers in search of work and women in nursing courses, from Endeks to Jewish activists, from prostitutes to cinema-goers, populate this story of wartime exploitation. If this book has a central protagonist, it is the Warsaw Citizens Committee, which takes on an increasing portion of city governance and emerges—through its growing competence—as a proto-governmental structure for the new Poland.

Writing against the preponderance of the scholarship, which focuses on the German occupation of Warsaw in World War II—the “major apocalypse”—Blobaum reconstructs employment numbers, calorie counts, and soup kitchen records to argue convincingly that the material circumstances of the average Varsovian—excepting the Jewish population, to whom we will turn in a moment—were *worse* during the First World War than the Second. He does this without flattening Warsaw life and retaining a lively sense of cultural and social tension. This story is not just about material destruction, or the animosities of the occupiers, but about the bread and butter of wartime civilian existence: food, heat, and jobs. It tells us that von Beseler’s policy of “rewarding” and “liberating” the Poles failed miserably because it was accompanied simultaneously by the expropriation of most of the city’s resources for shipment into Germany. The Germans starved and shuttered Warsaw and pushed the city to the brink of collapse and revolution, reflected in the political demonstrations of, among others, women and Jews. This economic exploitation undermined any support for the nation-building project that might have arisen and sped up the formation of a robust diverse urban political culture that was to come to fruition after independence.

Both Kauffman and Blobaum highlight the importance of antisemitism at this crucial juncture, a “peculiar twilight period” between war and peace in which old policies had lost their power but new ones had yet to replace them, but in which antisemitism was clearly a native phenomenon and not a foreign import (Kauffman, p. 11). The uncertainty of the time made Jews especially vulnerable and the economic devastation of the occupations saw them scapegoated and accused of profiteering (which was especially convenient for the Germans, the actual profiteers). Both agree that Russian policies were harsher on the Jewish community. Kauffman outlines how the thorniness of Polish-Jewish relations drew the German administration into setting new policies to keep the peace, with important consequences for post-war Jewish political life in Poland. Blobaum places an even greater emphasis on Polish antisemitism, positing that we need to ask why there were *not* pogroms in Warsaw in 1918 (as there were in Vilnius and Lwów), a question that he answers with reference to the shifting fronts around the other Polish cities, which exacerbated ethnic and racial tensions in a manner Warsaw escaped.

The Jewish question leads neatly into the other, larger question both studies raise, about the inevitable comparison to the occupation of Poland by Nazi Germany a generation later. Was this simply a prelude? The answer is a firm no. Blobaum points to a number of factors that differentiated the two occupations, the most important be-

ing the fate of the Jews: “the German ‘road to Auschwitz,’ whether in terms of policy or behaviors, did not lead through Warsaw during the First World War” (p. 141). Poland’s Jews were *better* off under the Germans than they had been under the Russians during the first war. In the second war, the Germans were more corrupt, more savage, and more violent, but in the first war Polish gentiles still suffered much more than has been understood or appreciated. For the Poles, this was *not* a “good” war. Kauffman, too, is firm: von Beseler was no Hans Frank, and the hardships of 1915-18 were not comparable to the atrocities of 1939-45. The breakdown of von Beseler’s administration, however, did carry back to Berlin a seed of humiliation and resentment that would blossom into a virulent anti-Polonism under Adolf Hitler with devastating consequences during the second occupation.

Together, these excellent new studies expand the cast of characters in the story of the creation of an independent Polish state in 1918, and they enlarge our understanding of the contours of the war in which this happened. Dismissing facile comparisons to the “major” apocalypse of the Second World War in favor of more subtle influences, they allow us to consider the last gasp of Russian and German imperial planning on Polish territory, and the jagged contours of the crisis of legitimacy from which Polish independence emerged, but haltingly, out of first Russian and then German failures.

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**Citation:** Jadwiga Biskupska. Review of Blobaum, Robert, *A Minor Apocalypse: Warsaw during the First World War* and Kauffman, Jesse, *Elusive Alliance: The German Occupation of Poland in World War I*. H-Poland, H-Net Reviews. July, 2018.

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