



Edgard Haider. *Wien 1918: Agonie der Kaiserstadt.* Weimar, Germany: Boehlau Verlag, 2017. 418 pp. \$37.00, cloth, ISBN 978-3-205-20486-2.

Reviewed by Tim Kirk

Published on HABSBUURG (April, 2019)

Commissioned by Borislav Chernev

As the end of 1917 approached it was perhaps not yet clear quite how destructive the Great War would prove for the Habsburg Empire, but its impact had long been felt on the streets of Vienna, where shortages of food and daily essentials had already set in even before the first Christmas. Edgard Haider, who has already published a volume on the city during that first inauspicious year of the war, has produced a book that captures the experiences of the Viennese as the war ended in defeat, revolution, and the disintegration of the state. Based largely on reports in contemporary newspapers and magazines, interspersed with references to diaries and popular histories, as well as scholarly works, it constructs a diverse range of perspectives from across Viennese society within the broadly chronological framework of the year.

The book begins with the explosive political start to the year, when mass strikes broke out in Lower Austria and quickly spread across the empire—only to be strangled by the Social Democratic leadership, Haider argues, on the basis of nebulous promises from the government. The experience revealed divisions within the labor movement that were to resurface again at the end of the year—albeit without giving rise to the fundamental split that so damaged the Left in other parts of Europe. The narrative then alternates be-

tween the depiction of the cumulative direct impact of the war and the direct impact of the war in the form of hunger, cold, criminality, sickness (the Spanish flu, of course but also tuberculosis and rickets), and death; and others dealing with the steady degeneration of familiar landscapes, the subtle shifts in the texture of everyday life. For much of the population, life was dominated by shortages of food and heating fuel, endless queuing, and the replacement of familiar items in the shops and on the menus of cafés and restaurants with poor substitutes made from ersatz ingredients. Food-hoarding farmers out in the country grew rich as the city starved, and the Viennese strapped on their rucksacks to forage for food or to gather wood for heating from the Vienna woods. But for all that it was not clear for much of the year that this would be very much the end of the world as the Viennese knew it. The situation was hopeless, but not serious. Many of the better off seemed to find what they needed, either in Vienna or during the summer break at Bad Ischl. Theaters played on and new cinemas opened, trips to the country gave way to more modest trips to Heurigen; and although the outbreak of hostilities had brought construction work to a halt, some rather prestigious buildings had gone up on the eve of war, including the Konzerthaus and, not least, the K.u.K. Ministry of War itself.

One or two others were finished during the conflict, such as the Exportakademie (later the Wirtschaftsuniversität); and Otto Wagner, although unwelcome in conservative circles, planned the reshaping of the postwar city on modern lines.

Wagner died in 1918, along with Klimt, Schiele, and Kolomann Moser, and their careers and others are summarized in a chapter toward the end of the book that reads rather like a collection of obituaries and provides a way into an obituary for the empire itself. The story draws to a close with the end of the war and the collapse of the empire. A speech by the Christian Social mayor, Richard Weiskirchner, at the Deutscher Volkstag held on June 17 in a town hall, decked out in flags of red-white-black and red-black-gold (as well as the Habsburg colors) evokes the future in uncompromising terms. It is a speech that very clearly reveals the common ground shared by the Catholic conservative and German nationalist "camps": "'We are not threatened by the power of the enemy's weapons,' Weiskirchner declared, 'no! but by a political crisis at home that is the product of disloyalty and high treason. Our soldiers have defended us against external enemies in heroic battles. We now call on all Germans, man by man, in the holy war against the internal enemy for the survival of our nation'" (p. 311).

The advent of revolution and republic is dealt with in a final chapter of only twenty-seven pages, culminating in the "birthday of the republic"—almost two months before the end of the year. This is an elegy for the old imperial Vienna, and there is very little of any substance about the republican Vienna that succeeded it or the people who made it. Indeed, the war itself and the political unrest at home are very much in the background. November 12, 1918, therefore comes across as something of an unexpected "zero hour," both culturally and politically—which is a pity, given the many continuities between empire and republic.

This is a book for those who already know Vienna, those who live there or visit frequently. It is replete with detail on all aspects of life during the last year of the war. A degree of familiarity is needed to negotiate one's way through both the city and its customs—although there is a very helpful and wide-ranging glossary of Austrian terms for German readers. It was a pleasure to read.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/habsburg>

Citation: Tim Kirk. Review of Haider, Edgard. *Wien 1918: Agonie der Kaiserstadt*. HABSBERG, H-Net Reviews. April, 2019.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=53044>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.