

## Book Review: Klaus Weinhauer, Anthony McElligott, and Kirsten Heinsohn, ed., Germany 1916–1923: A Revolution in Context (Bielefeld: transcript, 2016)

David Freis

### Angaben zur Veröffentlichung / Publication details:

Freis, David. 2017. "Book Review: Klaus Weinhauer, Anthony McElligott, and Kirsten Heinsohn, ed., Germany 1916–1923: A Revolution in Context (Bielefeld: transcript, 2016)." *German Politics and Society*. New York: Berghahn Books.  
<https://doi.org/10.3167/gps.2017.350406>.

### Nutzungsbedingungen / Terms of use:

licgercopyright

Dieses Dokument wird unter folgenden Bedingungen zur Verfügung gestellt: / This document is made available under these conditions:

#### Deutsches Urheberrecht

Weitere Informationen finden Sie unter: / For more information see:

<https://www.uni-augsburg.de/de/organisation/bibliothek/publizieren-zitieren-archivieren/publiz/>



Klaus Weinhauer, Anthony McElligott, and Kirsten Heinsohn, ed., *Germany 1916–1923: A Revolution in Context* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2016)

**Reviewed by David Freis, Ethics, History and Theory of Medicine,  
Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster**

Since the end of World War I, the period between 1914 and 1918 has been the topic of innumerable studies. Throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, a stream of publications has ebbed and flowed—the centenary of the war in 2014 probably left another high-water mark—but it has never run dry. Except for the Russian Revolution of 1917, however, the same cannot be said about the events in the aftermath of the war. While the next years will certainly bring some more books and articles about the revolutions that shook postwar Europe, most of them will likely be addressing a specialized academic readership rather than broader audiences.

Several reasons may account for the relatively low historiographic profile of the German revolution of 1918/1919. One of them is that, even inside German borders, the revolution was very localized. Instead of a uniform history of the revolution, there were a variety of local contexts and events in different cities and regions that are difficult to integrate into a coherent and comprehensive story. Moreover, as neither side could claim a decisive victory, the revolution remained difficult to integrate into political narratives and rituals of remembrance. While each side had its heroes and villains, the revolution remained an uneasy topic for the left, center, and right in the Weimar Republic and beyond. Up to the present day, the historiography of the revolution has been shaped by this legacy, with most of the relevant studies dating back to the 1960s to 1980s. Alexander Gallus, in one of the few recent books on the topic, has rightly used the notion of a “forgotten revolution.”<sup>1</sup> Although the volume edited by Gallus introduced some fresh perspectives on the revolution, however, it largely remained inside the traditional boundaries of political history. Moreover, while international history flourished everywhere else, the historiography of the 1918/1919 revolution remained stuck inside the borders of Germany.

Recently, scholars have begun to reexamine the revolution that ended World War I and ushered in the first German democracy. Robert Gerwarth’s magisterial *The Vanquished* (2016) is the first study to situate the German revolution in a broader international history of political violence in postwar Europe.<sup>2</sup> *Germany 1916–1923*, published in the same year and edited by Klaus Weinhauer, Anthony McElligott, and Kirsten Heinsohn, pursues a similar goal: to place the German revolution in its historical context and to fill at least some of the many lacunae in its history. Following a

long introduction that gives an excellent overview of the major historiographical trends of the last century, the contributors set out to explore the revolution from a variety of perspectives, many of them innovative and fruitful. The focus is less on the dates and events of traditional political history—*Ereignisgeschichte*—but on using the methods and concepts of cultural history to gain new insights about seemingly well-known stories, in the vein of the *politische Kulturgeschichte* pioneered by Wolfgang Hardtwig and others since the second half of the first decade of this century.<sup>3</sup>

It will not be necessary to summarize each of the nine chapters, which the editors have somewhat arbitrarily sorted into three parts (“Violence, State, and Order;” “Communication and Imaginaries;” “Subjectivities and Social Movements”). Instead, I will concisely highlight some major themes and notable contributions. For a publication that sets out to explore the context of the 1918/1919 revolution, the first chapter, authored by Mark Jones, is certainly an excellent fit. Jones literarily situates the revolution, examining in particular the role of urban space in 1918/1919. He convincingly and eloquently shows how a “spatial revolution” occupied urban spaces, and how government-backed right-wing militias used military violence to restore spatial hierarchies and reoccupy public spaces seized by the revolutionaries. Space, he argues, became a medium of symbolic interactions. Jones’s ideal-typical distinction of different kinds of revolutionary crowds seems like a particularly fruitful contribution, with considerable potential for further exploration and for comparative perspectives. In the second chapter of the first part, Nadine Rossol examines a topic that has been mostly neglected by a historiography focusing on the military and paramilitary groups: the role and self-understanding of the Prussian police during and after the revolution. As Rossol demonstrates, the case of the police illustrates the “mixture of challenges and opportunities” faced by state institutions after 1918: “a combination of feelings that included painful loss of power, control and authority,” but also brief hopes of reform and renewal. Eventually, aspirations to create a “people’s police” for a new democratic state fell short as conflicting interests and external factors shaped the Weimar police force.

The volume’s intention of re-examining the 1918/1919 revolution through the lens of recent historiographic perspectives and methods is perhaps most clearly realized in Kathleen Canning’s chapter on the experiences, imaginaries, and emotions of Germany’s revolutionary moment. In particular, Canning explores how the revolution was perceived as a rupture in gender and sexual hierarchies, and how gender shaped the symbolic representations of the revolution. As the chapter clearly shows, four decades after Klaus Theweleit’s seminal psychoanalytic study of German right-wing

masculinities after 1918,<sup>4</sup> to which Canning somewhat surprisingly does not refer, many aspects of the role of gender during the 1918/1919 revolution still remain to be explored. As a medical historian, I was particularly interested in Oliver Haller's contribution on the so called "Spanish" influenza, its role in the disintegration of the German army, and its influence on the outcome of the war. Yet, while Haller's re-examination of the extent of the influenza pandemic in the German army is not without merits, his attempt to connect the impact of the influenza and the notion of "willpower" to a revisionist reading of the "stab in the back" myth is far less convincing.

Although many of the contributions are excellent, the book is not without flaws. The most obvious one is, unfortunately, the sloppy editing. Several chapters are marred by stylistic issues and incoherencies, by clumsy wording, and by spelling errors that should not have made it past the first draft. Some factual mistakes might have been easily eliminated by some thorough proofreading. (Although stated otherwise on p. 83, Barcelona is evidently not in "central Europe.") The second problem is the overly broad interpretation of the "context," in which the German revolution is to be situated. In one of the two concluding commentaries to the volume, Stefan Berger rightly stresses the potential of global perspectives and of "de-emphasizing the 'German' in the term 'German revolution.'" Yet, some contributions stray too far from the book's main topic, and—while excellent essays in their own right—contribute little to our understanding of the events that shook Germany in 1918/1919.

Nevertheless, the book clearly succeeds when it comes to its main goal: showcasing the diversity and productivity of recent approaches in political and cultural history. The essays collected in this volume significantly extend the boundaries of the history of Germany's "forgotten revolution" and offer many new and fascinating perspectives. The next years will probably bring plenty of new studies on the aftermath of World War I. If this book is any indication, the new historiography of the 1918/1919 revolution is off to a good start.

## Notes

1. Alexander Gallus, ed., *Die Vergessene Revolution von 1918/19* (Göttingen, 2010).
2. Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End, 1917-1923* (London, 2016).
3. Wolfgang Hardtwig, ed., *Politische Kulturgeschichte der Zwischenkriegszeit 1918-1939* (Göttingen, 2005).
4. Klaus Theweleit, *Männerphantasien*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt/Main, 1977/1978).