

Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin 1914-19

Veranstalter: Zentrum für Vergleichende Geschichte Europas; Freie Universität Berlin

Datum, Ort: 21.11.1998–22.11.1998, Berlin

Bericht von: Aribert Reimann, Darwin College, Cambridge

Eighty years after the armistice, the First World War continues to attract substantial scholarly attention across all disciplines. Its position at the crossroads of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries marks it as a unique focus of never-ceasing interest for the historian of the realms of politics, the military, society, and culture alike. The recent meeting of the international collective 'Capital Cities at War' at the Zentrum fuer Vergleichende Geschichte Europas in Berlin reflected current trends among the historical profession. Launched in 1989 under the direction of Jean-Louis Robert and Jay Winter, the project aimed for a thorough analysis of the social history of wartime Paris, London and Berlin. From the start a conceptual framework was adopted that draws on the work of this year's Nobel Laureate in economics, Amartya Sen. After eight years of collective work, the group published a first volume with Cambridge University Press in 1997 that deals with impact of casualties, the mobilisation of labour, developments of income and consumption, as well as demographic change upon the ways of life of city dwellers. One contribution on 'The image of the war profiteer' already made it clear that contemporary well-being was subject to cultural as well as social factors, thereby pointing to the second phase of the project which is currently under way.

The newly established Zentrum fuer Vergleichende Geschichte Europas (ZVGE) is run in co-operation by the Freie Universitaet and the Humboldt-Universitaet in Berlin. Funded by the Volkswagen foundation the aim of its work under the direction of Profs Juergen Kocka and Hartmut Kaelble is to promote scholarly communication and transfer of knowledge across national boundaries with a particular emphasis on improving relations between Eastern and Western European academic cultures. Thus, the group working on Pa-

ris, London and Berlin were joined by a number of scholars who concentrate on the history of Lwow, Bratislava, Petersburg, and Moscow. The result was a lively and extremely fruitful meeting of 21 historians from 4 countries working on the urban experience of the First World War.

The meaning of culture for the urban experience of the First World War has many facets. Undoubtedly, the war disrupted familiar ways of life. London and Paris experienced aerial attacks, the latter being temporarily deserted by many among its middle-class population during the crisis of August/September 1914; deprivation, starvation and revolution left their mark on Berlin, Petersburg and Moscow, while Lwow found itself in the war zone and suffered badly during the ensuing civil war. All cities to different degrees suffered demographic losses. As Jay Winter (Pembroke College, Cambridge / currently Yale University) pointed out, the element of unprecedented trauma engulfing European culture can hardly be overstated. The ways in which culture contributed to individual as well as social adaptation to this experience need to be looked at in close detail, in the private homes of families, neighbourhood networks, streets and markets, schools, factories, cinemas and other places of entertainment, sites of public celebration and commemoration, religious communities and charities, hospitals and cemeteries. This analysis is all the more necessary as the cultural functionings of these places not only ascribed meaning to the experience of trauma. They also - at the same time - played a crucial part in the auto-mobilisation of domestic societies in order to persevere with the war effort.

Jeffrey Verhey (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bonn) demonstrated the virtues of such an approach through a close reading of the choreography of the so-called war-enthusiasm in Berlin - in fact a somewhat limited affair of young middle-class males who gathered in specific places around Unter den Linden and Wilhelmstrasse. Photographs were widely publicised and turned into a powerful myth of 'collective enthusiasm' for decades to come, even before there some evidence for more widespread patriotism in Berlin emerged during September 1914. The crucial

importance of mass-circulation newspapers for the collective imagination of the city was emphasised by Peter Fritzsche (University of Illinois, Urbana). Metropolitan societies were thus reconfigured by the construction of urban geography and social cleavages. The underlying motif for celebrations of community in the streets of European cities - the urge for national unity and a reconciliation of class-differences - was also connected to the rhetoric of social (in-)equality which, as Jon Lawrence (University of Liverpool) pointed out, needs to be explored in order to understand the complex functionings of wartime metropolitan culture. Cities were the hot spots of social inequality and it remains to be seen how notions of 'community' and the 'shared sacrifice' dealt with the imbalances of total mobilisation.

Social friction could become even more virulent when it came to ethnic conflict. Joshua Cole (University of Georgia, Athens) drew attention to issues of ethnic minorities in European cities during the First World War. Not only were so-called 'enemy aliens' (to be found in all major cities) subjected to hostility and violence, but the war also caused migration through the mobilisation of manpower as in the case of colonial troops and labour. Their situation was characterised by isolation and discrimination. Ethnic conflict had a more poignant meaning in Eastern Europe. Christoph Mick (University of Tuebingen) introduced the case of Lwow where numerous communities (speaking seven different languages) competed for control of the city. After alternating occupations by both sides, the worst was still to come after 1918 in the form of civil war following the Russian revolution and the collapse of Hapsburg rule. The Russian case is in itself a challenge for urban historians, as Richard Stites (Georgetown University, Washington D.C.) pointed out. Both Petersburg and Moscow were profoundly changed by the two revolutions, e.g. with respect to their social geography. Instantaneous myth-making coined representations such as the storming of the Winter Palace in Petersburg along the lines of Eisenstein imagery. After the demise of Soviet history writing, the complex impact of the First World War on Russian cities still needs to be explored in greater de-

tail. Different questions were posed by the contemporary imagination of gender identities. Joanna Bourke (Birkbeck College, London) argued for a reassessment of male gender identities under the impact of war. Familiar concepts of the male body were challenged and transformed by war-related disablement and the phenomenon of shell-shock. Deciphering the modes of discursive construction of male identities will be important for research into military hospitals and into representations of disabled ex-soldiers in the streets of European cities.

The history of metropolitan culture thus presents significant potential for further development. Jean-Louis Robert (Sorbonne, Paris) argued for an analysis of the different levels of everyday culture, symbolic culture and collective imagination. The cityscape was thus always inhabited, interpreted and phantasmised by contemporaries at any given time. Only by exploring the interaction of all three levels will we achieve an appropriate understanding of the cultural texture of European cities at war. Comparison will undoubtedly play a crucial role for future research. Like other branches, scholars of urban cultural history need to develop continuous networks of communication and co-operation. The group 'Capital Cities at War' will continue to put this idea into practice by collective research which constantly employs a comparative perspective on Paris, London, and Berlin. The meeting in Berlin produced a highly productive atmosphere across national academic cultures - not the least thanks to the generous hospitality of the ZVGE. Everybody who experienced this meeting is looking forward to the Zentrum developing into a major institutional focus for an increasingly international academic community.

Tagungsbericht *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin 1914-19*. 21.11.1998-22.11.1998, Berlin, in: H-Soz-Kult 01.12.1998.