

Rüger, Jan: *Heligoland. Britain, Germany, and the Struggle for the North Sea*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2017. ISBN: 978-0-19-967246-2; XII, 370 S.

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Researching the connection between geography and history can provide some spectacular perspectives. German history is no different in this respect. David Blackbourn exemplified the potential of this approach in his classic study „The Conquest of Nature: Water, Landscape, and the Making of Modern Germany“.¹ Another example is Michael Salewski's article collection „Die Deutschen und die See“², which sought to explore the role of the sea in modern German history.

Jan Rüger's new book can be viewed to some extent as another contribution to the „Germans and the sea“ theme. However, it aims mainly at the examination of Anglo-German relations in the 19th and 20th century through the history of the North Sea island of Heligoland. By using primary sources from no less than 46 archives, Rüger provides an extraordinary look into west European history in these centuries. As he wrote in the prologue, „Following the arc of the Anglo-German relationship, as it spans the past two centuries allows us to appreciate the many ways in which Europe and the British Empire were bound up with one another“ (p. 4).

The narrative begins with the British occupation of Heligoland in September 1807 during the war with Napoleon, and the subsequent effort of the British to support their German allies in the continent. Turning the island into a British „outpost on the edge of Europe“ (p. 11) had a deep impact on the emerging German national movement. As the island became a favorite seaside resort towards the mid-19th century, it also became a refuge for German nationalists escaping persecution in their German motherlands. „Seaside tourism and exile had gone hand in hand [...]“ (p. 41) From this point on Heligoland became increasingly associated with the emerging German national identity. No wonder thus that the *Deutschlandlied* was written in Heligoland in 1841.

The conflict between the developing German nationalism and the British possession of Heligoland became more and more pronounced. „Parallel to the rise of the German national movement, Heligoland thus turned into a site where British visions of empire and German visions of nationhood intersected.“ (p. 50) After the German unification this intersection proved to be a source of tension in otherwise good Anglo-German relations. Rüger describes in this context Bismarck's cautious handling of the Heligoland issue. While striving to annex the island, he tried to avoid a conflict with Britain and used soft diplomacy in order to deliver the message. Britain agreed to cede Heligoland to Germany in 1890 as part of an agreement regarding the division of colonial control in Africa. In contrast to Germany's hopes, it was „a function of the Scramble for Africa rather than the Concert of Europe“ (p. 86) and never progressed into a comprehensive Anglo-German alliance.

As a result, the hand-over, which symbolized a honeymoon in the Anglo-German relations, turned towards the end of the 19th century into an escalating conflict following Germany's ambitious naval build-up program. Heligoland assumed a prominent military role as a naval race developed between the two powers. Rüger highlights in this context the German „Copenhagen Complex“: the fear that the Royal Navy would do to the Germans around Heligoland what it had done to the Danish in 1807. It is therefore a paradox that when Great War came, Heligoland never fulfilled the key strategic role it was supposed to play in the expected naval show-down in the North-Sea. Although after WWI the island „turned into a symbol of defeat“, it recovered its status as a top holiday resort, attracting among others, groups of visitors who „took full advantage of the cheap, duty-free alcohol available on the island“ (p. 169).

The role of Heligoland in the Third Reich revolves to a large extent around its nazification. Rüger highlights among others how the island „represented the triumph of the

¹ David Blackbourn, *The Conquest of Nature: Water, Landscape, and the Making of Modern Germany*, New York 2006.

² Michael Salewski, *Die Deutschen und die See: Studien zur deutschen Marinegeschichte des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*, 2 Teile, Stuttgart 1998 und 2002.

German Volk over the hated Jews“ (p. 180) and how German Jews were rapidly driven away from its resorts. Once again Heligoland became a maritime fortress and once again, when war came, it proved to be of little military significance. The British occupation at the end of WWII culminated in a megalomaniac attempt to blow up the island after its entire population has been evacuated. At the beginning of an era of Anglo-German governmental reconciliation, Heligoland remind a thorny issue for many Germans, both in West Germany and East Germany. Even after Great Britain handed-over the island to the West German government, it took some time until it became a true symbol of reconciliation between the two countries. In this respect, Rüger also discusses the Germany's coming to terms with its past as represented by Heligoland.

The book uses a highly effective spectrum of prisms. The discussion of high politics is intertwined with local perspectives, as well as popular-cultural aspects. Throughout the book Rüger discusses the split self-identity of the island's population. Despite the prevailing „Heligomenia“ (p. 97) in German popular culture, the authorities thought in 1890 that Heligoland's population required a „germanization“ as was common with other population groups living on the frontiers of the new Reich. However, the island's population was hesitant in accepting the German national identity imposed upon them. As a result, the German government mistrusted the islanders and made a secret plan to evacuate all of them to the mainland in the event of war, as happened on 2 August 1914. There is a detailed description of the islanders' post-WWI pledge to the British government to regain control of the island. Rüger argues though that this was merely another case where the islanders „insisted on their 'ancient rights' on every previous occasion when a transition from one rule to another had seemed imminent“ (p. 167). As Rüger concludes at the end of the book, paradoxically, it was the harsh British policy after WWII that finally „convinced the Heligolanders that their future lay in Germany“ (p. 228).

One of the book's greatest advantages is its periodization and long-term perspective. It

makes it easy to follow, and it places the narrative within broader processes and events. The main arguments are clearly presented and the text is highly readable. Personal stories and anecdotes contribute to this readability. Numerous illustrations are interspersed in the text and support it nicely. The portrayal of Heligoland in different arts receives much attention throughout the book, and the epilogue is particularly striking in this respect.

Although Rüger's main goal in this book was to examine the Anglo-German relations, he succeeded in highlighting some key issues in the history of both countries, and especially of Germany. Here and there he leaves an open question, but as a whole, the book is a brilliant example of the way in which geographical features can serve as an axis for the study of history.

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