

Chickering, Roger: *The Great War and Urban Life in Germany: Freiburg, 1914-1918*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007. ISBN: 0521852560; XIV, 628 S.

**Rezensiert von:** Alan Kramer, Trinity College, Dublin

Do we really need such a long book on a rather small German city during the First World War, especially since there are now several studies of other cities and regions? The study on Berlin by Belinda Davis focused on food and gender. Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert have published two comprehensive volumes of comparative social and cultural history on Paris, Berlin, and London during the war. Benjamin Ziemann's exemplary book on Upper Bavaria was devoted both to the soldiers from that region and the civilians. Martin Geyer's study of the 'world turned upside down' by war and inflation argues that Munich in the years 1914 to 1924 was representative of the broader German experience of modernity in crisis.<sup>1</sup>

This book differs in approach from the above. It is an ambitious attempt to write a 'total history', and almost everything is therefore relevant. Wisely, Chickering makes no claims that Freiburg's experience in the Great War was representative. Several factors differentiated it to some extent: among them its size (89,000 inhabitants in 1914), its proximity to the war zone, and its geographic isolation from Germany's large centres of habitation and trade. In choosing not to engage in systematic comparison with other cities the author creates the space for a unified narration that often delivers surprising insights.

Wartime mobilization meant turning every available patch of land in the city into plots to be farmed by the urban population. By 1918 no fewer than one third of the city's households were tilling their own small plots and vegetable gardens. But even animals were mobilized: most horses, of

course, but also many of the city's dogs were sent to the front, serving in the medical corps and as rat-catchers in the trenches. Dogs that stayed at home faced charges of shirking their duty and competing with humans for scarce food. The campaign against cats would have put to shame Robert Darn-ton's 'Great Cat Massacre': 788 cats were culled in 1916 alone (pp. 184-188).

Despite the presence in the city of over one million soldiers at one time or another, the main subject of the book is the civilian population. There is a particularly enlightening section on children, over whose 'insubordination' there was a moral panic: roaming street gangs, mass petty crime, violence towards other children and adults, and a troubling increase in shootings with real guns, were evidence not only of unruliness among war children as adult male authority retreated, but also of extreme emotional disturbance expressed in 'destructive fury' (pp. 499-517).

While the story is well integrated into national history, the focus on apparently minor details conveys in a very tactile way the 'feel' of everyday life during the war, and sometimes produces surprising results. With figure 7.2, 'Bicycles stolen in Freiburg', for example, I expected to see a steeply rising curve peaking in 1918, but instead it showed a small peak in 1915, followed by a downward trend until the end of the war. The text shows the fascinating way the war economy affected society. When most private motor-cars, taxis, and horses were requisitioned at the beginning of the war, many residents of Freiburg turned to their bicycles for transport. The early spree in theft reflected the greater availability of booty, but in 1916 the war economy dictated the requisitioning of rubber tyres. Rather than endure the discomfort, commuters turned to the trams, and the graph of their usage showed a sharp upward curve, doubling by the end of the war. In a related development, the 'shoe question' became an acute sign of Germany's shortages of raw materials, with dire effects on ordinary civilians, especially the poor. As early as summer 1916, children were issued shoes with wooden soles. In summer children were encouraged to go barefoot, despite the risks posed by broken glass and nails. Even in the winter, thousands of civilians were reduced to wearing shoes made of wood and cloth uppers, which were 'supremely uncomfortable' (pp. 278-279, 284-289).

The book conjures up other sensations, too. The

<sup>1</sup> Ziemann, Benjamin. *Front und Heimat. Ländliche Kriegserfahrungen im südlichen Bayern 1914-1923*, Essen 1997 (English edition: *War experiences in rural Germany, 1914-1923*, Oxford, New York 2007); Davis, Belinda J., *Home Fires Burning. Food, politics, and everyday life in World War I Berlin*, Chapel Hill 2000; Winter, Jay; Robert, Jean-Louis (eds.), *Capital cities at war: Paris, London, Berlin 1914-1919*, [vol. 1], Cambridge 1997; Winter, Jay; Robert, Jean-Louis (eds.), *Capital cities at war: Paris, London, Berlin 1914-1919*, [vol. 2]: *A Cultural History*, Cambridge 2007; Geyer, Martin H., *Verkehrte Welt. Revolution, Inflation und Moderne. München 1914-1924*, Göttingen 1998.

citizens of Freiburg could see and hear the war 'over there' in Alsace: they climbed the Schlossberg and watched the artillery battles in the Vosges; and the thunder of the guns at times drowned out street noise and the bells of the cathedral (pp. 86-87). In time, even the sound of the cathedral bells became a distant memory, as they were 'made mobile' and melted down in a munitions foundry. The loss of church bells and bronze statues made as deep an emotional impact because of their role as cultural signifiers as the practical impact of the confiscation of copper, brass, or nickel pots and pans, door knobs, and even the pewter covers from student fraternities' beer mugs (pp. 192-193).

The quality of bread declined, as it did everywhere in Germany. Various additives, such as maize, lentils, and, somewhat less nutritiously, sawdust and sand, went into the mix. Spoiled rye and rotting potatoes sometimes gave the bread a disgusting smell and taste. The war launched another assault on the senses with the lack of soap and detergents. By summer 1916, the problem was not only the 'odors given off by unwashed bodies, teeth, and hair', but also the decline in hygiene and the rise in digestive and urinary disorders (pp. 306-308).

The section entitled 'Town and country' and the chapter 'Breakdown', a masterly exposition of the local political economy, deliver more than the often-told story of the conflict between urban consumers and rural producers. Chickering shows how the command economy, despite its notional rationality, created absurd irrationalities and eventually broke down. In the enormous social and cultural conflict between town and country, and between consumers, merchants, and suppliers, lay the origins of the political fragmentation of Germany. The rising anger was well illustrated by the trader who was so fed up that he wished a bomb would land in his crowd of complaining customers 'and kill them all.' City-dwellers accused the farmers (often with good cause) of enriching themselves from their hunger; yet farmers too had real grievances in relation to the heavy-handed controls imposed by the state, the shortages of labour and other commodities, and the growing insecurity of the countryside.

Although it is nothing new to First World War scholarship to see how Protestant and Catholic clergymen united to welcome the 'great holy war of freedom' (p. 75), Chickering rightly locates the ideas of liberal intellectuals in close proxim-

ity to war theology. Like so many of his patriotic colleagues, the great historian Friedrich Meinecke saw the war as a chance for regeneration and the end of the materialist striving 'after refined pleasure' – both concepts that dovetailed perfectly with German Protestantism. The 'fortress of national sentiment in Freiburg' was the university, or at least whatever remained of it after the departure of two-thirds of its students and almost half its academic staff. Intellectual life adapted to the pervasiveness of the war. The pathologist Ludwig Aschoff made such progress in his research on organ samples collected from more than a thousand autopsies on soldiers' corpses that the medical faculty decided, with unerring but no doubt unintended irony, to award General Ludendorff an honorary doctorate in medicine for providing such rich material (pp. 419-425).

We know the broad picture of the German war economy and society from classic overviews such as those by Hardach and Kocka.<sup>2</sup> The very unwarlike industry of Freiburg converted rapidly to the production of supplies for the army. The local economy went from initial disruption and high unemployment, via restructuring, to the bureaucratization of the wartime regime. Some entrepreneurs profited greatly from military contracts, but this was only a minority of larger companies. Especially in the last two years of the war many smaller firms fell victim to the programme to consolidate and streamline production, lost their supply of ever-scarcer raw materials, and had to close down. Some indication of the German economy's greatest shortage, labour, can be seen in the fact that by 1918 Freiburg's industry had been deprived of about half its pre-war male workforce (pp. 117-135). Here the decision against a comparative approach is detrimental. Why, for example, did wage rates for Freiburg workers increase by at most fifty or so per cent, when wages in Berlin went up by at least 100 per cent?<sup>3</sup>

While we learn that 28 per cent more civilians died of non-military causes in 1918 than in 1913, there is no comparative discussion of mortality rates (pp. 319-320), nor do we find out

<sup>2</sup> Hardach, Gerd, *Der erste Weltkrieg*, München 1973 (English edition: *The First World War*, London 1977); Kocka, Jürgen, *Klassengesellschaft im Krieg. Deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1914 bis 1918*, Göttingen 1973 (English edition: *Facing Total War. German Society 1914-1918*, Leamington Spa, etc. 1984).

<sup>3</sup> Manning, Jonathan, *Wages and purchasing power*, in: Winter, Jay; Robert, Jean-Louis (eds.), *Capital Cities at War*, [vol. 1], pp. 255-85.

to what extent the excess mortality rate was due to the influenza epidemic. However, the richly documented analysis of the discourse of bereavement and mourning more than compensates for this. Obituary notices at first employed the stereotypical clichés of ‘fatherland’, ‘heroic death’, and personal and national redemption invoking God. Over the course of the war it became more difficult to make sense of death; references to the fatherland declined, while use of the trope ‘Opfer des Krieges’ (victim of war) increased, indicating a perception of the war as an impersonal fate without human agency (pp. 328-331).

Mobilizing the economy meant creating several new layers of bureaucracy and expanding existing organs of state. It is one of the merits of this book to explain the various city, Land, Reich, and army institutions, and how they functioned, interacted, and competed. The regional War Office became more powerful than even the Deputy Commanding General. Within the city, power shifted from the municipal assembly to the executive; in turn, the authority of the city council rested increasingly on the administrative agencies in Berlin and Karlsruhe, the capital of Baden (pp. 210-216). In particular the vast food bureaucracy became the target of popular anger for its arbitrariness, rudeness, and incompetence.

The fine discussion of the intersections between local, state, and national politics, in particular of the polarization of politics between the Fatherland Party and the adherents of the Reichstag majority which had endorsed the peace resolution of July 1917 (pp. 529-543), shows how the analysis of the local is really essential for an understanding of the total picture. The peace resolution divided Freiburg’s National Liberals and united its Socialists; political debate became venomous and threatening, as the Pan-German Professor von Below called his National Liberal colleague Schulze-Gaevernitz a ‘criminal and traitor’. The Catholic archbishop saw democracy, revolution, and radical Socialism as ‘bacilli’ (p. 544).

This reviewer found the discussion of the causes and consequences of the food shortages less convincing. Certainly, the aim of the Allied (not just ‘British’) blockade was to starve Germany into defeat. But the fact that food shortages afflicted Austria, which was a net food exporter before the war and hardly at all dependent on maritime trade, even more severely than Germany, should give pause for thought before ascribing to the blockade the ef-

ficacy that is suggested here (p. 81). Domestic consumers in Germany, a major producer and net exporter of coal before the war, also suffered shortages of coal, yet no one would dream of blaming them on the blockade. The root cause of both was the distortions of the war economy: above all the priority given to the needs of the army, shortages of labour and transport, and disinvestment.

Chickering maintains that the women who composed the crowds protesting at food shortages actually ‘organized’ and even ‘wielded effective political power’. This is debatable. The evidence for his thesis of the ‘victory’ of the women, in which he follows Belinda Davis, is that the city responded in 1916 with the ‘Kundenzwang’, i.e. registering and allotting each customer to specific shops to purchase goods at specific times (pp. 234, 406-07). Yet this measure manifestly failed either to disperse the crowds or to improve access to scarce commodities. The crowds may have ‘appropriated urban space’ on occasions (cf. p. 406), but ‘political power’ was at all times held by the state authorities. This dilutes the strength of his far more important argument: that collective action, whether in the form of the myriad of ‘Vereine’ or the sometimes violent crowds of hungry and angry consumers, soon mutated from the war enthusiasm of August 1914 to the expression of stark divisions in the local community.

The book ends with a gripping chapter on the extreme swings in popular mood and the playing out of extreme political tensions in the last year of war. Well integrated with national developments, this account rightly brings soldiers back into the frame, and is a resounding vindication of the ‘total history’ approach.

The answer to my initial question is emphatically yes: the book’s length is necessary to tell the story with the necessary depth. The gamble on ‘total history’ has paid off handsomely. Cambridge University Press and series editor Jay Winter are to be congratulated for their confidence in the book, which is destined to become a classic. It will be essential reading for students of the war, urban history, and early twentieth-century Germany. The good news for German readers is that the Schönningh Verlag will publish a translation in 2008.

HistLit 2007-4-190 / Alan Kramer über Chickering, Roger: *The Great War and Urban Life in Germany: Freiburg, 1914-1918*. Cambridge 2007. In: H-Soz-u-Kult 06.12.2007.