

Ewald Frie

1918/19: 100 YEARS ON

Open Futures

1918/19 – War and victory, collapse and defeat, revolution and reform, peace and re-organisation, civil war and violence, famine and Spanish flu and much else. The elements can be separated analytically, and many of them have been analysed individually in a historical context. They have been interpreted and incorporated into the narratives of revolution research, the history of warfare and violence, peace research, the history of diseases and epidemics. But the historical dynamics of 1918/19 resulted from the interplay of the various elements in very different constellations. 1918/19 is therefore a challenging anniversary for a historical scholarship that is exploring new conceptual territory:

- *spatially*: leaving the construct of the nation state and instead ›playing with scales‹¹ from the local to the global;
- *temporally*: departing from era- and progress-based master narratives and instead ›zooming in and out‹ and playing with temporal perspectives;²
- *conceptually*: departing from conceptual constructs due to the blurring of categories like ›crisis‹³ or ›revolution‹⁴ and instead focusing on a broad range of phenomena of social transformation on the premise of ›multidimensional understandings of emergence and destabilization‹.⁵

1 E.g. James Retallack (ed.), *Imperial Germany 1871–1918*, Oxford 2008.

2 E.g. Emily S. Rosenberg (ed.), *A World Connecting. 1870–1945*, Cambridge 2012 (A History of the World, ed. by Akira Iriye and Jürgen Osterhammel).

3 Cf. Thomas Mergel (ed.), *Krisen verstehen. Historische und kulturwissenschaftliche Annäherungen*, Frankfurt a.M. 2012, pp. 9-22, and the Leibniz Research Alliance ›Crises in a Globalised World‹: <<http://www.leibniz-krisen.de/en/start/>>.

4 Cf. Arne Hordt et al., *Aufruhr! Zur epochenübergreifenden Beschreibung beschleunigten sozialen Wandels in Krisenzeiten*, in: *Historische Zeitschrift* 301 (2015), pp. 31-62; Keith Michael Baker/Dan Edelstein (eds), *Scripting Revolution. A Historical Approach to the Comparative Study of Revolutions*, Stanford 2015.

5 Elisabeth S. Clemens, *Towards a Historicized Sociology. Theorizing Events, Processes, and Emergence*, in: *Annual Review of Sociology* 33 (2007), pp. 527-549, here p. 529.

The following essay presents some reflections on the challenges and opportunities that the 100th anniversary of the confluence of events in 1918/19 creates for historical scholarship.

1. A Global Moment

The end of the First World War was a date of global significance. To be sure, the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month – the official turning point – could not be felt everywhere. In many parts of the world there was no fighting, nor had there been any between 1914 and 1918. There were no guns to be silenced here. In other regions, especially in the ›shatter zones‹⁶ of Central and Eastern Europe, the fighting simply continued after 11 November; the World War turned into wars of one state against another, into civil wars, wars of independence, and revolutions. In what was to become Turkey, war was waged from 1912 to 1923. In the various regions of what became the Soviet Union, the war ended at different times. But the ceasefire on November 1918 had little influence on the regional manifestations of the deadly civil war that immediately followed the revolution.

Despite its often minimal direct impact, the end of the First World War deserves to be described as a date of global significance. The German offer of a ceasefire to the American president, the parliamentarisation and subsequent revolutionisation of the German Reich, and finally the signing of the armistice in the Forest of Compiègne confirmed around the world the key role of Woodrow Wilson and his Fourteen Points. Their stated goal was nothing short of ensuring ›that the world be made fit and safe to live in; and particularly that it be made safe for every peace-loving nation which, like our own, wishes to live its own life, determine its own institutions, be assured of justice and fair dealing by the other peoples of the world as against force and selfish aggression.‹⁷ This not only provided orientation for the political restructuring of the vast geographical regions in Central and Eastern Europe, Western Asia and North Africa that had lost their political fabric after the collapse of the Habsburg Empire, the Ottoman Empire and (since a year earlier, in 1917) the Russian Empire. Elsewhere, too, people now demanded safety ›for every peace-loving nation‹ and ›fair dealing‹, interpreting Wilson's Fourteen Points in their own way. The empires of the winners, France and Great Britain, had survived the war. But why should the people there be

6 Donald Bloxham, *The Final Solution. A Genocide*, Oxford 2009, p. 81; quoted in Robert Gerwarth, *Rechte Gewaltgemeinschaften und die Stadt nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg*. Berlin, Wien und Budapest im Schatten von Kriegsniederlage und Revolution, in: Friedrich Lenger (ed.), *Kollektive Gewalt in der Stadt. Europa 1890–1939*, Munich 2013, pp. 103–121, here p. 105.

7 Woodrow Wilson, An Address to a Joint Session of Congress [8 January 1918], in: Arthur S. Link (ed.), *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, Vol. 45: *November 11, 1917 – January 15, 1918*, Princeton 1984, pp. 534–539, here p. 536. Cf. Manfred Berg, *Woodrow Wilson. Amerika und die Neuordnung der Welt. Eine Biographie*, Munich 2017.

denied what some of the losing empires attained – independence on a national and democratic basis? Erez Manela described this in 2007 as ›The Wilsonian Moment‹:⁸ national movements in many parts of the world picked up on Wilson's rhetoric and used it to construct self-determined visions for the future and plans for their realisation. But they were not given a hearing at Versailles; the prospect was held out of action later, within the League of Nations. The deep-seated frustration permanently changed the national movements outside Europe. The ›Wilsonian Moment‹ had been passed by.

One might well criticise this boiling down of the history of the period immediately following the war to the way in which Wilson's rhetoric was received.⁹ The important thing here is the structure of the argument. Just as the First World War was not a world war because there was fighting all around the world, but because people all around the world were able to base their actions on this constellation of events and to align their own objectives with it, the collapse of the empires in Central and Eastern Europe, Western Asia and North Africa as well as ›Versailles‹ was a date of global significance. Briefly, the future seemed open. The Europeans had lost their hold. Their inability to contain and end a brutal war had rendered them irrelevant as a model of civilisation. What emerged was perhaps not a global discourse community, but certainly a struggle for post-European futures that took place in different locations around the world and could be observed globally. Some of the actors came to Versailles. Others met elsewhere, corresponded with each other, read and learnt from one another. This writing and talking about post-war futures, though driven by specific and differing needs and grounded in specific and differing structures and balances of power, united people around the world. So the disappointment about the failure of independent entities to emerge from the victorious empires was also shared worldwide. A series of disturbances and insurrections in the spring of 1919 is indication of this. This global interaction was never concentrated in Versailles. But because of the promise to be fulfilled there of a future, just order, ›Versailles‹ acted as a kind of flywheel.

The experiences behind the global interaction were similar. Young men from many parts of the world had been in the European theatres of war, whether as soldiers, porters or tourists. At the end of the war the Spanish flu had spread around the world, claiming some 25 million lives.¹⁰ Many people had experienced deprivation, sickness and death, mobilisation, and polarising rhetoric created by ›us and them‹ communities. They had discussed how to commemorate dead family members and friends who had died far from home, whose bodies would not return. The everyday lives of many had changed. In Europe, women had become visible in a new way as industrial workers and protesters, making it increasingly difficult after 1918 to justify the failure to accord

8 Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment. Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism*, New York 2007.

9 Adam Tooze speaks of the ›imaginative construction of an Indian Wilsonian Moment‹, *The Deluge. The Great War and the Remaking of Global Order, 1916–1931*, London 2014, p. 542, fn. 56. Cf. also Katja Naumann's review of Erez Manela's book, in: *H-Soz-Kult*, 20 March 2009, URL: <<https://www.hsozkult.de/publicationreview/id/rezbuecher-11037>>.

10 See now Laura Spinney, *Pale Rider. The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How It Changed the World*, London 2017.



25 September 1919: Armenians in the eastern Anatolian city of Erzurum holding a banner referring to Wilson's guiding principles at a reception for Major General James Harbord, head of the American military mission in the Middle East
(Wikimedia Commons; National Archives, Washington DC; photo: Sergeant Barnes/Public Domain)

them the right to vote. Also in Europe, paramilitary groups continued the war despite the state monopoly on the use of force that had theoretically been established before 1914, or at least brought the experience of war into society. These groups held a fascination especially for those who were too young to have been involved in the war itself.

Similar experiences do not of course automatically translate into similar actions and policies. This has been demonstrated in the discussion around George L. Mosse's theory of brutalisation.¹¹ Even though millions of European men had seen and perpetrated

11 Cf. George L. Mosse, *Der Erste Weltkrieg und die Brutalisierung der Politik. Betrachtungen über die politische Rechte, den Rassismus und den deutschen Sonderweg*, in: Manfred Funke et al. (eds), *Demokratie und Diktatur. Geist und Gestalt politischer Herrschaft in Deutschland und Europa*, Bonn 1987, pp. 127-139. Cf. the featured topic ›Violence and Society after the First World War‹ in the *Journal of Modern European History* 1 (2003) issue 1.

horrific things during their tours of duty, not all European societies experienced the same kind of brutalisation of politics after the war. In Western Europe, most of the field grey, grey blue or khaki ›death workers‹ were transformed into citizens who tried to bring about political change through elections, peaceful protests and strikes. The political culture of Czechoslovakia was also pacified up to a point. In other regions of Central and Eastern Europe, however, the violence continued for decades before peace could be restored. The different ways of dealing with war experiences are put down to differences between the winners and losers of the war, urban/rural differences, and the different interpretations that were available or developed for extreme experiences in the various political cultures.

Even if there are no direct links between existential experiences and certain manifestations of political or violent action, a careful examination of these experiences is worthwhile. They opened up new realms of possibility for the actors involved. 1918/19 was not only a global moment because empires were destroyed and old interpretive rhetorics exchanged for new. Actors had also experienced existential uncertainty and new kinds of behaviour. Politicians not only saw the world with open minds, they also had a bigger toolkit to deal with open questions. And they had to reckon with other actors also possessing these tools, or at least being aware of them.

In this context, it is worth taking another look at Versailles and the other Treaties of Paris. For a long time they got bad press. There's a certain bitterness in the title of David Fromkin's 1989 book about the ›Creation of the Modern Middle East 1914–1922‹ after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, ›A Peace to End all Peace‹.¹² As late as 2015, Ian Kershaw describes Versailles as ›a recipe for potential future disaster‹.¹³ To be fair, it has to be recognised that the challenge was enormous.¹⁴ The entire territory under the rule of the fallen empires had to be reconfigured – to say nothing of the subsequent demands of national liberation movements around the world. The Concert of Europe that, throughout the long 19th century, had been responsible for stability in Europe and the world over which Europe held sway, had collapsed. The League of Nations, which was meant to fill the vacuum, was still no more than an idea. For the time being, all of the victorious powers were on the western border of the territory to be regulated. Russia, the key power at the eastern end, was just a big question mark. The victors had limited military and political options when it came to enforcing decisions in places like Poland or Turkey. In view of this, local actors sought to create facts on the ground. Wars were waged over the Polish, Greek and Turkish borders, and even the French and English themselves took action in the Arab region in anticipation of decisions that were yet to be made. In addition to this, all of the stakeholders at Versailles had ended up on the brink of ruin for their respective populations during the deadly

12 David Fromkin, *A Peace to End all Peace. The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East 1914–1922*, London 1989.

13 Ian Kershaw, *To Hell and Back. Europe, 1914–1949*, London 2015, p. 121.

14 Cf. Sally Marks, Mistakes and Myths. The Allies, Germany and the Versailles Treaty, 1918–1921, in: *Journal of Modern History* 85 (2013), pp. 632–659; Manfred F. Boemeke/Gerald D. Feldman/Elisabeth Glaser (eds), *The Treaty of Versailles. A Reassessment after 75 Years*, Cambridge 1998.



THE GAP IN THE BRIDGE.

Caricature in the British satire magazine *Punch*, 10 December 1919
(Wikimedia Commons; illustration: Leonard Raven-Hill/Public Domain)

world war and had been exposed to intense ›us-versus-them‹ propaganda. They were therefore more interested in security for themselves than in a future for the world. In Versailles, with limited time and limited resources, Wilson's ideas had to be reconciled with the security interests of the victors and the dynamics on the ground. When the USA then also failed to join the League of Nations and redefined its political role beyond, or above, Europe's political negotiation processes, it was little short of a miracle that any decisions were made at all that at least provided some orientation and, bit by bit, put an end – for now – to the bloodshed.

Nevertheless, the many who had placed their hopes in Wilson and ›Versailles‹ were disappointed. The flywheel of the end of the war had set a lot of things in motion, but had not actually succeeded in following through with much that could satisfy the hopes nurtured on all sides. To the extent that the global moment produced many disappointments, it was more than just a moment. Considering the enormous difficulties, the Versailles order functioned amazingly well.¹⁵ But the attendant disappointments presented potential for radicalisation that gave impetus over the following decades to various movements in different locations around the world.

¹⁵ Cf. Tooze, *The Deluge* (fn. 9).

2. Nation-founding Days

Versailles signified ›the rise of the democratic nation state to become the dominant form of constitution in Europe of the early 1920s‹.¹⁶ Wilson had set this goal. Only parliamentary democracies were accepted as partners in the talks at Versailles. At the same time, emancipatory movements, particularly the workers' and women's movements, were demanding permanent guaranteed power-sharing. ›The suddenness with which democracy became normality‹¹⁷ has to do with the experience of the world war and the international policies that followed. But this rise to dominance depended on the many supporters of democracy and their networks.

We know of course that this new beginning was arduous; we know it claimed victims, and frequently failed. Power changed hands nine times in Kiev between 1918 and 1920. The murder of as many as 30,000 Greeks and Armenians in Smyrna in September 1922, preceded by massacres of Muslim Turks in various parts of Asia Minor, opens Robert Gerwarth's account of the wars after the official end of World War I.¹⁸ In many regions of central Europe, the latent or open civil war of 1918/19 was followed by a sporadic civil war in the years 1919–1921, culminating in symbolic battles for terrain in the cities and often not ending until after 1923, and even then only for a time.¹⁹ The violence of the years 1917–1923 and its longer term impact have become central research agendas of late. This is also the context of the history of expulsions and resettlements, of the protection of minorities and humanitarianism.²⁰ And the democratic nation state was pushed to the margins of Europe, especially since the beginning of the Great Depression. It survived primarily in the west and north of the continent.

But despite the often devastating circumstances, it is worth noting that in the mid-1920s, fascism had prevailed only in Italy and communism only in the Soviet Union. At this point in time, the ›Wilsonian Moment‹ was long gone. But across Europe, democracy could count on ›idealistic, enthusiastic backing, mainly from the socialist and liberal Left‹.²¹ The projects and visions for the future, the hopes and fears,

16 Lutz Raphael, *Imperiale Gewalt und mobilisierte Nation. Europa 1914–1945*, Munich 2011, p. 84.

17 Tim B. Müller/Adam Tooze, *Demokratie nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg*, in: Müller/Tooze (eds), *Normalität und Fragilität. Demokratie nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg*, Hamburg 2015, pp. 9–33, here p. 32. Cf. Tim B. Müller, *Nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg. Lebensversuche moderner Demokratien*, Hamburg 2014.

18 Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished. Why the First World War Failed to End, 1917–1923*, London 2016, pp. 1–4. Cf. Boris Barth, *Europa nach dem Großen Krieg. Die Krise der Demokratie in der Zwischenkriegszeit 1918–1938*, Frankfurt a.M. 2016.

19 Robert Gerwarth, *Rechte Gewaltgemeinschaften* (fn. 6).

20 Cf. Eric D. Weitz, *From the Vienna to the Paris System. International Politics and the Entangled Histories of Human Rights, Forced Deportations, and Civilizing Missions*, in: *American Historical Review* 113 (2008), pp. 1313–1343; Bruno Cabanes, *The Great War and the Origins of Humanitarianism 1918–1924*, Cambridge 2014.

21 Kershaw, *To Hell and Back* (fn. 13), p. 133.

the opportunities and limitations of these years do not form a ›linear narrative to disaster in the early twentieth century‹,²² though there are differing views in the recent literature as to the nature of these opportunities and limitations.²³

And so it will be interesting to see how the various present-day states, whose independence goes back to the end of the First World War, approach their 100-year anniversaries. They will of course focus on current political fault lines and needs for identification and will want to instrumentalise history to this end. But history itself is recalcitrant and forces us to adapt. When the Finns, for example, celebrate their anniversary in 2017 under the theme ›Together‹, the website carries the following introductory words: ›The newly born state was willed into being by the Finns after a long struggle. In spite of hard times, the Finnish people have for almost a hundred years engaged in the building of their country and making decisions together.‹²⁴ The Finnish civil war of 1918, in which more than one percent of the population was killed, can no more be covered up entirely here than the fraught domestic politics of the 1920s and 1930s.



›Finland's big year 2017‹

(<<http://suomifinland100.fi/info/?lang=en>>; screenshot from November 2017)

22 For example, with an empirical focus on Japan: Frederick R. Dickinson, Toward a Global Perspective of the Great War: Japan and the Foundations of a Twentieth Century World, in: *American Historical Review* 119 (2014), pp. 1154-1183, here p. 1159.

23 One example, with a greater dose of pessimism than Müller and Tooze, is Konrad H. Jarausch, *Out of Ashes. A New History of Europe in the Twentieth Century*, Princeton 2015, pp. 140-144.

24 <<http://suomifinland100.fi/info/?lang=en>>. Cf. also <<http://www.lietuva.lt/100/en>> (›Restored State of Lithuania turns 100‹).

Other countries between Azerbaijan and Czechoslovakia, between Finland and Turkey, will have their own priorities in 2018/19. There will be tourist programmes and exhibitions, coffee-table books and conferences. There will be studies on national histories and histories of democracy, each from their own specific perspective. Some of those reading this article will be actively involved in this. It is of course legitimate that today's communities are searching, or having searches made, for their history – and also end up finding something. But histories of democracies are ›particularly susceptible to the creation of national legends and edifying narratives on the one hand and, on the other, to fundamental criticism and denunciations‹.²⁵ For historical scholarship, 2018/19 will be an opportunity to witness the construction of national identities and meaning. The role of professional historiography as committed yet critical, contributing to a sense of identity while also exposing myths,²⁶ will become extremely important again.

A comparative consideration of the national and democratic narratives can be helpful here. Because each of these histories sets priorities and has its own specific historical recalcitrances to deal with, they can complement and implicitly interrogate one another. It will also be beneficial to take a look at the nations that *cannot* celebrate their centenary because they did not attain statehood and are no longer even remembered as candidates for this status. There are probably more instances of nation-building that have failed or petered out than there are of successful ones. There were clearly thoughts of forming a Székely republic, a Hutsul and a Banat republic in the Danube-Carpathian region in 1917–1919,²⁷ and from today's perspective their national aspirations are no less justified than those of, say, Luxembourg or Liechtenstein. Wilson's concept of the nation was simply not suited to the Eastern and East Central European situation, where multilingualism, the coexistence of different language groups and cultures, and the overlapping of social and ethnic segregation were the norm. At the beginning of 1918 Wilson had left the future of the Habsburg Empire open in the tenth of his fourteen points, which reads: ›The peoples of Austria-Hungary, whose place among the nations we wish to see safeguarded and assured, should be accorded the freest opportunity to autonomous development.‹²⁸ After the defeat of the Central Powers, however, an overall solution for the Danube-Carpathian region was no more possible than for the west of the fallen Russian Empire. As Wilson's criteria could not be applied, matters were decided by the authority of the regional and local victors, though this had to be synchronised with the actors at Versailles.

25 Müller/Tooze, *Demokratie* (fn. 17), p. 33.

26 Cf. Jürgen Kocka, *Sozialgeschichte. Begriff – Entwicklung – Probleme*, Göttingen 1977, 2nd ed. 1986, pp. 129–131.

27 Cf. the conference ›Blick ins Ungewisse. Visionen und Utopien im Donau-Karpaten-Raum 1917 und danach‹, Ljubljana, 10–12 May 2017; conference report by Mateja Gaber, in: *H-Soz-Kult*, 8 July 2017, URL: <<https://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/tagungsberichte-7237>>.

28 Wilson, *An Address* (fn. 7), p. 537.

The victors came in the guise of the democratic nation state. But in Europe, too, just as in other parts of the globe, it is worth taking a look at those who would also have liked to wear this mantle, who indeed tried it for a time, before then becoming Romanians, Ukrainians or Hungarians after all. The rise of the democratic nation state defined the early 1920s. But because democracy and nation were interconnected from the outset, not everyone saw this rise to dominance as good news.

3. A Difficult Anniversary in Germany

Germany could have one of the national histories revolving around the end of the war and ›Versailles‹ that are shaping up for 2018/19. But the German case is different. In 1918, the German nation state had already existed for almost half a century. The extent to which its existence was in jeopardy was not clear to a population whose military was still in enemy territory and that did not initially experience the defeat as such. Even though the dissolution of the empire was briefly considered in France, no one in Germany saw its continued existence as cause for celebration. The ›winding up the war on the domestic front‹²⁹ did not appear as the great achievement that it was. In the eyes of the vast majority, the nation was not saved, but rather violated from the outside – and, the political right believed, from the inside as well. The democratic nation state without a monarchy, born of the 1918 November revolution, confirmed in the elections to the National Constituent Assembly in January 1919 and manifest in the constitution signed on 11 August 1919, was not based on a lasting consensus. The revolution was not very popular. It was the anniversary of the constitution, not of the revolution, that became the central political holiday for those loyal to the republic. The outcome of the revolution seemed presentable, but not the process itself.

And yet the revolutionaries would have had every reason to be proud. Despite the violent clashes in Kiel in early November 1918, in which the insurgents could by no means be certain of victory, the revolutionary wave went on to sweep successfully, and without bloodshed, through the German cities and towns. Monarchs and princes abdicated or were pushed aside without anyone lifting a finger in their defence. Workers' and soldiers' councils worked together with the administrations to demobilise the army and maintain services and public order. At the January elections in 1919, the democratic forces consisting of the SPD, DDP and Centre Party achieved a three-quarter majority. But the violent clashes of the second revolutionary wave that were already underway in January overshadowed the successes of the first months of the revolution – as did the disappointment at the terms of the ceasefire and, later, regarding the peace

29 Detlev J.K. Peukert, *The Weimar Republic. The Crisis of Classical Modernity*, London 1991, pp. 47-49; German: *Die Weimarer Republik. Krisenjahre der Klassischen Moderne*, Frankfurt a.M. 1987, pp. 57-59 (›Die innere Liquidierung des Krieges‹).

settlement at Versailles.³⁰ The revolution was played down after the event. But this retrospective shadow cast over it should not obscure the fact that from October to December 1918, even in Germany and into the conservative camp, many people had hopes of a better, post-revolutionary future.³¹ The suggestion repeatedly made in the literature that Germany got off relatively lightly after the end of the war probably reflects a sentiment that was widespread at the end of 1918. After this the picture darkened.

In view of Germany's federal tradition and its many centres, it is not surprising that the revolution of 1918, like that of 1848/49,³² neither began nor ended in Berlin. Its dynamic evolved out of the interaction of a number of centres. This interaction was easily unbalanced; those acting and interacting did not know each other well and had to make decisions on the basis of incomplete information and often erroneous assumptions. ›Anxiety and fear, hope and idealism, as well as mistaken interpretations due to lack of experience and knowledge, all counted towards crystallizing not only individual subjectivity but the collective subjectivity of the revolution itself.‹³³ So it is highly worthwhile that in the coming months, we are going to learn a lot about how revolutions unfolded in the various German regions. A network of museums in Germany, Switzerland and France will shine a light on the ›historical turning point on the Upper Rhine.‹³⁴ The Baden-Württemberg state archive is digitalising ›Sources on the history of democracy in the German Southwest, 1918–1923.‹³⁵ In January 2017, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation's Archive of Social Democracy organised a ›workshop discussion on democracy/history in 1918/19‹ ›with the aim of supporting and promoting the networking of initiatives and projects in the fields of historical scholarship and the politics of remembrance.‹³⁶ There will be many other initiatives helping us achieve a better understanding of active and passive spaces, zones of noise and ›zones of silence.‹³⁷ It is only in the local that we can examine the almost imperceptible shifting of moods

30 Cf. Volker Stalman, Die Wiederentdeckung der Revolution von 1918/19. Forschungsstand und Forschungsperspektiven, in: *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 64 (2016), pp. 521-541; Mark Jones, *Founding Weimar. Violence and the German Revolution of 1918–1919*, Cambridge 2016. For a critical perspective, see Dirk Schumann, in: *H-Soz-Kult*, 26 October 2017, URL: <<https://www.hsozkult.de/publicationreview/id/rezbuecher-27742>>.

31 Klaus Weinbauer/Anthony McElligott/Kirsten Heinsohn, Introduction. In Search of the German Revolution, in: Weinbauer/McElligott/Heinsohn (eds), *Germany 1916–1923. A Revolution in Context*, Bielefeld 2015, pp. 7-35, here p. 19; Daniel Schönplüg, *Kometenjahre. 1918 – Die Welt im Aufbruch*, Frankfurt a.M. 2017; English: *A World On Edge. The End of the Great War and the Dawn of a New Age*, New York 2018 (announced for October).

32 Cf. Christian Jansen/Thomas Mergel (eds), *Die Revolutionen von 1848/49. Erfahrung – Verarbeitung – Deutung*, Göttingen 1998.

33 Weinbauer/McElligott/Heinsohn, Introduction (fn. 31), p. 19.

34 <<https://www.dreilaendermuseum.eu/de/Netzwerk-Museen/2018-19-Zeitenwende>>.

35 <<https://www.landesarchiv-bw.de/web/59763>>.

36 Conference report by Anna Zachmann, in: *H-Soz-Kult*, 29 March 2017, URL: <<https://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/tagungsberichte-7086>>.

37 Nils Freytag, Steckengeblieben – vernachlässigt – vergessen. Neuerscheinungen zur Revolution 1918/19, in: *sehепunkte* 13 (2013) No. 3, URL: <<http://www.sehепunkte.de/2013/03/21766.html>>.



Gathering on the market square in Reutlingen, 11 November 1918
(Reutlingen municipal archive, S 105/1 – Keim photo collection, No. 142.69)

and balances of power over time, which then manifested themselves in symbolic events like the Kapp Putsch. It is only in the local that we can undertake a meticulous analysis of the meaning of ›anxiety and fear, hope and idealism, as well as mistaken interpretations‹, the interaction of which produced the dynamics of the polycentric development of the revolution. On the other hand, a comparison of local and regional analyses within Germany will reveal a similar effect to that of the histories of nations and democracies around the world: narratives circulate historically and historiographically; stories of heroes and villains are constructed and perpetuated. Here, again, the critical function of historical scholarship will be crucial.

The time frame is subject to debate. The revolution is generally said to have begun with the sailors' revolts in Kiel of October/November 1918. Various suggestions have been made for the end: May 1919 (end of the Bavarian Soviet Republic), August 1919 (Weimar Constitution), March/April 1920 (Kapp Putsch and Ruhr uprising). In keeping with the international discussion, Klaus Weinbauer and others have postulated a turbulent period extending more broadly from 1916 to 1923.³⁸ This sacrifices the focus

38 Weinbauer/McElligott/Heinsohn, Introduction (fn. 31), pp. 11-14.

on the democratic swing in order to incorporate the German experience in the international research on war-weariness, transitional periods leading to and following wars, and consolidations, and to benefit from this research. Local and regional historical research around the anniversary will probably not take this kind of approach. Just as there were 20 years ago with regard to 1848/49, there will again be compelling reasons to strengthen the history of German democracy and take up the legacy of the revolutionaries. This is surely a good thing. But the strange dissatisfaction with the revolution, the empirical conditions and agency of the actors, can only be understood in an international context extending from the onset of war-weariness in 1917 to the stabilisation of the situation in Europe in 1924. Studies focusing on this period should, however, remain sensitive to moments like the horizon of hope at the end of 1918, the analysis of which is indispensable to understanding the disappointment of many of the actors in the spring and summer of 1919.

Germany thus plays its specific part in the global moment of 1918/19 and its myth-engendering potential. This is also evident in the German research traditions that focus on the agency of the social democratic actors in the first and second revolutionary waves in particular, the characteristics of the soviet movement and the formative power of the first key decisions of November 1918. These debates, which have continued with varying intensity for half a century, are less potentially explosive than the question of responsibility for the war, which Christopher Clark fruitfully took up for the year 1914/2014.³⁹ Nor are they readily applicable to the whole of Europe, because unlike the question of responsibility for the war, the ›unfinished revolution‹ is not actually a European problem. These studies are nevertheless innovative because they can help to describe more precisely the perceptions of the world and related factors affecting the actors' decisions.

Keith Michael Baker and Dan Edelstein have recently proposed looking at revolutions since the late 18th century as ›scripts‹ offering ›frameworks for political action‹. ›Scripts generate events.‹⁴⁰ Revolutionary ›scripts‹ did indeed play an important role during the German revolution of 1918/19. Friedrich Ebert ›reached for the revolutionary gesture to prevent the revolution,‹⁴¹ as Max von Baden wrote in his memoirs. The revolutionary chancellor was aware of the Marxist tradition of revolutionary thought as well as of how earlier revolutions had unfolded. The revolutionary civil war in Russia was a terrifying spectre not only for Europe's pre-revolutionary elites.⁴² Ebert and the

39 Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers. How Europe went to War in 1914*, London 2012.

40 Keith Michael Baker/Dan Edelstein, Introduction, in: Baker/Edelstein, *Scripting Revolution* (fn. 4), pp. 1-24, here p. 2, p. 3.

41 Quoted in Heinrich August Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung. Arbeiter und Arbeiterbewegung in der Weimarer Republik 1918 bis 1924*, Berlin 1984, 2nd, completely revised and corrected ed. 1985, p. 41.

42 Robert Gerwarth/John Horne, Paramilitarismus in Europa nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg. Eine Einleitung, in: Gerwarth/Horne (eds), *Krieg im Frieden. Paramilitärische Gewalt in Europa nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg*, Göttingen 2013, pp. 7-27, here pp. 16-17; Jörn Leonhard, *Die Büchse der Pandora. Geschichte des Ersten Weltkriegs*, Munich 2014, passim; English: *Pandora's Box. A History of the First World War*, Cambridge 2018.

others involved drew their own conclusions from this in 1918/19. The German research is crucial to describing parameters that influenced ›anxiety and fear, hope and idealism‹ and limited the number of possible courses of action. In order to understand 1918/19, it helps to avoid making artificial distinctions between the overlapping types of events. But in the minds of the actors, preexisting understandings of individual events certainly had a channelling effect. Local and regional studies in the context of European and global constellations are important, not least because these scripts circulated nationally and internationally and were fine-tuned in experiential spaces that were socially, culturally and geographically confined.

4. Actors, Situations, Scripts

How do we sort the flood of information we receive from global, European, national and regional projects and celebrations, from conferences, anniversary publications and bestsellers? In an edited volume published in 2013 on the ›Context of the labour movement and Ruhr basin in the revolution, 1918 to 1920‹,⁴³ Jürgen Mittag implicitly suggested sorting research strategies as falling under political, social and cultural history, and classifying the regions under investigation according to socio-economic criteria. These conventional classifications are no longer in vogue. When the possible courses of action available to the actors are developed not from structures but from perceptions of the world that are based on emotions and formed via scripts, when social differentiation is understood not as something that can be described by social statistics, but as an act of structuring by the actors themselves that is situationally created and intersituationally⁴⁴ loosely connected, traditional classifications that appear pragmatically sound are rendered meaningless.

Structure-based classifications cannot, of course, simply be replaced. In Jörn Leonhard's panorama of the world war, ›fatigue‹ is a key factor. That people grew tired of the trenches and turnips is clear. But the ›crises of fatigue‹⁴⁵ of 1917 were able to be overcome by means of a ›remobilisation‹, the consequences of which were still influencing the behaviour of the victors at Versailles. Exhausted people clearly don't have to give up,

43 Jürgen Mittag, Von der verratenen zur vergessenen Revolution? Einleitende Anmerkungen zum Kontext von Arbeiterbewegung und Ruhrgebiet in der Revolution 1918 bis 1920, in: Karl Christian Führer et al. (eds), *Revolution und Arbeiterbewegung in Deutschland 1918–1920*, Essen 2013, pp. 19–43, here pp. 20–22.

44 Stefan Hirschauer, Intersituativität. Teleinteraktionen und Koaktivitäten jenseits von Mikro und Makro, in: Bettina Heintz/Hartmann Tyrell (eds), *Interaktion – Organisation – Gesellschaft revisited. Anwendungen, Erweiterungen, Alternativen*, Stuttgart 2015 (special issue of the *Zeitschrift für Soziologie*), pp. 109–133, here pp. 118–125; Ewald Frie/Boris Nieswand, »Bedrohte Ordnungen« als Thema der Kulturwissenschaften. Zwölf Thesen zur Begründung eines Forschungsbereichs, in: *Journal of Modern European History* 15 (2017), pp. 5–15.

45 Leonhard, *Die Büchse der Pandora* (fn. 42), p. 797 (›Erschöpfungskrisen‹). The following citation p. 862 and passim (›Remobilisierung‹).

but can be motivated anew – in 1917, 1918, and even later in the 20th century. Physical conditions, emotions and feelings are only loosely connected to action. Similar arguments can be constructed for the new images of masculinity that emerged from the trenches and influenced the ›war youth generation‹ in various ways,⁴⁶ for the disabled veterans who found themselves in a world in which the misfortunes were visible on the bodies of other people as well, but who became involved in the post-war societies in very different ways.⁴⁷ As we can see from these examples, the history of the end of the world war was not determined solely by sensibilities, feelings and hopes. They became historically relevant through patterns of interpretation that were in turn constantly being reinvented, ›rescripted‹⁴⁸ or newly found. After 100 years, the history of the end of the war will be told from the perspective of the actors, their emotions and the ways in which they perceived the world, as well as from the history of situations, follow-up actions, and the interpretive frameworks that provided orientation in them.

There are of course also the broad epochs that encompass the First World War in their sweep: ›high modernity‹ from 1880 to 1970,⁴⁹ ›classical modernity‹ from 1880 to 1930,⁵⁰ the European or global civil war from 1914 to 1945.⁵¹ Many recent studies speak of the global confrontation between the three great ideological worlds of liberalism, communism and fascism that began with the First World War. But in view of actor-centred and situation-centred research efforts, it would seem there are more urgent tasks than furnishing the existing ›layers of time‹ or ›time spans‹⁵² with new empirical material or adding new chronological arcs. We need studies crossing national and continental boundaries that explore the reach of the moments of hope and the potentials of the final months of 1918 and the mid-1920s. Methodologically, we still lack mid-level generalisations that can replace the conventional classifications revived by Jürgen Mittag if we want to assimilate the new findings emerging from a variety of sources. We need to identify the elements that are intersituationally common or shared, that connect the hopes, fears and perceptions of the world, in order to rewrite the history of the post-war period from the bottom up. Such an undertaking will encounter the difficulty that 1918/19 – unlike 1914 – represents a flywheel for very many histories around the world that often remain unconnected. Like the national anniversary

46 Raphael, *Imperiale Gewalt und mobilisierte Nation* (fn. 16), p. 56.

47 Cf. Deborah Cohen, *The War Come Home. Disabled Veterans in Britain and Germany, 1914–1939*, Berkeley 2001; Sabine Kienitz, *Beschädigte Helden. Kriegsinvalidität und Körperbilder 1914–1923*, Paderborn 2008.

48 Baker/Edelstein, Introduction (fn. 40), pp. 16–18.

49 Ulrich Herbert, Europe in High Modernity. Reflections on a Theory of the 20th Century, in: *Journal of Modern European History* 5 (2007), pp. 5–20.

50 Cf. August Nitschke et al. (eds), *Jahrhundertwende. Der Aufbruch in die Moderne 1880–1930*, 2 vols, Reinbek bei Hamburg 1990; Peukert, *Weimarer Republik* (fn. 29).

51 Cf. Walther L. Bernecker, *Europa zwischen den Weltkriegen 1914–1945*, Stuttgart 2002; Ernst Nolte, *Der europäische Bürgerkrieg 1917–1945. Nationalsozialismus und Bolschewismus*, Frankfurt a.M. 1987.

52 Cf. Anselm Doering-Manteuffel, Konturen von »Ordnung« in den Zeitschichten des 20. Jahrhunderts, in: Thomas Etzemüller (ed.), *Die Ordnung der Moderne. Social Engineering im 20. Jahrhundert*, Bielefeld 2009, pp. 41–64; Doering-Manteuffel, Die deutsche Geschichte in den Zeitbögen des 20. Jahrhunderts, in: *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 62 (2014), pp. 321–348.



»Beggars quarrel over the best spot:
(Photo: Walter Ballhause [1911–1991], Hanover 1930; Walter-Ballhause-Archiv)

celebrations and histories that are probably being created even now, they can be compared, but not always contextually linked beyond their common origin. Daniel Schönplflug's book *Kometenjahre* (English title: *A World On Edge*), a source-oriented, actor-centred panorama with a European focus and a global orientation, is perhaps a particularly fitting reflection on the subject of 1918/19 – though it cannot replace more analytical, systematic approaches.⁵³

People had all sorts of different hopes, and sought to realise them, in 1918/19. But most hopes ended in a disillusion that also burdened the newly founded states, international entities and non-state actors in the years after 1917. Nevertheless, until the mid-1920s things could still have gone either way for the democratic nation state. It is worth considering these open futures as well as their mostly unfortunate outcomes. It can be helpful here for global historical research, the quest for national self-affirmation and the establishment of regional democratic traditions to watch one another closely.

53 Schönplflug, *Kometenjahre* (fn. 31).

Many have written that German research on the revolution of 1918/19 has had nothing worthwhile to offer since its most fruitful period in the 1970s. A number of recent studies demonstrate that this is beginning to change.⁵⁴ The great task ahead is to establish conceptual connections beyond established time spans, categories of events, and structural patterns. 1918/19 is therefore a suitably challenging anniversary for historical scholarship.

(Translated from the German by Joy Titheridge)

Prof. Dr. Ewald Frie

Eberhard Karls University of Tübingen | Institute of Modern History

Wilhelmstr. 36 | D-72074 Tübingen

E-mail: ewald.frie@uni-tuebingen.de

54 Cf., in addition to Weinbauer/McElligott/Heinsohn, *Germany 1916–1923* (fn. 31), also Julian Aulke, *Räume der Revolution. Kulturelle Verräumlichung in Politisierungsprozessen während der Revolution 1918–1920*, Stuttgart 2015.