



LENA RUDECK

Vergnügen in Besatzungszeiten.
Begegnungen in westalliierten Offiziers- und
Soldatenclubs in Deutschland, 1945-1955
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Over the past decade, the Allied occupation of Germany has been the subject of a major historiographical rediscovery. While a previous generation of scholars often framed their research as a contribution to an understanding of the nascent Cold War or as an exploration of the »prehistory« of the two German states, recent work has shifted towards an analysis of the occupation as a subject in its own right. As part of this turn, the occupation is increasingly understood as involving a complex social relationship between the occupiers and the occupied, within which power relations were in a constant state of flux. This has encouraged the emergence of a range of new studies that concentrate on analysing the occupation »from below«, focusing on themes such as daily life, social interactions, and the gendered experience of occupation.¹

Lena Rudeck's innovative study on a significant, but hitherto entirely ignored subject is a very welcome addition to this growing body of work. Rudeck has had the good idea of exploring the many clubs established for Allied officers, soldiers, and service personnel in the three western zones of occupation. These clubs play a central role in cultural representations of the occupation period, most notably in film and literature, and were a central feature of contemporary public discourse, but have curiously never attracted much interest amongst historians. In filling this gap, Rudeck has produced a rare example of a comparative study of the three zones, something that most scholars of the occupation period have shied away from given the intricacies of mastering the unwieldy archival sources produced by each occupation machinery. This effort has paid off. Through her distinctive approach, Rudeck is able to demonstrate the significant differences that existed in the approach of the three western occupiers, thereby putting paid to the familiar notion that the British and French were simply replicas of the Americans.

¹ See e.g. *Susan L. Carruthers, The Good Occupation. American Soldiers and the Hazards of Peace*, Cambridge, Mass./London 2016; *Camilo Erlichman/Christopher Knowles (eds.), Transforming Occupation in the Western Zones of Germany. Politics, Everyday Life and Social Interactions, 1945-55*, London 2018; *Samantha K. Knapp, Occupiers, Humanitarian Workers, and Polish Displaced Persons in British-Occupied Germany*, London 2023.

The book provides a comprehensive survey of all aspects of the clubs between 1945 and 1955. Rudeck first traces the establishment of the clubs. As she shows, the clubs were devised as strategic tools to regulate the behaviour of the troops and exert a form of control over them. All three occupiers worried that their officers and soldiers would get bored during their spare time, and as a result would engage in unruly behaviour that could generate conflict with the local German population. In addition, when fraternisation rules were relaxed in the autumn of 1945, there was increasing fear about the relations between Allied male soldiers and German women, not least owing to rising rates of venereal disease (VD) and worries about the German populations' resentment at the supposed ›immorality‹ of the occupiers. Concerns about the ways in which German pubs functioned as hot spots for criminal activities and as places in which soldiers could interact with prostitutes prompted a drive towards creating clubs that were more attractive than what was on offer elsewhere. The Allied clubs were therefore meant to provide officers and soldiers with a framework within which they could engage in heavily regulated leisure activities, while strengthening the internal cohesion of the troops, increasing troop discipline, and reinforcing the soldiers' ties to their respective home countries. The idea, as Rudeck convincingly argues, was to create a »new normality during the state of exception« (p. 79) created by occupation.

Each occupying power, however, conceived their clubs in a distinctive manner. The American clubs were meant to strengthen the identification of American officers, soldiers, and occupation personnel with the United States as a nation, and the clubs consequently organised numerous cultural activities. The British clubs, by contrast, were luxurious ventures, offering special comfort and lavish access to food and drinks, providing members of the occupation with a high standard of living that exceeded that of most people in the United Kingdom. In many respects, their purpose was to motivate British personnel to remain in Germany. Finally, the French clubs were highly improvised structures that reflected the lack of financial resources in France, serving primarily as a tool to strengthen the social cohesion of individual military units.

Rudeck examines the people who worked in the clubs, focusing on the role of the American ›hostesses‹. These women had been carefully selected to serve the soldiers in the clubs, create an ›American atmosphere« (p. 93), provide company to the men, and be available for friendly conversations. They were also important intermediaries between the guests and the Germans working in the clubs, such as most notably the kitchen staff, as well as the German entertainers and musicians who were hired to put on shows. As Rudeck shows, the occupiers were highly dependent on such German employees, not least because there was a shortage of non-German bands. In return, Germans who managed to land jobs in the clubs received numerous privileges, including good wages as well as access to food and alcohol. Occupation always entailed a high degree of interdependency between the occupiers and the occupied.

The book's most innovative chapter provides an analysis of the mechanisms by which access to the clubs was restricted to specific Allied groups and to certain segments of the German population. Here, again, major differences between the three occupiers come to light. The American clubs differentiated strictly between officers, non-commissioned officers, and enlisted men. The Americans also enforced a rigid racial segregation, with separate clubs being set up for Afro-American soldiers, who were barred from white clubs even after the formal desegregation of the US military in July 1948. In the British Zone, the differentiation between ranks was gradually diluted during the occupation period, reflecting the increasing ›civilianisation‹ of the occupation machinery. In the French Zone, finally, a strict separation between the ranks was maintained throughout the occupation, and the so-called ›foyers‹ were linked directly to specific military units. As part of the racialised politics of the occupation, French colonial soldiers were segregated into separate clubs, the ›cafés maures‹.

The biggest headache for the occupiers in their attempt to exercise discipline over their troops was the simple fact that the male Allied personnel wanted to spend their leisure time with female company. As there were not enough women in the Allied services, the authorities allowed some German women entry to the clubs. In a particularly stimulating section, Rudeck provides a careful analysis of an American peculiarity: the introduction of so-called ›social passes‹ to regulate access

to the clubs. This clashed with the approach taken by the French, who generally prohibited the entry of Germans to the clubs until 1952, while the British initially only permitted Germans to attend specific events, and opened their clubs to all Germans only in 1950. The Americans, by contrast, started opening their clubs to selected Germans in 1947, who were issued a pass after an extensive vetting process that at times included an intrusive physical examination. Rudeck reconstructs in detail the sociological profile of the German women who applied for a pass and the criteria used in determining who should be admitted. This allows her to refute one of the most persistent popular myths about the clubs, namely that these were fora within which poor German working-class women prostituted themselves in exchange for food, stockings, and cigarettes, lending the clubs a reputation of immorality. By contrast, the archival evidence shows that the Americans carefully selected the women who received passes so that they conformed to a specific contemporary ideal of moral propriety. These were generally highly educated women who had an independent income and belonged to the local bourgeoisie. The result was the emergence of friendly and romantic relationships between the occupiers and the occupied, often giving rise to forms of longer-term intercultural exchange.

By studying an admirable variety of sources drawn from more than twenty archives, Rudeck succeeds in painting a highly differentiated picture of the clubs that leaves few questions unresolved. At times, however, this exhaustive approach also comes at a price, producing repetitions and occasionally an oversupply of detail that distracts from the central analytical issues. Similarly, despite its intended comparative approach, the book still privileges sources on the US Zone and has far more to say about the American clubs than about those in the British and French zones, which remain somewhat opaque. Finally, this study could have examined the clubs in occupied Germany more emphatically as part of a transnational history of soldiers' clubs during the Second World War and in the immediate post-war period. This would have allowed for a discussion of whether the case of the Allied occupation of Germany, which is typically treated in isolation, can be placed within a broader history of foreign rule in Europe in the mid-twentieth century.

None of this, however, should distract from the evident qualities of this important book. Rudeck has written the definitive study on the Allied clubs in occupied Germany, demonstrating the malleability and dynamism inherent to the social interactions between the occupiers and the occupied. Her story shows that beyond the drama of high politics one essential feature of military occupation in the mid-twentieth century was the experience of idleness. The need to alleviate such boredom and limit its potential for conflict, however, led to highly variegated experiences of daily life under occupation, which this book has succeeded in capturing in all their ambiguity.

Zitierempfehlung

Camilo Erlichman, Rezension zu: Lena Rudeck, *Vergnügen in Besatzungszeiten. Begegnungen in westalliierten Offiziers- und Soldatenclubs in Deutschland, 1945–1955*, transcript, Bielefeld 2023, in: *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* (online) 65, 2025, URL: <<https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/afs/82032.pdf>> [24.10.2024].