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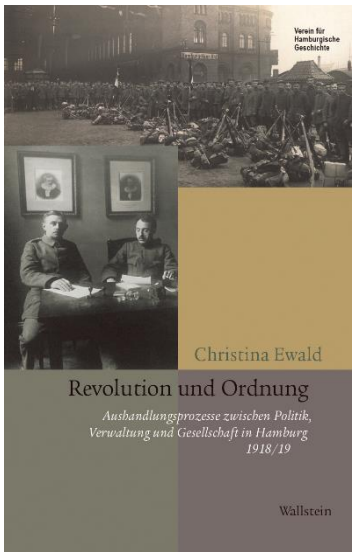

Christina Ewald

Revolution und Ordnung.
Aushandlungsprozesse zwischen Politik, Verwaltung und Gesellschaft in Hamburg 1918/19
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reviewed by

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On the centenary of the German revolution of 1918–1919, the focus of historical remembrance was on the men and women who took to the streets in early November 1918, stressing the popular mobilisation that shaped this event. Christina Ewald's detailed and thoughtful study continues this focus on new political actors, but turns away from the streets to concentrate on those who organised and administered revolutionary change, namely the revolutionary government of Hamburg, which lasted from November 1918 to March 1919. Ewald examines the scope and learning processes of the revolutionaries in Germany's second city. The citizens of Hamburg expected quick improvements to their everyday lives – a fact the members of the local workers' and soldiers' council understood and sought to address. Simultaneously, the revolutionaries also wanted to implement genuinely new policies. According to Ewald, one crucial step on this way was the insistence by the revolutionaries on the maintenance of order. In her understanding, order should not be interpreted as a counterrevolutionary concept in the context of the 1918-19 revolution but as core part of revolutionary policymaking in Hamburg.

After outlining the situation of Hamburg at the end of the *Kaiserreich* and the beginning of the revolution, including the set-up and characteristics of the city's workers' and soldiers' council (chapter 1), Ewald examines five key areas: food provision (chapter 2), housing policy (chapter 3), economic demobilisation (chapter 4), school reforms (chapter 5) and leisure time regulations (chapter 6). These aspects mattered greatly to the everyday life of Hamburg's citizens, but they also reflected what the revolutionaries wanted to change and achieve. Local government might not at first glance appear to be the most exciting area of historical investigation, but it was at this level, in particular, where revolutionaries tried to put their ideas into practice, with varying degrees of success.

The difficult food situation (chapter 2) in the winter of 1918–19 was nothing new for Hamburg's population, as it had already been experienced in previous wartime winters. Since the Allies maintained their food blockade even after the signing of the armistice, it was left to the workers'

and soldiers' council to deal with the supply shortages. Given that many people had hoped that their material situation would improve quickly after the end of the war and the successful revolution, the problems of sufficient food provision and distribution had the potential to undermine the revolutionaries' promise of enhancing people's lives. As Ewald outlines, there was a broad consensus between the Social Democratic members of the revolutionary government and the established municipal War Office of Food (*Kriegsversorgungsamt*) that rooted in their cooperation during the war. Apart from some of its members from the radical left, the workers' and soldiers' council was aware that it had to rely on the expertise of those who had dealt with this matter before, and it was therefore the *Kriegsversorgungsamt* that took the most relevant decisions. For many revolutionaries, adequate food provision was a prerequisite that had to be met to enable them to implement their revolutionary ideas for a different present and future, even if it was not part of their revolutionary project as such.

In contrast, housing policy (chapter 3) was in itself an important aspect of the envisioned revolutionary change. This concerned housing shortages aggravated by the demobilisation of soldiers, as well as protecting tenants from rising rents. Here, the workers' and soldiers' council tried to implement long-term solutions, but failed, according to Ewald, to appropriately influence the well-connected interest groups in this area. Furthermore, the revolutionaries lacked the expertise needed for more targeted interventions. It was clear to Hamburg's revolutionary government that a well-functioning housing policy was key to its progressive plans, but those needed to support its implementation delayed action until the municipal elections in March 1919. Shortcomings in this area should therefore not be misunderstood for carelessness on the part of Hamburg's revolutionaries. In fact, they argued that competences regarding the protection of tenants belonging to the Reich could be ignored due to better regulations and laws formulated by them.

Transforming Germany's war economy into a peacetime economy was, alongside the satisfaction of basic material needs, the greatest challenge facing the revolutionary governments in Hamburg, Berlin and elsewhere across the country. Ewald examines the conflicts between Hamburg's revolutionaries and the conservative economic council, which included some key institutions of the city's economy (chapter 4). The members of the economic council made it very clear that they considered economic expertise to reside with them, rather than with the division of the workers' and soldiers' council they were interacting with. Furthermore, the economic council considered itself the public voice that the people of Hamburg should listen to. Not surprisingly, the workers' and soldiers' council disagreed. And here it was the city's revolutionaries who managed to implement modified versions of their ideas regarding the protection of workers from redundancies.

The section on school education (chapter 5) explores an area in which the revolution accelerated previous reform initiatives. The expansion of the circle of participants in these educational debates was one consequence of the revolution and it illustrates the challenges of more democratic and inclusive processes. Teachers, parents, pupils, school directors, school boards and teachers' councils all wanted a say in school policy in addition to the workers' and soldiers' council. By embracing revolutionary means through the formation of councils, a participatory tool installed by the revolutionary government, parents, teachers, and pupils made their voices heard and sometimes used it to mobilise explicitly against progressive reform ideas. By abolishing religious education in schools in December 1918, the revolutionary government demonstrated its power to implement fundamental change. At the same time, it allowed for a fierce mobilisation against this decision to take place. In hindsight, the abolition of religious education was probably not the smartest action of the revolutionaries, as it enabled emotionally charged counter-revolutionary protests. However, the revolutionaries had tried to implement a demand here that was a central plank of their political beliefs and was particularly close to their hearts. In this matter, Hamburg's revolutionaries were not reacting to immediate post-war difficulties, but were acting upon their vision for the future.

In the final chapter of her study (chapter 6), Ewald explores the regulation of leisure time activities, especially dancing, by the revolutionary government, which also led to conflicts with the public. Moral and economic concerns had accompanied popular dancing for a long time. The workers' and soldiers' council initially took a relaxed approach to longer opening hours of dance venues, which provided popular entertainment. This attitude shifted in early 1919, however, when the revolutionaries realised that other urgent challenges (food supply, housing, demobilisation) meant that negotiations about leisure activities had to take a back seat. The allegedly rampant 'dance craze' was now perceived as inappropriate in view of the difficult times and limited resources in other areas. Furthermore, popular opinion seemed to have, in part, swung against a laissez-faire attitude towards dance entertainment. Ewald identifies a learning curve among the revolutionaries here, who realised by early 1919 that they had more to lose than to gain from a liberal policy on public dancing.

Christina Ewald's study sheds light on the difficult negotiating processes that followed the dramatic days of November 1918. She shows convincingly that Hamburg's revolutionary government was keenly aware of the necessity to solve everyday problems, while simultaneously trying to implement lasting change. At times, these two aims contradicted each other. Hamburg did not experience the violence of Berlin or Munich during the revolution, but a comparatively peaceful transition process in line with that in most German cities. Municipal revolutionary authorities concentrated their practical efforts on solving everyday issues, and by expanding political participation they paved the way for stable democratic governments in Germany's second city. While the stability of Hamburg's governments throughout the Weimar Republic was certainly due to specific local circumstances, Ewald's focus on negotiations, compromises, political learning curves and popular expectations enables us to understand revolutionary politics at the municipal level as dynamic and adaptable, and less as ideologically driven.

Zitierempfehlung

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