

Christian Groh. *Kommunale Polizei im Wiederaufbau: Sozialgeschichte der Pforzheimer und Heilbronner Polizei von 1945 bis 1959.* Ubstadt-Weiher: Verlag Regionalkultur, 2003. 294 S. EUR 19.90 (broschiert), ISBN 978-3-89735-216-2.



Reviewed by Sace Elder (Department of History, Eastern Illinois University)

Published on H-German (November, 2005)

Policing and Postwar Reconstruction

Given the central role played by German policing institutions in state-societal relations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,[1] it seems reasonable to expect that a consideration of Germany's "Stunde Null" would at some point need to include the postwar development of policing institutions. Christian Groh's study of the municipal police in post-1945 Pforzheim and Heilbronn contributes to this as yet understudied subject. The police provided the much-needed "security and order" in these two cities—as elsewhere in Germany—during the crisis-ridden years of reconstruction, even as the institutions of policing were reorganized to accommodate the Allied goals of democratization, demilitarization, denazification, and decentralization. Ultimately Groh is concerned with the question of continuity and change between the pre- and postwar periods. How did developments in the realm of policing reflect popular and institutional attitudes toward *Herrschaft*? To what degree did the development of the police on the municipal level influence the development of a new, democratic civic imaginary?

To address these questions, Groh begins with the

assumption that police history cannot be separated from social and political history, and he thus seeks to provide "eine in die Stadtgeschichte eingebettete Sozialgeschichte der Nachkriegspolizei" (p. 19). Any study of the police in this period must necessarily be a local study, Groh points out, both because of the Allied policy of decentralization and because social and economic reconstruction was a highly localized process. His research focuses on the institutional development of the police in these cities, the make-up and training of the personnel, the arenas of police activity, and the relationship between the police and the public. His time frame is the period between German defeat and the taking over of the municipal police by the state of Baden-Württemberg under the Polizeigesetz of 1955. (Pforzheim would elect to retain its municipal police until 1959.) Groh explains that the two cities under study provide a useful vantage point from which to view German reconstruction since both were all but completely destroyed during the war and were located in the same U.S. zone of occupation. The source base is much richer for Pforzheim, according to Groh, and for that reason he uses Heilbronn as a point of comparison, although it is not made clear why com-

parison is methodologically necessary.

Kommunalisierung was the product of diffuse efforts to decentralize and denazify the German state, arising in part from Allied (particularly U.S.) police practices. The “German inheritance” with regard to police was that of a state-sponsorship of police agencies, whose jurisdiction encompassed not only the enforcement of public order and criminal law, but also a host of other welfare and administrative functions. Although militarization and comprehensive activities of the police were gradually mitigated before 1933, the Nazi period, of course, saw a dramatic extension of police authority with regard to the prosecution of crimes and was centralized on the Reich level. It was therefore of utmost importance to the Allied occupation that the German police be strictly circumscribed in its authority, demilitarized in its organization, and decentralized in its jurisdiction. A brief discussion of the debate regarding police powers of punishment reveals how deeply informed Germans’ ideas about police powers were imbedded in what Groh refers to as “Tradition”: In 1947 the League of North Baden-Württemberg Cities presented the state ministry with a letter explaining that only in authoritarian Prussia was there not a tradition of police powers of punishment; lack thereof was not in keeping with the democratic traditions of Baden and Württemberg. (Despite this plea, courts were created in 1949 to replace both the prosecutorial powers of the police and to ease the burden on the existing court system). An effort was made also to curb the powers of the police to prevent the surveillance of the population that characterized policing under the Third Reich. Strict limitation of the competence of the police to “Sicherheit und Ordnung,” however, was not entirely successful, as it was often difficult to decide what constituted a breach of public order in the tumultuous circumstances of the 1940s and early 1950s.

To determine the extent to which the reorganized police agencies were democratizing, Groh assesses the recruitment and education of personnel. He finds that while on the whole denazification was fairly successful, at least until the mid-1950s, democratization and demilitarization were somewhat more incomplete. On the one hand, one did not find a large number of party members either in the rank-and-file personnel or in the police leadership. On the other hand, former victims of National Socialism were not included in the ranks of the police. Police training, which was the responsibility of the local police agencies, tended to reinforce older, decidedly undemocratic, notions of policing. This included the enforcement of military-style discipline among recruits and

the use of prewar textbooks, which emphasized older philosophies of surveillance and criminology.

If the exclusion of Nazism’s “Volksfeinde” from the ranks of the police and the methods used to educate new officers suggested a kind of continuity with the recent past, Groh finds other sources of continuity as well. A particularly revealing incident involved the firing of Pforzheim’s police chief Emil Brand. Brand owed his position both to his own effectiveness as a police chief and to the “pragmatism” of the U.S. occupational policies. It was, however, German tradition that high-ranking police officials also be trained jurists with an intimate familiarity with the law, and Brand was not a trained jurist. When the Pforzheim city government fired Brand on these grounds in March, 1947, it illustrated, according to Groh, the persistence of German traditions that sometimes ran counter to the interests of the occupational authorities. The manner in which Brand was fired further raised the issue of democratization in local politics, as the Mayor received criticism for exercising *Eigenmächtigkeit*.

To evaluate the extent to which German politicians identified with the democratization efforts of the U.S. occupying power, Groh examines the debates regarding the placing of local police agencies under state authority (*Verstaatlichung*). On a national level, the debates centered on the problem of democratization and the protection of the state (particularly protection from Communism). The occupational authority was in a difficult position with regard to centralization: on the one hand, centralization certainly made administration and reconstruction of a badly disrupted society much easier; policing the rampant criminality of the postwar period was made all the more difficult with the disruption of unified systems of communication and even regionally centralized records. At the same time, centralization undermined the localism that the occupational authorities were committed to developing. Many German politicians also argued for municipal over centralized police. The Peter Kärtner serial murder case, for example, was cited by defenders of local police who pointed out that it had not been the Berlin detectives who had caught Kärtner but local police officers. Others, including the Pforzheim CDU leaders, argued that *Verstaatlichung* would assure greater security, particularly in the face of potential Communist threat, and that a centralized system would be too costly. The arguments of the Pforzheim Oberbürgermeister against centralization won the day in 1955—at least initially; three years later the argument that a centralized state police would save the city money

triumphed and the state took over the institution. Groh finds no significant public discussion of the transfer of authority in the Pforzheim newspapers. Citizens seem to have noticed no change in the services provided by the men and women in uniform. Indeed, the only aspect of the transition that drew any significant commentary from the press was the change from municipal blue to state green uniforms. Although it was relatively short-lived, the experiment with local police in the two cities ultimately had a positive effect on postwar German development, according to Groh. In his assessment, “den Grundstein einer Polizei, die die junge Demokratie stützten, hatten die Städte gelegt, was nicht bedeutet, dass nicht vordemokratische Elemente auch in der Polizei überleben konnten” (p. 107).

Groh finds surviving “predemocratic elements” in the activities of the police, which were circumscribed after 1945 to “Sicherheit und Ordnung.” Groh’s most exhaustive chapter (130 pages) details the various areas of police activity. Pforzheim and Heilbronn were by no means the most criminal of German cities, but the crime rates there did tend to follow postwar German trends. While police officers were bound by a new duty to “protect and serve,” they carried with them “cultural baggage” (p. 180) that was anything but democratic. Especially after the currency reform, which resolved some of the economic and social dislocations that had produced the sharp increase in property crimes and black market activity, police authorities approached certain groups of offenders and certain kinds of offences with “kulturelle bedingte Anschauungen” (p. 180). Groh’s analysis might have benefited from a more theoretical consideration of how “cultural baggage” operates in criminal science and police practice, especially given the large body of literature on the subject.^[2] It is not clear, for example, how he determines that the prejudices of police personnel were “unbewusst” (e.g., pp. 110, 185). In any case, Groh thoroughly demonstrates that racist, sexist, and moralistic norms informed the policing techniques used in the late 1940s and early 1950s. As a result, eastern and southern European displaced persons were disproportionately identified as criminals, women’s sexuality was strictly monitored in efforts to control venereal disease, and the Sinti and Roma were singled out for particular suspicion by police. Youth were identified as a group that was particularly “gefährdet” in the postwar period, echoing an earlier period in Germany’s modern history. In other words, postwar police tended to take up the terms of the prewar “war on crime.” Although the practices of the police were not democratic, in Groh’s view they did not “ac-

tively” prevent democratization (p. 238). (Of course, if one is comparing the Pforzheim experience with that of the United States, one might wonder if democratization without racist and sexist prejudices is possible.)

Groh’s final chapter examines the efforts made to rehabilitate the public image of the police and to develop a cooperative relationship between police and the people they were to “serve and protect.” The gradual increase in private transportation on the streets gave traffic police in particular an opportunity to instruct citizens in driving rules and proper traffic behavior. On the whole, Groh finds, the residents of Pforzheim seem to have appreciated these efforts. Officials also sought to instruct citizens in police work and present a more sympathetic image of the police through public sporting events and police exhibitions—tactics used already in the 1920s. To measure the success of this overhaul of public relations, Groh carefully compares complaints made by citizens to the police, discussions of the police in the public press, and official police sources. Groh reproduces some—often amusing—complaints of police behavior that suggest that citizens developed a fairly good understanding of their rights and the limitations of police powers. The expectation of police helpfulness could be found in the urban press, whose reporters and editors sought to promote social stability by encouraging a positive image for the police. Only in the 1950s, Groh finds, were there explicit criticisms of police work in the daily press, and then only of individual officers. Groh briefly discusses official complaints (*Anzeigen*) made by citizens as the most important point of contact between the police and the public; citizens were less likely to help enforce laws that were widely transgressed, such as traveling without a pass or participating in the black market. Citizens proved all too willing to help police other kinds of behavior, such as theft and physical assault. Groh speculates on the basis of rather limited sources that there was a transition from what Robert Gellately has called a “mutual surveillance society”^[3] under National Socialism to a “selbst regulierende Gesellschaft” where the police stood in the background and only intervened in limited cases (pp. 270-271).

Groh might have done his impressive research more justice by drawing out his conclusions more thoroughly. As noted above, he might also have made better use of the theoretical considerations used by historians of crime and policing. Nonetheless, scholars interested in the history of policing will find valuable this highly empirical study that successfully combines urban, social, and institutional history to uncover an important chapter in the

development of postwar German democracy.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, the essays in Alf Luckte, ed., *“Sicherheit” und “Wohlfahrt”: Polizei, Gesellschaft und Herrschaft im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992).

[2]. For the German case, see especially Peter Becker, *Verderbnis und Entartung. Eine Geschichte der Kriminologie des 19. Jahrhunderts als Diskurs und Praxis, Verffentlichungen des Max Planck Instituts fr Geschichte*, vol. 176 (Gttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2002).

[3]. Robert Gellately, “Gestapo und Terror: Perspektiven auf die Sozialgeschichte des nationalsozialistischen Herrschaftssystems,” in Alf Luckte, ed., *Sicherheit und Wohlfahrt*, pp. 371-392; see also Gellately, “Denunciation as a Subject of Historical Research,” *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung* 26, no. 2/3 (2001): 16-29.

Copyright (c) 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the Reviews editorial staff: hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Sace Elder. Review of Groh, Christian, *Kommunale Polizei im Wiederaufbau: Sozialgeschichte der Pforzheimer und Heilbronner Polizei von 1945 bis 1959*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. November, 2005.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11226>

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.