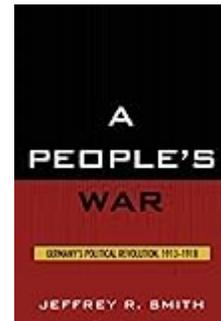




**Jeffrey R. Smith.** *A People's War: Germany's Political Revolution, 1913-1918.* Lanham: University Press of America, 2007. 213 pp. \$32.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7618-3642-1.



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## Locating a Vernacular Revolution in German History

Germany's defeat in 1918 is often seen as a political rupture that resulted from social, cultural, and economic crisis that fragmented a traumatized society, making it more susceptible to the rise of National Socialism. Jeffrey Smith's new book argues that historians need to revise their perception of November 1918 as a moment of "disunity" in response to a lost war. Instead, he sees 1918 as a culmination of a growing "nationalist vernacular sphere," a movement of popular activism that unified Germans across social and political lines, shattering the monarchy. The term "revolution," Smith argues, should be applied to the 1913-18 period as a whole, with the war as a catalyst, rather than a rupture, in facilitating the expansion of this "vernacular public sphere." Ultimately, he suggests, the mobilization of popular activism in a struggle to wrestle sovereignty from the kaiser constitutes an underlying continuity between the *Kaiserreich* and the Third Reich (p. 21). Relying on police records from Berlin, Munich, and Hamburg, as well as newspaper accounts of imperial authorities' clashes with citizens, Smith claims to avoid the rather narrow focus on nationalist pressure groups and elite political leaders found in the enormous historiography ranging from Fritz Fis-

cher and Hans Ulrich Wehler to David Blackbourn and Geoffrey Eley (p. 8). In a thorough overview of this scholarship, Smith boldly claims to "overcome the inherent shortcomings of the revisionist historiography" by demonstrating that new links between the state and society were being forged since 1914, with citizens seizing political initiative in ways that replaced Wilhelm II's authority with that of "a newly enfranchized German *Volk*" (pp. 8-9). However, the significance of Smith's own argument needs to be further developed, as his goal to provide a "third view" of this watershed period, distinct from the scholarship of the 1960s and 1980s, could be more fully realized. Though Smith makes an interesting attempt to write a history of German politics without becoming engrossed in the machinations of "the state," his conception of the "vernacular public sphere" needs to be defined with more nuanced argumentation and more effective use of primary sources.

In his chronological approach, Smith begins by locating the rise of an increasingly active public sphere in response to the Kaiser's management of several famous patriotic festivities. The dichotomy between "monarchy"

and “nation,” Smith claims, can be seen in Wilhelm II’s failed attempts to control the tone of the Battle of Nations centennial. This anniversary became a “monarchist” rather than popular event, as evidenced by the relegation of citizens to the role of passive observers of parades and rituals. The monarchy’s limited ability to set the agenda and manage the public’s enthusiasm was dramatized further in the events of July 1914. Smith relies heavily on Jeffrey Verhey, whose work brilliantly shattered lingering myths of the unified “spirit of 1914” by exploring divisions in working- and middle-class responses to the war.[1] But Smith claims to find a previously overlooked phenomenon in the prelude to the Great War. July 1914, Smith writes, saw elites fade into the background while “the people” acted independently of the state, thus asserting their sovereignty. Here Smith notes that in July 1914 the middle classes were the main actors in taking to the streets to assert nationalism in ways that overwhelmed the kaiser’s police. A climate of rumors, nationalist sentiment circulated in popular media, and spontaneous outbreaks of patriotism signaled a war mentality that outpaced the kaiser’s war machine. This emerging “vernacular public sphere,” spearheaded by crowds of Germans including virtual unknowns like Adolf Hitler, revolted against the political order and foreshadowed a virulent anti-bourgeois, anti-liberal nationalism that defined itself as more capable of defending the nation than the monarchy.

Smith’s overview of the vernacular opposition to the Wilhelmine state in the context of economic crisis and military catastrophes in 1916-17 constitutes one of the stronger aspects of his study. Vernacular forms of protest against the regime, often less dramatic than the familiar demonstrations against food shortages and the politicized labor unrest, represented a more subtle yet persistent layer of dissent.[2] Hypernationalistic *Schundliteratur* (seen as vulgar and immoral by Wilhelmine censors) celebrated ordinary Germans as a separate entity from the control of the monarchy. The “common man” in the vernacular nationalistic sphere would show Wilhelm how to persevere through total war. Paradoxically, Smith sees Paul Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff’s military dictatorship, which centralized control of the war, as the fulfillment of the vernacular sphere’s vision of a nationalist system that displaced the kaiser. As Hindenburg and Ludendorff tightened their stranglehold on the state and society, the public sphere became even more emboldened in its dissent against the monarchy: “the ‘vernacular sphere’ had by 1917 encompassed more and more of Germany’s working and lower-middle classes,

urban and rural dwellers, who became united in their demands for a more egalitarian, participatory, and activist state in which they framed their individual interests and grievances” (p. 173).

Although his analysis of the vernacular sphere as a form of dissent within the *Kaiserreich* is provocative, and his writing will be engaging for specialists in German history, Smith’s interpretation of the vernacular public sphere’s significance is more problematic. Smith consistently de-emphasizes the diverse reactions and perspectives across class and political lines that Germans had to the war and too easily conflates these competing groups into a unified oppositional body. On one hand, Smith agrees with Verhey’s point that “the masses” were deeply divided in their response to the outbreak of the war. However, Smith’s argument could be improved by taking these divisions into greater account and highlighting the differences in vernacular protest. Smith’s evidence concentrates primarily on middle-class, right-wing protest against imperial management of the war. Yet he suggests that this vernacular sphere consisted of widely divergent groups, nationalists and socialists, working and middle classes, coexisting as a unified entity. His work would have benefited from greater distinction between their divergent views on the national community and analysis of different conceptions of popular sovereignty. What forms of working-class vernacular dissent existed and how did they contrast with middle-class vernacular culture? Although Smith’s collection of sources from newspapers and police reports are engaging, further documentation of perspectives held by popular activists, in particular working-class Germans, would have helped to delineate different strands of vernacular dissent competing against each other. Smith’s portrayal of so many groups across social, economic, and political lines as unified in their protest against the Wilhelmine monarchy needs to be further explored to explain why after 1918 the “vernacular public sphere” descended into irreparable fragmentation and conflict over competing visions of the national community.

#### Notes

[1]. Jeffrey Verhey, *The Spirit of 1914: Militarism, Myth and Mobilization in Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[2]. On the social and political effects of Germany’s economic crisis, see Belinda Davis, *Home Fires Burning: Food, Politics, and Everyday Life in World War I Berlin* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

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