



**Andrea Bergler.** *Von Armenpflegern und Fürsorgeschwestern: Kommunale Wohlfahrtspflege und Geschlechterpolitik in Berlin und Charlottenburg 1890 bis 1914.* Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2011. 392 S. \$105.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-515-09935-6.



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**Published on** H-German (January, 2014)

**Commissioned by** Chad Ross

## A Tale of Two Cities

Andrea Bergler's *Von Armenpflegern und Fürsorgeschwestern* joins a growing number of important local studies that over the past fifteen years or so have provided a progressively more differentiated understanding of poor relief and welfare in Germany in the long nineteenth century. The book takes up two themes that have been the topic of other studies, namely, the social reform vision of the women's movement and the emergence of new forms of preventive social welfare during the Wilhelmine years, but links them together in a more detailed and explicit manner than previous works.

In Bergler's account, the Social Democrats, who entered into municipal and national politics in increasing numbers after 1890, were the driving force behind the expansion of municipal social policy. Their reform vision, Bergler argues, had much in common with that of the bourgeois women's movement, who sought to supplant deterrent poor relief with a broad spectrum of pedagogically oriented, financially more generous social welfare programs designed to prevent social need, rather than to alleviate it on a post factum basis, while us-

ing their involvement in such programs as a bridgehead for securing greater political rights for themselves at the local level. However, the Social Democratic challenge notwithstanding, between 1890 and 1914 municipal politics was dominated by liberals of varying stripes, and the shape of the municipal social policy programs that developed during these years depended on the extent to which the interrelated goals of Social Democrats and bourgeois women were supported by the men who held the balance of power at the local level and who alone could vote in local elections and hold municipal office during the Wilhelmine era. Where such proposals fell on favorable ground, there emerged, Bergler argues, a distinct—and specifically progressive—social formation in which expanding municipal support for preventive social welfare programs served as the basis for both a politics of class conciliation and the growing involvement of women in public life. Where such support was lacking, opportunities for women in the social and public spheres were limited, and social programs remained correspondingly unreformed and wedded to older notions of deterrence,

fiscal parsimony, and masculine privilege. To make this argument, Bergler tells a tale of two cities, Charlottenburg and Berlin.

Before its incorporation into greater Berlin in 1920, Charlottenburg was an independent municipality, and its social welfare programs—both those that were directly funded and operated by the city and the initiatives of the many voluntary organizations active in the social sector—were widely regarded as a model for progressive reform. Municipal authorities in this Berlin suburb precociously accepted public responsibility for meliorating social problems in a number of areas, including labor market programs, preventive social hygiene (school health care, tuberculosis welfare, infant welfare, and the rehabilitation of drinkers), and pedagogically oriented housing reform programs, and they appointed prominent social reformers to head both the municipal offices responsible for these programs and the city's poor relief office. Charlottenburg was the first city to appoint women to positions on the boards overseeing the operation of municipal social services, thereby opening the way for them to participate in communal politics in an official, if limited, manner, and the work of women's associations was closely integrated with that of city social service agencies.

In contrast to the politics of class and gender compromise in Charlottenburg, Berlin social politics was, Bergler argues, shaped by the prevailing atmosphere of "class struggle" (pp. 86, 340-341), and the disinclination of Berlin liberals to pursue class conciliation through social reform meant that social policy in that city lagged in virtually every respect. The reform of the city's poor relief system was permanently blocked. In 1898 Emil MÃ¼nsterberg, the nation's leading poor relief expert, was appointed as head of the city's poor relief office and charged with reforming municipal poor relief in accordance with the Elberfeld system, whose adoption was the signpost of progressive modernity in Charlottenburg. However, not only was MÃ¼nsterberg never able to muster the political support needed to make regular house visiting into the cornerstone of its poor relief system, which remained more an inefficient system of minimal pensions than a mechanism for preventing need or helping people recover their independence. The city's male poor guardians were also able to use their corporate power to effectively block the participation of women, maintain their paternalistic influence over the clientele, and protect both their material interests and homosocial administrative practices. Berlin also adopted a much narrower understanding of the scope of public re-

sponsibility for the remediation of social problems, and, correspondingly, the municipal social services administration kept women's associations at arm's length. And while reformers in Charlottenburg drew on diverse discourses (population policy, social hygiene, maternalism, social order, and morality) to legitimate both pedagogical intervention into the social sphere and positive collaboration across the gender line, in Berlin the city council and social administrators seemed more interested in using the social programs that they did establish to police the lower classes.

The bulk of the book is devoted to explaining what Bergler sees as the systematic difference between the political cultures of Charlottenburg and Berlin (part 2) and then showing how this difference, together with the success or failure of the women's movement in the two cities, shaped policy and practice in the three key areas of poor relief, social hygiene programs for orphans, mothers, and infants, and housing supervision (parts 3-5). The sixth part pulls together and restates many of the arguments that are developed in the preceding sections. All of this is done in great detail and with great care, something that will make the book an important point of reference for future scholarship.

Bergler's comparative approach is one of the book's major strengths. In telling this story, she makes more systematic use of several sets of local sources, especially city council records and the archives of the local poor relief, labor, health, and housing offices, than have other scholars, who have often cherry-picked local materials to tell a national story, and with surprising frequency she points out salient differences between social policy and practice in the two cities.

However, the most important shortcoming of the book also relates directly to its comparative approach. Bergler views the growing political influence of the Social Democrats at the national level and their increasing involvement in local social politics as the catalyst for many of the developments she charts. However, as George Steinmetz has shown, increased Social Democratic influence could just as easily lead to social liberal compromise as to a hardening of class lines, and Bergler does not provide a satisfactory explanation of why Charlottenburg and Berlin should have followed such radically divergent paths, especially in view of both their geographical proximity and the fact that Berlin (together with Frankfurt) was one of the main meeting points of social reform groups from across the nation.<sup>[1]</sup> The basis for her comparison consists primarily of a brief account of party

strength in Charlottenburg and Berlin. These passages do not shed much light on either the political and social values of the parties represented in the city councils or the political economy of the two cities; they do not provide a convincing explanation of why such a large bourgeois majority should have led to class compromise in Charlottenburg, where the Social Democrats held only 20 percent of the seats on the city council, and class conflict in Berlin, where the Social Democrats also remained a minority party; and they leave unexplained why the Berlin city council would have appointed to such a prominent position a social reformer like Münsterberg, whose vision of a modern, reformed poor relief system was so at odds with that which Bergler attributes to the city's liberal parties. While these concerns lead me to question at

times the stark differences that Bergler describes in the political culture of the two cities, these doubts are held in check, at least in part, by the richness of her empirical material, and the tension between Bergler's description of the impact of gender and Progressivism on municipal social reform in Charlottenburg and Berlin and her explanation thereof is something that readers will have to grapple with in working their way through her book and attempting to apply her insights to the broader development of the local welfare state in Wilhelmine Germany.

#### Note

[1]. George Steinmetz, *Regulating the Social: The Welfare State and Local Politics in Imperial Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

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**Citation:** Larry Frohman. Review of Bergler, Andrea, *Von Armenpflegern und Fürsorgeschwestern: Kommunale Wohlfahrtspflege und Geschlechterpolitik in Berlin und Charlottenburg 1890 bis 1914*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. January, 2014.

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