

Elusive alliance: the German occupation of Poland in World War I, Jesse Kauffman, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2015, 287 pp., \$36 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0-674-28601-6

Jesse Kauffman's study ties in with a recent trend in the extensive research on the First World War. Its theme is the German occupations, specifically the policies adopted and implemented in the Imperial Government-General of Warsaw. There is ample reason for the choice of topic. As the author points out, the geographical focus of historical research into the war has traditionally been the western theatre. The military, political, and social development in the east, however, has been subject to less analysis. At least this is the case among British, French, and American historians; as Kauffman points out, and for obvious reasons one might add, Polish and German historical scholarship has devoted more attention to the eastern front, and to Polish-German relations.

Kauffman identifies a number of key questions involved with the topic. These range from the aim and consistency of German policies in the east to the role played by pre-war Polish ethnic tensions and nationality conflicts in that process. At the center stage of *Elusive Alliance*, though, the classic problem of a possible German 'Sonderweg' reappears, but in context of more recent debates on the long-term effects of the First World War: was the war the 'great seminal catastrophe' in European politics and civilization, as per George F. Kennan? Or, was it rather that the prospect of political normality remained a reality even after 1919? The balance between continuity and discontinuity in domestic German political thinking and diplomacy, as well as the reemergence and role of interwar Poland, are crucial aspects of this problem. To Kauffman the essential task is to unravel whether there is tangible evidence suggesting any systematic connections and similarities between imperial German policies in Poland and those of the Nazi-regime a quarter of a century later. This involves taking stock of Hans Hartwig von Beseler, the Governor-General himself, as well as analyzing the policies of the dual civil and military administration of wartime Poland in more general terms. For example, did Beseler's reports and personal correspondence reveal signs indicating any 'festering eastern-focused pathologies' with respect to the Poles, or did the German administration and policing of Poland in general indicate that this was actually the case?

Kauffman sets out by addressing the introduction of the Government-General in 1915, and the appointment of Beseler to the head of the administration. From thereon, the study deals with the role played by the occupied Polish lands to the German war effort, but also the introduction of local self-administration, based on the principles of the 1808 Prussian *Städteordnung* by vom Stein (sic). This was part of a more long-term ambition to eventually create a separate Polish territorial state, but under German dominance. Alongside these ambitions, reformation of the educational system in Poland was also important. Accordingly, two chapters of the book are devoted to educational reforms, and the opening of Warsaw University in November 1915. (We should remember that the very same university was shut down by the Nazi-regime 24 years later.)

Education, or rather *Bildung*, is crucial also to Kauffman's analysis of German-Polish relations, and of German attitudes to and perceptions of the Poles. Because, as illustrated by Beseler's correspondence, a common enough perception among the German elite was that the Poles simply were too 'immature' to be trusted with the task of governing themselves. They had to be taught first. Importantly, though, whereas images such as these certainly reflect a typical late nineteenth-century colonial view of conquered peoples, whether in Africa, India, or, as in this case, Poland, Kauffman demonstrates that there were still

more differences than similarities when First and Second World War-policies are put in comparison. Notably, Beseler's and other Germans' viewpoints lacked the biological component typical to Nazi racial thinking. This includes attitudes towards the large Jewish group among the Polish population.

Consequently, Kauffman rejects the notion that the occupation fits within a larger, German scheme of *Drang nach Osten*, murky in terms of ideology and catastrophic in terms of outcomes. Essentially, the occupation of Poland came about as an unintended consequence of initial German successes on the eastern battlefields. Following that, strategies and policies were developed primarily as responses to the specific and gradually changing conditions of the First World War: At the core of this problem was the emerging, never-ending need for resources, including manpower, in order to sustain the war effort. Kauffman, therefore, arrives at the conclusion that the First World War was in many ways a watershed between nineteenth-century diplomacy and politics, and the totalitarian ideologies of the twentieth century. It was a watershed, however, on the premise that we accept a specific timeframe for the political development in Eastern Europe, in contrast to in the west. Kauffman argues convincingly that the war in the east and the German occupation of Poland are best understood as part of a series of convulsions initially opened by the failed 1905 Russian revolution. This long and bloody sequence, characterized by conflicts between ethnic groups and nations, and by more or less failed attempts of state-formation among Germans and Poles alike, culminated in the Second World War. Effectively it reached its conclusion in the ethnic cleansing of all things German from Eastern Europe after the war.

No doubt, the scholarly debate on long-term effects of the First World War, including the possibility of a German *Sonderweg*, will continue among historians. Perhaps, as suggested by Jürgen Kocka in his article "Assymetrical Historical Comparison" in the *History and Theory Journal* (1999), the original 'Sonderweg-hypothesis' drew on a biased or, 'assymmetric' form of historical comparison from the outset. For example, Kocka pointed out that whereas the middle classes in Germany certainly stood out as weak and inherently anti-democratic in relation to their British or Dutch counterparts, the opposite can be said when they are put in relation to the middle classes in east and central European countries (49). But the list of pros and cons on issues such as these could go on, and the point is simply to indicate that any final conclusion to the problem is unlikely to appear. Neither is it the ambition of Kauffman to launch such an explanation, however tentatively. Kauffman's thoroughly researched and well-written book aims to highlight the role of German-Polish relations to the overall political development of inter-war Europe, and it does this very well. T.S. Eliot's lilacs may have grown out of the dead lands of the western front, so to speak, rather than on the endless plains of Poland. Yet, by providing the reader with fresh insights into the complex issue of German imperial policies, and Polish state-formation, Kauffman's study deepens our understanding of the political dynamics played out on these plains, and of a crucial period in European history. *Elusive Alliance* will stand as a valuable contribution to the field.

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