

Katharina Thielen, Politische Partizipation in der preußischen Rheinprovinz 1815–1845. Eine Verflechtungsgeschichte, Köln, Weimar, Wien (Böhlau) 2023, 737 S., 50 Abb. (Stadt und Gesellschaft, 10), ISBN 978-3-412-52831-7, EUR 80,00.

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When the Congress of Vienna awarded the Kingdom of Prussia new territory in western Germany in 1815, it inherited a region that had already underwent dramatic transformation under French rule. How the French revolutionary legacy and Prussia's neoabsolutism intersected with Rhenish culture and economy has been a core question for generations of historians. Whether examining the Rhenish institutions, early industrialization, or other post-Napoleonic impulses of constitutional rule and liberal self-governance, the Rhenish Vormärz serves as an important laboratory for investigating civil society and participatory politics in modern Germany. For this reason, Katharina Thielen's study, a doctoral dissertation from the Saarland University, joins a dense historiographical field whose achievements set a high bar for *Erkenntnisgewinn*. The book admirably succeeds in meeting this standard, providing an important, fine-grained study of how notable politics in five Rhenish cities contributed to a self-confident regional identity that positioned itself within and against Prussian rule.

The study focuses on the city councils (*Stadträte*) of Aachen, Cologne, Düsseldorf, Coblenz, and Trier, the province's five principal cities to assess formal and informal political participation. Appointed initially by the French state and subsequently filled by the Prussian government, these positions constitute a concrete instance of *histoire croisée* in Franco-Rhenish history. Tracing the terms of approximately 470 councilors over six terms in three decades, Thielen examines how these Rhenish councilors negotiated political and cultural influence, not just through their offices but also through clubs, societies, masonic lodges, chambers of commerce, and family networks. She brings us into close, instructive contact with their personalities, professions, and social connections, just as her voluminous appendices of councilor networks and biographical data are a trove of information that historians will long consult (483–652).

Over six office terms, councilors formed a thicket of connections through city casinos, freemason lodges, agricultural associations, and chambers of commerce which linked interests to regional and national concerns. Councilors' biographies furthermore reveal social heterogeneity. While the usual professions of notables are well represented – bankers, merchants, judges, estate owners –, the crafts and trades were not ignored. With bakers, brewers,



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tanners, bookdealers, and tavern keepers also holding office, one glimpses additional conduits for political communication. The councils of Trier, Coblenz, and Cologne especially confirm the author's points about the influences of family ties, club connections, and multi-generational influence. Viewing this connectedness, Thielen explores how these notables moved beyond specific municipal concerns to advocate »translocal political strategies of participation«, which helped shape a regional identity (49, 475). This transnational inheritance from France, she argues, provided a sphere of public life that contested and neutralized Prussian authority.

Because the *Munizipalverfassung* represented both city and countryside, Rhinelanders viewed the selection procedure as one approximating equality, insofar that not just the wealthy bourgeoisie and nobility received appointments but also middle-class Catholics (456). As ersatz local representatives, councilors in turn elicited political participation from constituents. Indeed, the early petition campaigns for a promised constitution as well as for relief during the hunger crisis of 1817–1819 politicized large segments of the population. Although councilors proved ineffectual with these and other problems, they nonetheless prevented further incursions from Prussia's governing hierarchy with protest, internal debate, and negotiation. Councilors also exerted influence by refusing to convene or, alternately, to meet and then do nothing: a negative form of participation that undermined rational administration and cast Prussian governance as unresponsive and arbitrary. The passive-aggressive strategies inscribed into this bureaucratic relationship are fascinating. Wilhelm von Haw, the Lord Mayor of Trier (1818–1839) and two-term councilor, was particularly adept at blocking the flow of state paper (289). The councils of Trier, Coblenz, and Cologne emerge as the principal engines of regional political coverage, because of their councilors' extensive connections to economic, cultural, and associational life (479). Yet, of course, central political aspirations remained unfulfilled. Neither communal representation nor the provincial Landtag, established in 1826, achieved the principal goals of constitutional rule, equitable taxation, freedom of the press, transparency of public affairs, or any other consequential legislation.

With formal channels of political communication largely blocked, city councilors circulated information and built consensus on divisive issues through other participatory practices at the local and regional level. Higher administrative elites from the Prussian state, notes Thielen, rarely penetrated these Catholic social circles, although casinos and chambers of commerce offered entry to Protestant notables and non-Rhenish civil servants. Through the region's extensive carnival culture but also through masonic lodges and other voluntary associations, city councilors and their kin formed enduring networks. As the politicization of the Rhineland continued apace – fueled by discontent over the Milling- and Slaughter Tax, the revolutionary crises of 1830–1833, the Cologne troubles, and so much more – notables and their modes of political



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communication contributed to a self-confident regional awareness, a positionality capable of opposition.

In 1845, the three-class voting system replaced the French municipal order. Those earning above 200 talers were placed into three categories, whereby the top two tiers could outvote the numerically greater third class. Thielen views this plutocratic »reform« as the work of the provincial Landtag, whose deputies cleaved to the economic liberalism of *Großbürgertum*. Despite this setback for participation, Thielen nonetheless concludes that the lower-level networks had »outlasted all personnel and generational changes since the era of French rule« and, in so doing, created a core element of Rhenish participatory politics in the Vormärz (471). This study thus offers invaluable processual evidence to understand how disparate cities and villages coalesced as a regional voice to offer staunch support for both liberal and democratic revolution in 1848.

If political participation in the Rhenish Vormärz constituted more social groups and cities than Thielen's analytical remit allows, her selection of cities and themes warrant praise. They persuasively illuminate the social logics by which local notables adapted to adverse political circumstances to cultivate a participatory political culture over thirty years. It's remarkable in one sense that Berlin tolerated the refractory attitudes of its appointed councilors, for so many bit the hand that fed them. But Prussia understood the social depth of the Rhenish institutions and had to abide their political charge. The *Verflechtungen* of this study – France/Rhineland, Rhineland/Prussia, city/region – open new sightlines to gauge the province's political culture, and it further invites comparative study. Historians of Western Europe, then, should take note of this incisive study, if not also its highly informative footnotes and bibliography.

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