

## [Friedman on Williamson, 'The British in Interwar Germany: The Reluctant Occupiers, 1918-30'](#)

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**David G. Williamson.** *The British in Interwar Germany: The Reluctant Occupiers, 1918-30*. Second Edition. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. Illustrations. 360 pp. \$130.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4725-9582-9.

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David G. Williamson's second edition of *The British in Interwar Germany: The Reluctant Occupiers, 1918-30*, first published in 1991, is encyclopedic in scope. It presents an extraordinarily detailed account of military, administrative, and diplomatic decisions on the part of British occupiers, as well as the realities within which they worked. The British, directing their operations first from Cologne and then from Wiesbaden, were there to enforce the Treaty of Versailles. As indicated by the subtitle "reluctant occupiers," Williamson argues that they were pulled into continental politics and, more pointedly, into a mediator role between France and Germany.

Reluctance forms the springboard for Williamson's analysis. Britain's territorial ambitions were global whereas France's were European. The British were thus forced into an unwanted mediatory position, trying to soften the harsh French line while enforcing the treaty. Their own aim was to preserve the balance of power on the continent, fearing looming Bolshevism in the East and hoping for a stable, peaceful Germany. This made them more receptive to German attempts to revise the Treaty of Versailles, as Germany could check both French and Bolshevik ambitions. On the ground, Williamson argues, this resulted in a disinterested benevolence on the part of British occupiers, fostering relatively good relations between troops and civilians. Although the British failed to keep the peace in the region with the Ruhr crisis, the crisis proved to be a turning point. When the French acceded, British goals of German economic recovery and territorial integrity began to be realized. With the Dawes Plan and the Treaty of Locarno, Germany's foreign relations slowly began to normalize, yet enough concern remained about Germany's disarmament that British troops remained stationed in the Rhineland, the last personnel leaving in 1930.

Williamson identifies five distinct phases of the British occupation: an immediate, assumedly temporary occupation of the Cologne Zone, the Treaty of Versailles's ratification and the beginnings of Britain's mediator role, the Ruhr crisis, the Dawes Plan and Treaty of Locarno, and a prolonged withdrawal. He handles progression through these phases on a diplomatic level and from a British perspective. As a result, the book does not explicitly engage with other literature on the interwar period with a more continental focus. Such classics as Detlev Peukert's *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity*, published in English in 1992, Eugen Weber's *The Hollow Years: France in the 1930s* (1994), or more recent scholarship, such as Annemarie Sammartino's *The Impossible Border: Germany and the East, 1914-1922* (2010), might have proved useful interlocutors and lend

crucial German and French interwar perspectives.

This case study nevertheless hints at larger issues. Williamson addresses relevant comparisons—Inter-Allied Military Control Commission policies in Germany outside the Cologne Zone, British colonial policy in general, and the politics of occupation with an eye to World War II. The way Germany is treated, certainly by the military and diplomatic officials in question, but also to some extent by the author himself, is as a sort of colony. Occupation is inherently violent—the book acknowledges the occasional deadly accident—but the overall impression is surprisingly positive. British occupation troops were well tolerated by the populace because the geopolitical stakes for Britain were low. Unlike in France’s case, there existed little motivation for revenge on political or individual levels.

Williamson’s source base runs the gamut from local to geopolitical, often through an administrative lens. This “history from above” presents an almost hermetically sealed focus on the case study. It refrains from speeding ahead to the interwar period’s inevitable end and abstains from foreshadowing, and this is valuable in itself. In the introduction, Williamson states his intent to integrate social history into the diplomatic narrative; this perspective is gestured at through some subaltern sources but not fully included on its own terms. It would have benefited from dialogue with such scholarship as Nicoletta Gullace’s *The Blood of Our Sons*, Martin Pugh’s *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain, 1914-1999*, and especially Julia Roos’s article “Women’s Rights, Nationalist Anxiety, and the ‘Moral’ Agenda in the Early Weimar Republic.”[1] However, it is difficult to criticize the book for limitations so clearly acknowledged by its stated scope.

*The British in Interwar Germany* would serve well as a reference for scholars of the interwar period and of occupations in general. Williamson gives a blow-by-blow account of the British occupation with a wealth of information; the sober, calculating, pragmatic attitude the author ascribes to the occupiers seems to inform his own writing, which prizes attention to detail over interpretation.

Note

[1]. Nicoletta Gullace, *The Blood of Our Sons: Men, Women and the Renegotiation of British Citizenship during the Great War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain, 1914-1999* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000); and Julia Roos, “Women’s Rights, Nationalist Anxiety, and the ‘Moral’ Agenda in the Early Weimar Republic: Revisiting the ‘Black Horror’ Campaign against France's African Occupation Troops,” *Central European History* 42, no. 3 (September 2009): 473-508.

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