

The Rise of National Socialism in the Bavarian Highlands:  
A Microhistory of Murnau, 1919–1933. By Edith Raim. Routledge, 2022.  
244 pp.

Acclaimed historian Edith Raim, a scholar of Nazi-era Germany and lecturer on contemporary history at the University of Augsburg, has undertaken a micro-historical approach which challenges prevailing understandings of the rise of the NSDAP in Weimar Germany. She calls into question the common perception that rural Catholics resented the rising tide of National Socialism and were less inclined to vote for Hitler and his party. To reveal other factors which may have influenced Germans apart from the urban-rural and Catholic-Protestant divides, she examines the interwar history of the small Bavarian town of Murnau (today Murnau am Staffelsee). This town is particularly interesting because, contrary to what the grand narrative would suggest, rural Catholic Murnau was aligned with the Nazi party from very early on, while neighboring towns were less so.

Raim divides her book into four chronological parts, each of which offers a detailed overview of political, economic, and cultural developments. As the discussion covers a period of more than 15 years, Raim's account differs from earlier microhistories, which are often centered around specific criminal cases. She is well aware of this detail, and she notes in the Introduction that twentieth-century microhistory is still something of a new genre with its own challenges. The extended timespan and microhistory approach, however, hardly efface the agency of individuals. In fact, this is a pivotal point that Raim makes throughout the book. She aims to put more instances of "everyman" agency into the histories of the twentieth century, which tend to be driven by an impetus towards grand narratives. Raim delivers on this aim, which is arguably the most important and innovative aspiration underlying her narrative. Individual forces, however, come together with those which mobilized a whole community for a cause or rather, in the case of Murnau, against a cause, specifically that of the Weimar Republic.

The first chapter offers an overview of Murnau before the war with a focus on the composition of the population and the power dynamics within the town. The second provides a summary of events from 1918 to 1923. The reader comes to know the entrepreneurial Bavarian town, in which individuals who belonged to the middle and upper classes held near absolute political and social power. World War I had a huge impact on the town's community, as many male citizens (more than the German average) died on the frontline and injured veterans returned to the town in 1918.

The collapse of the monarchy and the proclamation of the Bavarian Soviet Republic in 1919 exacerbated sentiments of despair and anger. The backlash against new ideas and the social upheaval in the fundamentally traditional highlands were immediate and long-lasting. The *völkisch* movement, which rested on the pillars of social traditionalism, antisemitism, anti-republicanism, and the *Dolchstoß* myth, emerged almost immediately, and the NSDAP fed on this sentiment from the outset.

It was crucial in these times that prominent individuals in Murnau, such as leaders of the social clubs and influential figures in the local press, became ardent Nazi supporters themselves. By 1923, when hyperinflation peaked and the Beer Hall Putsch was orchestrated, Murnau was lost to *völkisch* and specifically National Socialist beliefs. The existence of a decent number of alehouses in the town where people could gather and the inclination of retired or discharged officers to retreat to a conservative milieu gave this movement even more momentum.

The third chapter details how the relative stability in Germany in the mid-1920s did not change anything substantially in Murnau when it came to politics. There were two reasons for this. First, pro-NSDAP community leaders were already entrenched in Murnau, and though they faced a few setbacks, they were nonetheless able to maintain local party influence even after the failed coup attempt. Second, the 1920s did not really “roar” in the highlands. Because of the prevailing sense of economic insecurity, fear of falling incomes and falling social status was nigh universal among members of the Murnau middle class. This gave rise to a campaign against department store chains, for example, where antisemitism again was often used.

Finally, the fourth chapter examines how the NSDAP managed to achieve an absolute majority among the voters of the town. While their direct involvement in local council politics turned out to be a half-success at best, their grip was so strong that Murnau residents preferred antisemitic tropes to the facts they were perfectly able to see with their own eyes. During the Great Depression, a Jewish benefactor fully funded a hospital for the town, creating employment for many destitute workers. He was commemorated on a plaque for his gratuity (which was taken down when the Nazis took over the country), but the whole affair did not affect Murnau voter preferences. It did not help that a pivotal local bank went bankrupt, deepening the economic crisis in the region. Furthermore, the Nazi instigators of a local mass brawl were let go with near impunity by the courts. If

anyone in Murnau was still on the fence about the power of the NSDAP and the precariousness of the Republic, this also seemed to offer a clear answer.

I have two minor concerns about Raim's otherwise excellent book. The first concerns a phenomenon I personally would have liked to have read a bit more about. Based on the story Raim tells, Murnau citizens were fluidly alternating between two collective identities, loyal subjects to an all-German ("Prussian," nonetheless) ruler on the one hand and rebels against an unjust tyrant on the other, evoking heroes of local peasant rebellions. This switch depended on whether the ruling party in Berlin suited their ideological communal preferences. On the surface, this suggests a very utilitarian and opportunistic approach, which is not something one would expect from a small rural town, even putting pro-Nazi sentiments aside.

My second reservation, however, concerns the conclusion of the book. Raim contends that Murnau offers an example of how Weimar democracy gradually eroded and died, but I would argue that, based on her findings, this is not quite the case. Even if NSDAP candidates did not win an absolute majority in the town before November 1932, Murnau was already a lost cause. Apart from a few fledgling years in the early 1920s, local politics was dominated by the Nazi party or its stand-in formation, the *Völkischer Block*. Interwar Murnau clearly consistently resented and detested the Republic, and supporters of pro-Weimar parties were in the permanent minority once the local elites put their lot in with the far-right after 1923. Even if one argues that this had happened because the pro-Weimar parties had given up on Murnau, this does not necessarily prove Raim's point. Democracy was not slowly suffocated on the shores of the Staffelsee. It died in its infancy.

András Patrik Erdős  
ELTE Doctoral School of History  
erdandrasp@gmail.com