

Einstein in Berlin

Dieter Hoffmann: Einstein's Berlin: In the footsteps of a genius. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013, xiv+177pp, \$45.00 PB

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Books about Einstein abound but they sell. Perhaps more than with other subjects, if you want to publish a book about Einstein, you need to delimit your subject matter and target a sizeable audience. Topobiographies, as one might call them, that is, biographies with a focus on a specific location, are a popular way to meet this challenge. You are cutting down your subject matter to manageable proportions and you are addressing a naturally defined readership. With Einstein, topobiographical works almost constitute a genre.

Let me mention some examples. Carl Seelig wrote a book about Einstein in Switzerland (Seelig 1952). Max Flückiger (1974) followed his example with a book specifically about “Albert Einstein in Bern.” For Einstein’s Berlin years, not a biography, but a collection of sources was presented in the year of the hundredth anniversary of his birth by Christa Kirsten and Hans-Jürgen Treder (1979). Less topographically constrained, Jamie Sayen (1985) wrote about “Einstein in America.” In 2005, the world celebrated the one-hundredth anniversary of Einstein’s miracle year. So in that year, many books about Einstein were published. For example, Alexis Schwarzenbach (2005) wrote another book about Einstein in Switzerland. Ann Hentschel and Gerd Grasshoff (2005) published another book about Einstein in Bern. That year also saw some more publications on Einstein’s years in Berlin. Thomas Levenson (2003) took the lead with a book entitled simply “Einstein in Berlin.” Hubert Goenner (2005) followed with a book with the same title, and Dieter Hoffmann (2006) called his version “Einstein’s Berlin.” Levenson’s book was published in America; Goenner’s and Hoffmann’s books came out in Germany. Hoffmann’s book has now been translated into English.

The motives and agendas of authors of topobiographical works are as diverse as the motives and agendas of authors of regular biographies. But in the history of science, why would one focus specifically on a scientist and the city or country he or

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she lived in? In some of the examples mentioned, there is a more or less explicit assumption at work. The locale in which a scientist moves can explain, to some extent it is believed, features and characteristics of the intellectual attitudes and achievements of the scientist. Any original work in the sciences is always a reaction to a received state of affairs and that state of affairs is transmitted to the creative individual via people (family, teachers, colleagues, acquaintances, friends, and enemies) as well as institutions (schools, colleges, academies, and religious communities) and cultural media (dailies, lectures, debates, movies, and theatres). In all generality, this is a truism, but for topobiographical works, the assumption is a stronger one. The transmission is assumed to be specific to the city or country in the period under consideration. In Einstein's case, his years in Berlin (1914–1932) coincide with his rise to international fame and to his becoming the household name known to every child on the street. Putting the 18 years that Einstein spent in Berlin into the context of the history and culture of that city raises indeed a number of interesting questions. First off, the city itself underwent a remarkable development during those years, being as it was the center of German history from the height and demise of a monarchy to the rise and demise of a first democracy, involving the First World War. It also was home to the academic and scientific institutions in which Einstein moved. He came to Berlin accepting a call to become a member of the prestigious Prussian Academy of Sciences. His position as a member of the Academy implied a full salary as well as faculty privileges with the university. The Berlin University was one of the largest of the country and home institution for some of the leading physicists and mathematicians of the time. Fritz Haber, Max von Laue, Walther Nernst, Max Planck, and Emil Warburg, to name just some more important figures, were his direct colleagues in the Academy or at the university. In addition, Einstein was made the director of a Kaiser-Wilhelm-Institute for Physics, with funding provided mainly by a private entrepreneur. But there were also institutions of cutting-edge experimental science. Thus, Einstein was a member of the board of trustees of the Imperial Institute of Physics and Technology, the *Physikalisch-Technische Reichsanstalt*, at the time the largest physics institute of the world and a leading institution in precision physics and technology. It was here that at the turn of the century, Otto Lummer and Ernst Pringsheim had performed high-precision measurements of blackbody radiation, which were decisive for the discovery of Planck's radiation formula, and it was here where people like Hans Geiger, Walther Bothe, and Walther Meissner performed some of the most advanced experiments investigating the quantum properties of matter in the 1920s. And there were other institutions such as the AEG Research Laboratories, the Archenhold Observatory, and the so-called Einstein Tower for solar research, which made Berlin a center of the physical sciences during Einstein's tenure.

Hoffmann's book is appropriately titled "Einstein's Berlin"; it is not an attempt to give a portrait of the city in its own right. It is also not a high-flying essay with an explicit thesis of Berlin's significance for Einstein's development. It is organized somewhat arbitrarily by locations, much like a tourist guide with information as to which subway line connects to the place at hand but little scholarly apparatus. But less than a tourist guide, Hoffmann did not include a map of the city, like Hentschel and Grasshoff (2005) did, with information on the whereabouts of the different

places, which would have been useful. The locations are grouped, rather arbitrarily, according to Einstein's apartments, workplaces, places of political activity, and friends and acquaintances. The book is at its best when Hoffmann goes off tangent and relates the biographies of lesser known figures which nevertheless played important roles in Einstein's environment, such as Hugo Andres Krüss, a bureaucrat in the Prussian Ministry of Culture. Hired as an assistant to Friedrich Althoff, Krüss quickly rose through the ranks of the ministry to become the director of the university division and later managing director of the State Library. He was a central contact person for Einstein from his initial appointment to the various matters dealing with the Einstein Tower, the Einstein Donation Fund, his many international travels, or the Committee of Intellectual Cooperation of the League of Nations. Their collaboration was largely successful in many of these affairs but not without tension, as witnessed by Einstein referring once to his contact person at the ministry as the "silly and conceited Mr. Krüss." It is with this kind of background information that a picture of Berlin acquires contours as the background to Einstein's activities. But Hoffmann makes no attempt to interpret the bits and pieces of information that he presents in describing the various places of Einstein's life in Berlin. About the fact that Einstein in Berlin was interacting with famous colleagues, scholars, writers, poets, actors, and influential politicians, Hoffmann only writes: "brilliant minds simply attracted other brilliant minds," and he largely leaves it at that. Hoffmann was born in Berlin and raised and educated in the Eastern part of the city when there were two German states. One of the aims of his book, that he explicitly states, is to show "what scientific and intellectual culture Berlin lost through the crimes of National Socialism and the destruction of World War II." Indeed, Hoffmann does not fail to point out how shabbily some of the institutions, like the Prussian Academy which had pulled Einstein to the city in the first place, treated him once the winds were blowing the other way.

The book was translated from the German original of 2006 (Hoffmann 2006), and some of the more pertinent secondary literature on Einstein that appeared since then was added to the bibliography but not, as far as I can see, incorporated in the text. Nor has an attempt been made to update the text with information available from three more volumes (10, 12, 13) of the *Collected Papers of Albert Einstein* that have appeared since then, covering Einstein's Berlin years from May 1920 to March 1923 (Buchwald et al. 2006, 2009, 2012). Hoffmann could then, for instance, have pointed out the relevance of cutting-edge low-temperature research done at the *Physikalisch-Technische Reichsanstalt*, or mention Einstein's collaboration with Walther Nernst on refrigerators. Hoffmann could then also have taken out a throwaway remark in the not very original (but luckily rather brief) passages on Einstein's relationship to "the gentle sex." With the expiry of the embargo in 2006 on personal correspondence given to the Einstein Archives by Margot Einstein and the publication of pertinent documents in the same year in volume 10 of the *Collected Papers*, the entire Einstein Archive is now open to the public, and no further correspondence "is probably still in safekeeping at the Einstein Archive in Jerusalem." This is also the case for the correspondence with Betty Neumann, with whom Einstein had an affair in 1923–24. The relevant correspondence is available to the public, too, and will be included in the forthcoming volume 14 of the

Collected Papers. These critical comments notwithstanding, Hoffmann's book provides a detailed, engaged, and competent source of information on Einstein's years in Berlin and succeeds in its aim "to convey how his life and work were linked with the scientific and social life of the city: how strongly Einstein was bound within a 'Berlin network'."

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