

Hugo von Kupffer: A Pioneer of Modern Reporting in Berlin

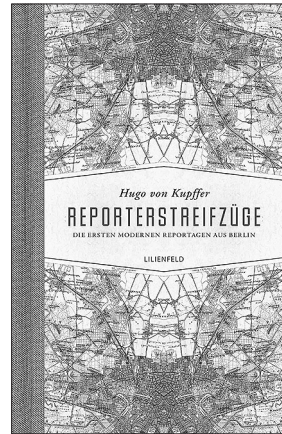
Reporterstreifzüge: Die ersten modernen Reportagen aus Berlin (Reporter strolls: The first modern reportages from Berlin) by Hugo von Kupffer. Edited with an afterword by Fabian Mauch. Düsseldorf: Lilienfeld Verlag, 2019. Footnotes. Editorial Note. Credits. Hardback, 272 pp. €22.00; USD\$24.14.

Reviewed by Kate McQueen, University of California Santa Cruz, United States

When the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, commonly known as the St. Louis World's Fair, flung open its gates in the spring of 1904, thousands of journalists descended upon the city. They came, not simply as reporters but as participants in the World's Press Parliament. This international convening at the fair aimed to promote journalistic professionalization and cooperation across borders—a “universal journalism,” to borrow a phrase from the Parliament's Committee on Resolutions, which outlined a vision for a special committee of seven attendees of the 1904 Parliament to devise a plan for a permanent “confederation” among international members of the press that would take that vision forward.

Five thousand delegates from thirty-seven countries arrived. But only two non-Anglo-Americans rose to the ranks of the World's Press Parliament's higher office and special committees. One of those was Hugo von Kupffer (1853–1928), chief editor of the *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, then arguably Germany's most-read newspaper. Kupffer's elevated position reflected his standing as an elder statesman of the profession. In fact, his influence on the German-language press would be difficult to overstate. Kupffer played an outsized role in developing one of the country's first mass newspapers, serving as editor-in-chief for the *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger's* first four decades. He was also one of the first German journalists to adopt modern, first-person reporting methods—strategies he learned on his first newspaper job with the *New York Herald*, from 1875 to 1878.

The *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger's* founding in 1883 afforded Kupffer an opportunity to transplant these soon-to-be universal strategies into a regularly appearing section called “*Reporterstreifzüge*,” which loosely translates as “reporter strolls.” With these articles, Kupffer wrote a few years later, “I envisioned the real American ‘reporter,’ who exists in name only here, and who, due to our almost still embryonic, heavily constricted, sometimes even antiquated press conditions, cannot yet thrive on Ger-



man soil.”

The ephemeral nature of newsprint can make it difficult to locate and appreciate such pioneering moments of transfer. But thanks to publisher Lilienfeld Verlag, Kupffer’s efforts are now readily available to today’s readers of German. *Reporterstreifzüge: Die ersten modernen Reportagen aus Berlin* (Reporter strolls: The first modern reportages from Berlin) is a collection of twenty-five articles originally published in the *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger* between 1886 and 1892. It builds on an 1889 collection of similar title—*Reporterstreifzüge: Ungeschminkte Bilder aus der Reichshauptstadt* (Reporter strolls: Unvarnished pictures from the imperial capital)—by adding twelve previously uncollected articles, a bibliography, a notes section that decodes some rather charming, antiquated vocabulary, and editor Fabian Mauch’s helpful, historically contextualizing afterword.

The articles featured in this volume accomplish two things. They demonstrate Kupffer’s reporting and writing style—a rendering of on-scene observations interspersed with interview-harvested information and dialogue. They also display corners of Berlin that typical readers, then and now, would find unfamiliar. It is worth noting that Kupffer is not a Benjamin-style *flâneur*, nor a “raging reporter” in the model of Kupffer’s more famous journalistic descendant, Egon Erwin Kisch. Kupffer’s explorations are purposeful and less concerned with the city’s seedy underbelly than with the unseen but respectable world of the municipal. He takes his readers inside the city’s canalization (189–98) and water purification systems (223–39). He visits the *Städtische Desinfektions-Anstalt*, the city-operated institute responsible for purifying all manner of household objects of infectious disease (166–74). He knocks on doors with the city’s census gatherers (160–65).

The most attention-grabbing articles in the collection do, however, find a way to connect civic administration with the more sensational topics one can assume appealed to his target audience. Kupffer attends a day of trials at the local criminal court (113–20). He goes inside two prisons, one for men (136–47) and one for women (199–207). He tours the city morgue (104–112). The volume’s most hair-raising piece is a long profile of the city executioner, Herr Krauz, complete with a description of a beheading by sword.

Despite the occasionally gruesome material, the articles are surprisingly prim. Kupffer’s access is city-sanctioned, and his interview subjects are usually civil servants, whom he approaches with little skepticism. As a result, there is a “public service announcement” quality to his work, flavored with an additional dose of local patriotism. This is perhaps to be expected in a newspaper like the *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, which explicitly marketed itself as being “above partisanship.” For more critical explanatory work, readers at the time would have needed to consult a more left-leaning publication.

The collection is also free of literary conceit. Like many of his contemporary journalists in Germany, Kupffer studied literature and in his youth and fostered aspirations to be an author in the literary sense. Yet, coming into his own as a reporter, he accomplished a complete reversal. In the foreword to the original collection, Kupffer assessed his work as less of an “oil painting” than an “un-retouched photograph.” He

wrote not for the feuilletonist's bourgeois audience, who enjoyed an elegant turn of phrase, but for the petit-bourgeois and working-class reader who needed, as Hendrik Michael points out, an "everyday resource" to help navigate Berlin's rapid growth. The city had not yet fully evolved into a metropolis but was certainly on the rise; its population tripled to nearly three million during Kupffer's professional lifetime.

Kupffer had the foresight to understand that his work might hold, as he writes in his foreword, a "cultural-historical" rather than a literary value. And it is true that this volume provides a fascinating window into a now utterly unfamiliar Berlin—a city that still faced diphtheria and typhus, retained an executioner (37–42), and reserved a regular "ladies day" at court, exclusively to hear the cases of female defendants (113–20). The new volume does a beautiful job of preserving that value, and not only through its well-researched and imminently readable afterword. Lilienfeld Verlag has provided the book with an attractive feel and design and even created a digital trailer for the publicity campaign. It feels correct for Kupffer's journalism to be reintroduced by a trade—rather than a scholarly—publisher, with a more general audience in mind. Because Lilienfeld Verlag also published the collected work of legendary German trial reporter Sling, *Der Mensch, der Schiesst* (The man who shoots) in 2014, German press historians can hold out hope that additional forgotten treasures of journalism may soon find their way to a new and broader audience. It would be a delight to see other trade publishers follow Lilienfeld's example, in Germany and beyond.