

Featured Reviews

The Oxford Handbook of Modern German History. Edited by Helmut Walser Smith. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. xvii + 863. Cloth \$175.00. ISBN 978-0199237395.

Helmut Walser Smith's *Oxford Handbook of Modern German History* (OHMGH) is a very rich and up-to-date reference work, written by thirty-five carefully selected experts in the field. It will be invaluable not only for historians but also for scholars and teachers in Cultural Studies and literature who may wish to have it on hand for easy reference once a less expensive paperback version is published. Given this richness, the reviewer faces an almost impossible task of doing justice to it in just a few pages. Still, let me try to offer the reader of this interdisciplinary journal what is, I hope, a fair summary of what the OHMGH is trying to do, followed by comments on the main sections, on a number of individual articles, and, finally, on the Handbook's overall design.

Smith starts off with a fanfare by proclaiming in his first sentence that the volume "departs in significant ways from previous histories of modern Germany." Not without some pride, he points firstly to the fact that it has been "put together by an international team of scholars, with historians from Germany, Great Britain, the United States and other nations, suggesting the diversity of scholarship and the global context of the modern discipline of history." Secondly, he notes that the OHMGH—following the approach of Christopher Alan Bayly—"represents a novel attempt to place German history in a deeper international and transnational setting than has hitherto been the case." This means in particular that the contributors do not have a fixation about "the *Sonderweg* debate—the question of whether Germany took a special and mistaken path to modernity, resulting in World War I, World War II, and the Holocaust." Rather, the contributions "emphasize the embeddedness and the impact of German history in and on wider developments and render these qualities as central organizing principles of modern German history." This does not "preclude showing how German history differed from other national histories, but it allows us to see these differences in a more complex and international field." Students are therefore encouraged "to develop a catholic sense of 'family resemblances' to other histories." Referring to Ludwig Wittgenstein, Smith wants them to see "a wider range of likeness even while retaining a concept of difference" (all quotes in paragraph from p. 1).

Thirdly, the volume is not concerned with the traditional "chronological markers" of modern German history, i.e., 1871, 1918, 1933, 1945/1949, and 1989/1990. It begins instead with the mid-eighteenth century in order to root the enterprise more deeply in the German past. The 1860s then form the next significant "marker," with

1941 as a major “vanishing point”—or *Fluchtpunkt* (a term discussed later in this review). For the post-1945 decades, the periodization is more conventional, focusing on the two Germanys that became reunified in 1990. The *OHMGH* thus starts with three “overarching chapters on place and on people with the former showing the changing representation of German homelands and the latter focusing on gender as constitutive but historically changing,” followed by “four chronological markers which separate two long periods of time (1760–1860 and 1860–1945), and two shorter periods (1945–1989 and 1989 to the present)” (2).

These divisions are designed to make “nation-state sovereignty into a decisive marker as well as a problem of modern German history.” Thus, while the concept of a German nation can be traced back to the “early sixteenth century,” German nationalism was “at best a late eighteenth-century invention.” Although this German nationalism posited a necessary “congruence between a German nation and a German state,” it was only in 1871 that the German nation-state was created “in a world of multinational and overseas empires.” The “pull of empire, including dominion over peoples considered inferior,” is then said to have “shaped the context in which Germany’s subsequent political history unfolded.” Accordingly, the nation-state “plays a prominent role in this Handbook” (all quotes from p. 2). However, Smith continues, “bringing that experience of the nation and state together in one chronological arc” means placing “less stress on the undeniable importance of specific governments, regimes, and revolutions.” Rather “it emphasizes continuity, and sets this continuity not in the context of social structure or the history of everyday life, but in terms of the history of the nationalizing state, inter-state violence, and global war” (7).

In light of this vision of modern German history and of Smith’s brief comparisons with the Japanese, French, and British experiences of nation-state building and consolidation, it is worth bearing in mind his widely discussed study *The Continuities of German History: Nation, Religion, and Race across the Long Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 2008), in which he introduced the concept of the “vanishing point” of 1941, a chronological marker that also seems to underlie the *OHMGH*. He sees it as an aid, taken from the development of three-dimensional painting, that helps the historian recognize a perspectival point crucial for the structure and unfolding of a larger historical process—in this case, the history of modern Germany, with its escalation of nationalist state violence and eventual resort to war, which culminated in the Holocaust.

This is how Smith deals with the question of continuity, and neither he nor his contributors challenge the *Sonderweg* argument head-on—essentially following Geoff Eley, who asserted that this concept has been largely discredited and should be given an unceremonious burial. This call has no doubt had an enormous influence on an entire generation of historians of modern Germany who entered the profession from the 1980s, when it became almost *de rigueur* to move into the underdeveloped field

of a socio-cultural *Alltagsgeschichte* "from below" and to dissociate oneself from a concept of continuity that an early postwar generation of historians had first taken up in the English-speaking world. That approach to German history was reflected, for example, in Leonard Krieger's writings in the 1950s and later in the work of Fritz Fischer and his students in Hamburg, as well as in that of the "Bielefeld School" around Hans-Ulrich Wehler. Arguably the most striking statement on the *Sonderweg* is still to be found in Gordon Craig's *Germany: 1866–1945* (Oxford, 1978). He viewed the 1860s as the starting point of a major German divergence that ended in 1945, and concluded—not entirely plausibly—that Adolf Hitler had, after demolishing everything, restored to the Germans "the options that they had had a century earlier." And this time "they were not entirely bereft of guidance" (Craig, 764) when making their renewed choice between Western-style parliamentarism and Prussian authoritarianism.

Against the background of the seismic shifts that Smith identifies in his Introduction, the contributors to Parts I and II wrestle with the question of continuity in a different way from that of Craig. Readers looking for useful surveys will find Robert von Friedeburg's "Origins of Modern Germany," Celia Applegate's "Sense of Place," and Ann Goldberg's "Women and Men, 1760–1960" stimulating for their insights into long-term trends. The eight articles in Part II, some of which go back as far as the mid-eighteenth century, focus more specifically on military, intellectual, transnational, economic, demographic, religious, and literary developments through the 1860s.

The contributors to Part III then deal with sociocultural and political change under the large umbrella of the newly founded German nation-state of 1871. Two articles devoted to economic developments connect with James Brophy's analysis in Part II of "The Great Transition, 1750–1860," which he views as a protracted process "entangled in continuity as well as in change" (190). Having presented the macroeconomic picture, supported by a number of tables, Cornelius Torp discusses the structural peculiarities of German capitalism and the rise of the industries of the Second Industrial Revolution (with a few general comparisons to Anglo-American ways of doing business), before examining some of the socioeconomic consequences, such as class conflict and the beginnings of globalization. Adam Tooze then offers a digest of "The German Economy in an Era of Crisis and War, 1917–1945" in a mere twenty pages. Given that the importance of this topic has not been at the center of research and teaching in recent decades, his *tour de force*, though very readable, could easily have been expanded by a few more pages to give users of the Handbook a sense of what Walther Rathenau meant when he insisted that "die Wirtschaft ist unser Schicksal." More intangible factors, such as culture and faith, are at the other end of the spectrum. Here Rebekka Habermas's "Piety, Power, and Powerlessness: Religion and Religious Groups in Germany, 1870–1945" is particularly well documented and deserves special mention as a worthwhile read.

It is on page 527 that we finally reach two articles explicitly concerned with Smith's "vanishing point." Starting with "mass death" in World War I, Thomas Kühne treats the Nazi "war of extermination" as a case of "nation-building through genocide." In light of the recent books by Kühne and Michael Wildt on the "real existing Nazi folk community," it is a contribution that will lend itself to lively discussion. Under the title "The Three Horseman [sic] of the Holocaust," William Hagen similarly focuses on antisemitism, "imperial violence," and the concept of *Volksgemeinschaft* as a political-ideological force in the German nation-state. While most of the other authors do not position themselves very clearly in the historiographical field within which they are working, Hagen explicitly defines his arguments as "an interpretive response to current and recently published broad-gauged synthetic literature." He then adds: "The works highlighted here, both in text, notes, and bibliography, comprise a dialogue and debate so that on issues of interest to readers it is recommended that they compare the relevant studies" (566). There is more good material in the *OHMGH* on these issues, and I will return to their significance for modern German history more generally.

Part IV, which covers the postwar years of 1945–89, is the section in which the authors rely on and synthesize the vast amount of recent research on the Allied occupation, the political systems of the two Germanys, religion, and cultural developments. This includes Uta Poiger's piece on "Generations: The 'Revolutions' of the 1960s" and Donna Harsch's "Industrialization, Mass Consumption, and Post-Industrial Society." Not an economic historian like Torp and Tooze, Harsch is most interested in the social impact of the war, e.g., on family structures and changes in social stratification in East and West Germany. The three final contributions look at the vagaries of the "*Annus Mirabilis*: 1989 and German Unification" (David Patton), European integration (Kiran Patel), and the extent to which unified Germany has become a multicultural society (William Barbieri, Jr.). These are, of course, themes relating to the present and future of Germany, where historians find themselves, to some extent, in the shoes of social scientists, even if the latter tend to be more willing to make predictions than ever-cautious historians. Perhaps this is what motivated Barbieri to end his concluding piece on a telling and lighter note—true to the emphasis on continuities of German nationalism at the heart of the Handbook. He recounts how a televised match between Turkey and Germany during the European soccer championships in 2008 was "disrupted during the decisive final minutes of the game when an Alpine storm broke off the transmission of the Swiss feed. In the multicultural society, however, not a minute was missed by the Germans of foreign extraction who were watching the game on Al-Jazeera" (809–10).

Ultimately, the editor and contributors seem to have struggled with two larger conceptual and methodological problems. Holding so many contributors to a deadline and organizing the incoming material cannot have been easy for Smith, who took on

the heroic task of editing a voluminous English-language Handbook, a genre that German historiography first developed over a century ago. But in this respect, it apparently helped him that he has himself not been wedded to micro-historical research (with the possible exception of one of his books: *Butcher's Tale: Murder and Anti-Semitism in a German Town* [New York, 2002]). Time and again he has been more interested in constructing, in almost architectural fashion, new frameworks within which he believes modern German history might be viewed and practiced in the future, with his "vanishing point" hypothesis and now his *OHMGH* being two prime examples. Time will show whether the content of this volume is as novel and as persuasively constructed as the editor claims, or whether it is more an illuminating stocktaking exercise of a particular generation of historians of Germany in the German- and English-speaking worlds. This generation has broadened and deepened our knowledge of the field in very important ways and has often done so in dialectical fashion, i.e., by questioning the findings and arguments of the generation of the 1960s and 1970s.

In the process, the later generation has—to the extent it has been interested in longer-term developments and continuities—also come up against the huge challenge that all historians of modern Germany face: how to comprehend the "vanishing point" of World War II and the Holocaust, which, in many ways, continues to be incomprehensible. Although a number of contributors refer directly or indirectly to the term *Sonderweg*, they continue to reject it—only to reintroduce it through the backdoor as they approach the 1941 "vanishing point." Benjamin Ziemann in his piece on "Germany 1914–1918: Total War as a Catalyst of Change" arrives at the firm conclusion that there was "no 'direct line' from the Jew Count in 1916 to the Holocaust" (385). Fair enough: It is the twists and turns that pose the truly challenging questions to all who teach this period.

This means that this volume reflects an odd situation. Even if the research of many of the contributors has been microscopic, and/or focused on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, most of them will, in the classroom, carry their analysis of modern German history forward into World War II and then into the no less vexing problems of how the Germans emerged from that war. They will highlight "the peculiarities" of modern German history and concede that there was indeed something very peculiar about this nation as the first half of the twentieth century unfolded. To be sure, another generation will come along to construct the course of modern German history in yet another key. Until that time, anyone interested in Germany will read this book with profit for the insights it offers into some of the most challenging "vanishing points" of the modern age.

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