

JYX



This is a self-archived version of an original article. This version may differ from the original in pagination and typographic details.

Author(s): Ahonen, Pertti

Title: Book Reviews : Different Germans, Many Germanies: New Transatlantic Perspectives

Year: 2018

Version: Accepted version (Final draft)

Copyright: © The Author 2017. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of the German

Rights: In Copyright

Rights url: <http://rightsstatements.org/page/InC/1.0/?language=en>

Please cite the original version:

Ahonen, P. (2018). Book Reviews : Different Germans, Many Germanies: New Transatlantic Perspectives. *German History*, 36(1), 120-122. <https://doi.org/10.1093/gerhis/ghx110>

Different Germans, Many Germanies: New Transatlantic Perspectives. Edited by Konrad H. Jarausch, Harald Wenzel and Karin Goihl. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2017. Xii + 328 pp. £92.00 (hardback).

This far-ranging edited volume is constructed around an ambitious intellectual agenda. As Konrad H. Jarausch and Harald Wenzel explain in the introduction, the intention is to challenge prevailing Anglo-American perceptions of modern Germany, particularly an excessive preoccupation with Nazism, war and genocide, which has left many scholars ‘trapped in a negative perception of the past’ (p. 1). To widen the parameters of mainstream trans-Atlantic debate, the editors wish to bring to the fore two alternative paradigms for interpreting German history and present-day society. The first highlights ‘multiple continuities of the German past’ rooted in ‘neglected older traditions’ that have not been sufficiently appreciated in conventional accounts of Germany’s road into the Nazi abyss – and back up again (p. 15). The second stresses ‘the fundamental transformation’ of Germany and the Germans after 1945, propelled primarily by the ‘horrific impact of the Third Reich’ (p. 12). Jarausch and Wenzel call for greater scholarly attention to Germany’s ‘postwar rehabilitation’, a process significantly influenced by the United States, which yielded a successful and progressive Germany that, despite the darkness of its recent past, can now provide ‘positive counterexamples’ to ‘Anglo-American policies’ (p. 17). Overall, the volume claims to contribute to ‘a more complex understanding’ of recent German history by ‘exploring the deep entanglement of its positive and negative aspects’ and by integrating into the analysis a wide range of experiences, including the country’s prolonged interaction with the United States, which the editors read as ‘the encounter of two related but competing modernities’ (p. 17). These varied insights are to emerge from the contributions of North American authors, all but one of them alumni of the Berlin Programme for Advanced

German and European Studies at the Freie Universität Berlin, who are described as members of ‘a younger generation of scholars, less weighted down by traditional baggage’ than older colleagues (p. 3).

How well does *Different Germans, Many Germanies* succeed in fulfilling its ambitious agenda, then? To answer that question, two types of issues require attention: the volume’s coherence and effectiveness (the degree to which it meets the aims set by the editors) and its overall persuasiveness (the degree to which those aims themselves convince).

On the first level, the collection works rather well. With its fifteen contributions, divided into four thematic sections, it manages to cover an impressive range of issues in innovative and insightful ways. The first set of chapters addresses Imperial and Weimar Germany, emphasizing aspects of German society that generated wide interest abroad, especially in North America, both at the time in the years afterwards. These include the *Kaiserreich*’s blueprint for modernity, as interpreted by visiting American observers, which Scott H. Krause explores engagingly, as well as the German model for universal healthcare, whose relevance even for present-day American debates is demonstrated persuasively by Annette F. Timm. The second section focuses on Germany’s recovery after the Second World War, in both East and West. Here Clara Oberle’s interpretation of the emergence of an ‘antifascist myth’ in early postwar Berlin as a complex, interactive and mutually expedient process between Allied occupiers and the local population is especially illuminating. Part three shifts the focus to contemporary Germany in general and to aspects of the so-called ‘German model’ of societal organization in particular. Carol Hager makes the most ambitious contribution here, arguing convincingly that the renewable energy sector has recently given birth to a new kind of German model. It combines the corporatist networks between political and economic elites that characterized the classic West German model with new bottom-up influences rooted in citizen activism whose input has made the system more prone to conflict

and promoted significant technological innovation. The final section, which, according to the authors, addresses aspects of 'German culture' that have 'achieved global renown by inspiring debate elsewhere' (p. 15), is somewhat less thematically coherent than the other three, but that does not detract from the quality of the individual contributions. Sara F. Hall, for instance, delivers a perceptive analysis of the interaction between the emerging German and American film industries from their pre-World War One origins to Weimar cinema's heyday in the 1920s.

What about the volume's wider ambition of reorienting trans-Atlantic German studies away from an allegedly excessive focus on the Third Reich? Here the verdict must remain more mixed, at least in this reviewer's opinion. The editors do make a valid point with their call for greater attention to trajectories of German history other than those easily linkable to the Nazi era, and the complex transformations of the post-1945 period certainly deserve extensive further analysis. However, such new scholarship should not eschew questions of continuity or disruption between the Nazi years and the preceding and succeeding periods of German (and wider European) history or assume that the Third Reich can be bracketed out of the longer narrative, any more than any other historical sub-period can. In this sense the editors' decision to exclude 'any chapters on the Nazi dictatorship' because 'the murderous policies of Hitler's Third Reich are already well-known to Anglo-American readers' (p. 13) seems dubious. The apparent suggestion that enough is now known about the Nazi period is problematic, as is the implication that the horrors of the 1933-1945 period can somehow be fenced off into a separate field of historical investigation, distinct from the rest of Germany's past.

The inherent difficulty of de-centring the Third Reich within German history comes through in some of the contributions, most notably in the final chapter, Michael Meng's nuanced and fascinating exploration of public remembrance and its societal functions in contemporary Germany. In his critical reflections on Germany's commemoration of the Holocaust, Meng applies the notion of two contrasting types of public memory: a memory that 'redeems the nation state from its dark past' and a 'remembrance that introspectively reflects on the past' (p. 300). The former, which Meng sees as characterizing much of Germany's oft-vaunted commemoration of the Nazi era, uses the engagement with history to create a narrative of redemption in which the nation learns from past mistakes in order to move towards a brighter future. Although such redemptive efforts derive from good intentions, they can, potentially, breed new divisions, including those between autochthonous citizens and immigrants that may arise if the correct Holocaust memory becomes a 'disciplining instrument' of sorts which newcomers must obey before integration into the national community can progress (p. 307). Reflective memory, by contrast, is typically local, 'introspective, multidimensional, and multi-temporal', as well as critical of national politics and myths, including the special 'pride' that some have detected in German proclamations of success in dealing with the nation's genocidal past (p. 306). Although Meng does not make the point, his critique of the redemptive memory paradigm could probably also be applied to this volume itself and its premise, cited above, that the horrors of the Third Reich formed the counter-point against which Germany and the Germans have reacted in transforming themselves into a progressive, even exemplary nation state. In this way, Germany's post-1945 reorientations remain rooted in the legacies of the previous era, just as the Nazi years cannot be detached from preceding periods of history. The trajectories and transformations examined in this ambitious and thought-provoking volume deserve a wide readership – but in combination with other

explorations of the longer run of modern German history, in which the years 1933-1945 are also fully embedded.

Pertti Ahonen

University of Jyväskylä