

Helmut Walser Smith (Hrsg.), *The Oxford Handbook of Modern German History* (Oxford Handbooks in History), Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011, XVII + 863 S., geb., 95,00 £.

The dust jacket of the "Oxford Handbook of Modern German History" features a photograph of Hans Haacke's installation, "Germania", as it was displayed at the Venice Biennale in 1993. The background of the piece is a plain white wall on which "Germania" is printed in large letters. The name, of course, evokes Tacitus's first-century work on the Germanic tribes, rediscovered in the fifteenth century at the dawn of German national feeling, as well as the monument featuring a statue of the goddess Germania built near Rudesheim to commemorate the formation of the Kaiserreich, and, most importantly, the megalopolis that Hitler planned as the capital of his "Thousand Year Reich". Extending from this wall towards the viewer is a fragmented surface created when the artist broke up the stone floor of the building housing his installation. Since this is the pavilion constructed for the German contributions to the 1934 Biennale, its partial demolition had particular historical resonance; this was, after all, the floor on which Hitler stood as he admired Nazi Germany's artistic accomplishments. Haacke's work is a sort of anti-monument or, perhaps more accurately, a visual meditation on the problems of monumentalising a national history that is elusive and pervasive, fragmentary and powerful, awkward to traverse but impossible to avoid.

How does one create a handbook for such a history? Handbooks, like monuments, presuppose the ability to define a subject, to give it recognisable form and accessible identity. Germany has always resisted easy definition. When does its history begin? With the "Germans" of Tacitus's imagination? What are its spatial dimensions? Those of the Kaiserreich of 1871 that was so unconvincingly symbolised by the Rudesheim monument? And what is nation's defining narrative? Is it a path towards the ruins of Hitler's grandiose dreams? At various times in Germany's modern history – 1815, 1871, 1933, 1990 – people have thought that they had answers to such questions, only to discover that the questions had reemerged in new forms. Two decades after the creation of yet another new Germany, the publication of the "Oxford Handbook of Modern German History" invites us to reflect once again on the enduring problem of German history's subject and structure.

Helmut Walser Smith, the handbook's editor, has assembled an impressive group of contributors, most of whom, like himself, are in the middle of distinguished academic careers. It is an international ensemble, including scholars from America, Britain, Germany, and a handful of other countries; at least twelve of the 36 contributors do not teach in the country in which they were born. As is inevitable in such ventures, there is some unevenness among the handbook's 35 chapters, but the overall quality is very high, the writing uniformly good, the scholarship sound and up-to-date. For those seeking an introduction to the central themes of modern German history, the handbook will provide a reliable and accessible guide, while more experienced scholars will find here a wealth of stimulating new ideas and provocative interpretations. The editor and his colleagues have every reason to be proud of their collective effort.

After the editor's introduction and three thematic chapters (Robert von Friedeburg on historical origins, Celia Applegate on "senses of place" and Ann Goldberg on gender relations), the handbook is divided into four chronologically-defined sections (1760–1860, 1860–1945, 1945–1989, and Contemporary Germany). The coverage is weighted towards the present: eight chapters are devoted to the hundred years from 1760 to 1860, thirteen to the eighty-five years after 1860, seven to the post 1945 era, and three to contemporary Germany. All in all, half of the book's eight hundred pages of text deal with the period after 1914, and of these more than two hundred are devoted to the years since 1945. This distribution clearly reflects the shift in scholarly focus away from the nineteenth

century, which in the 1970s and 1980s was the most historiographically dynamic era, towards the more recent past.

While these chronological divisions provide the handbook with an indispensable organisational frame, their interpretive significance is limited. A number of chapters do not fit within the chronological boundaries of a section; some begin earlier, others end later. Moreover, most of the familiar dates – 1848, 1871, 1933 – that have conventionally been used to divide the historical narrative do not shape the structure of the chapters. Jonathan Sperber, for example, treats the revolution of 1848 in the context of the Atlantic revolutions that began in 1776. Siegfried Weichlein's stimulating account of national unification, "Nation State, Conflict Resolution, and Culture War" begins in 1850 and ends in 1878; Thomas Mergel's treatment of the rise of Nazism is set within an excellent chapter on "Dictatorship and Democracy, 1918–1939". This does not mean that 1848, 1871, or 1933 are ignored or that their importance is underestimated, but they are analyzed as parts of broader trends and developments, not as "turning points" in a single narrative.

Central to the handbook's purpose and organisation is the problem of the nation: "nation-state sovereignty" Smith writes in his introduction, "is a decisive marker as well as a problem of modern German history". But Smith recognises the limits as well as the importance of the nation-state. Moreover, the nation does not anchor the handbook's narrative. The book begins with Robert von Friedeburg's skeptical reflections on the relationship between Germany's early modern "origins" and its present and ends with Kiran Patel's chapter on Germany and European integration and William Barbieri's on Germany as a multicultural society, both of which implicitly call into question national identity as it was conventionally defined. In between, the nation is more often seen as a problem than as a decisive marker. This is the case, for example, in Christian Jansen's chapter on the formation of nationalism from 1740 to 1850, Pieter Judson's on nationalism in the era of the nation-state, Andrew Port's on the two Germanies after 1949, and Andreas Daum's on the two German states in the international system.

Several of the handbook's chapters reflect the current scholarly emphasis on the transnational and international dimensions of German history. Franz Fillafer and Jürgen Osterhammel treat the "cosmopolitan" trends within the German enlightenment. Ute Planert examines the global context in her chapter on "International Conflict, War, and the Making of Modern Germany, 1740–1815". Sperber, as we have seen, looks at the influence of the Atlantic revolutions in German and Europe. Andrew Zimmermann considers the national and international aspects of racial theory and practice in the age of imperialism. Cornelius Torp explains "the great transformation" of the German economy and society from 1850 to 1914 in terms of both industrialisation and globalisation. And Sebastian Conrad and Philipp Ther show how patterns of demographic mobility and migration "demonstrate the degree to which German history was embedded in transnational processes".

In his forceful and original chapter on "Authoritarian State, Dynamic Society, Failed Imperial Power, 1878–1914" Smith argues that "the essential conflicts of the Kaiserreich involved the contradictory integration of a newly-formed, authoritarian national state, with an exceedingly dynamic and mobile society, into a competitive world of overseas empires in the process of imposing white hegemony on large parts of the globe". About the significance of that fundamental tension between an authoritarian state and a dynamic society I have no doubt, but I wonder if Smith (as well as some of his colleagues) does not somewhat overestimate the salience of imperialism for German foreign and domestic politics. Despite the growing importance of its imperial aspirations and global connections, Germany remained a continental power, deeply imbedded in the European international system. It is surely valuable to stress the transnational dimensions of German history, but the political, economic, cultural, and diplomatic transnational connections that mattered most were European.

It was, after all, primarily European interests and ambitions that drove German involvement in the twentieth century's two great wars. The handbook chapters devoted to the world wars are not much concerned with their origins: the incendiary debates about German war guilt, ignited by Fritz Fischer and his students in the 1960s, have faded away; Fischer himself gets one brief and critical mention. Instead, the contributors to the handbook are interested in the wars' impact on German society, politics, and culture. In his chapter on Germany from 1914 to 1918, Benjamin Ziemann argues that

the war was “a catalyst of change” rather than “a fundamental caesura and immediate cause of rapid change” a conclusion that is not fully supported by his own nuanced account of how the war affected the national community. The national community is also the focus of Thomas Kühne’s chapter “Todesraum: War, Peace, and the Experience of Mass Death, 1914–1945” which shows how “the perpetration of mass violence structured national solidarity”.

As Smith writes in the introduction, the Holocaust “remains at the center of any attempt to understand modern German history”. The murder of Europe’s Jews is touched on by Ziemann, analysed at greater length by Kühne, and is the subject of William Hagen’s chapter, “The Three Horseman of the Holocaust: Anti-Semitism, East European Empire, Aryan Folk Community”. Separately, Hagen argues, anti-Semitism and empire were necessary but not sufficient causes of mass murder, only their combination after 1939 made it possible. An Aryan “Volksgemeinschaft” was Nazism’s ultimate goal: “The degree of its realisation was the decisive test of Hitlerism’s legitimacy, both in the eyes of Nazi rulers and Nazi-inclined ‘Aryan’ subjects”. While Hagen’s chapter is the only one devoted entirely to the subject, the Holocaust casts its dark shadow across many of the contributions including Zimmerman’s account of racism, Ziemann’s “Religion and the Search for Meaning, 1945–1990” and Lutz Koepnick’s “Culture in the Shadow of Trauma?”. Overall the contributors to the handbook reaffirm the Holocaust’s moral urgency and historiographical centrality for German historians, even when they emphasise its origins in imperialism, total war, and mass violence rather than in the peculiar pathologies of German history.

The handbook has four strong chapters on economic developments: James Brophy on “The Great Transition, 1750–1860”, Cornelius Torp on “The Great Transformation: German Economy and Society, 1850–1914”, Adam Tooze on “The German National Economy in an Era of Crisis and War, 1917–1945”, and Donna Harsch on “Industrialisation, Mass Consumption, Post-Industrial Society”. In addition, there are two chapters on demography and migration: Ernest Benz on “Escaping Malthus: Population Explosion and Human Movement, 1760–1884” and Sebastian Conrad and Philipp Ther “On the Move: Mobility, Migration, and Nation, 1880–1948”. All of these contributions are more sensitive to the global aspects of economic and social history than would have been the case a couple of decades ago; most of them include some discussion of gender. Moreover, while the issues of class formation and conflict are not ignored, I think it fair to say that they do not have the salience they once did in either West or East Germany. “Organized capitalism”, “the feudalization of the bourgeoisie”, “the vanguard of the proletariat”, “the lower middle class”, and other once familiar concepts have either disappeared from view or moved to the margins of scholarly concern. Marx remains an important historical figure, but is no longer a powerful historiographical presence.

Nowhere are changes in the scholarly landscape more apparent than in the handbook’s treatment of religion. Until fairly recently, historians of modern Germany – in contrast to their colleagues in medieval and early modern history – were not much concerned with confessional issues. In part this was due to the discipline’s unself-conscious Protestantism; Catholicism seemed to be a subject best left to Catholics, who largely wrote about – and for – one another. Moreover, because they did not fit easily with either the Marxist paradigm of class conflict or the liberals’ emphasis on the essential struggle between left and right, confessional loyalties disrupted the inherent dualism built into most narratives of modern Germany. In the last couple of decades, however, religion has received an increasing amount of attention from scholars, which is reflected in the handbook’s three strong chapters devoted to the subject: George Williamson “Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, 1760–1871: Enlightenment, Emancipation, New Forms of Piety”, Rebekka Habermas “Piety, Power, and Powerlessness: Religion and Religious Groups in Germany, 1870–1945”, and Benjamin Ziemann “Religion and the Search for Meaning, 1945–1990”. Hegel, who believed that the owl of Minerva flew at dusk, would not have been surprised to learn that the scholarly understanding of religious ideas and institutions seems to coincide with a sharp decline in confessional commitment among German Christians. The main fault line in German religious culture no longer divides Protestants and Catholics, or Christians and Jews, but Muslims and everybody else.

Except for religion and for literature (which is well served by chapters by Ritchie Robertson on the period from 1810 to 1890 and by Stephen Dowden and Meike Werner on “The Place of German

Modernism“), the handbook’s treatment of culture is rather limited, not to say perfunctory. The chapters on the postwar period by Uta Poiger, Donna Harsch, and Lutz Koepnick deal with various aspects of popular culture, including lifestyles, patterns of consumption, and film. However, philosophy and political theory, science and humanistic scholarship, music and the visual arts receive very little attention. Of course, omissions are unavoidable in a project like this, where there is always a shortage of space (not to mention time and willing collaborators). In any case, it is usually not very helpful for a reviewer to point out what a book does not contain since there is almost always something more that might or should have been said, and especially in a book that must cover such a subject as vastly complex as the history of modern Germany.

The Oxford handbook reflects a historiography in transition. Its contributors examine many of the problems that have long occupied scholars; racism and genocide, mass violence and war, the fortunes of democracy, the origins of economic development, social inequalities and conflict all retain their significance even if they are often approached from new perspectives. But the authority of the grand narratives that once ordered the German past, posed problems for research, and provided the framework for scholarly disagreements has clearly diminished. The so-called “Sonderweg”, that special path laid out by Germany’s pathological exceptionalism, no longer shapes a vigorous debate about direction of modern German history, largely because German history no longer seems to be a path leading to 1933 or 1945. Smith, for example, concludes his introduction by contrasting the response to Heinrich von Treitschke’s remark in 1879 that everywhere in Germany one hears the phrase the Jews are “our misfortune” with the public reaction to outbreaks of anti-foreigner violence after 1989. “In 1880, a prominent few criticised Treitschke, in Germany in the early 1990s hundreds of thousands of protestors [...] registered their opposition”. These protestors were responding to the events of the moment, but did so in part because they remembered the lessons of the past. Smith, of course, acknowledges that such protests will not end violence and discrimination, yet he believes that the protests do “suggest a popular embrace of the civic work of a society that, for all its deficiencies, has become tolerant of difference, sensitive to the disparities in life chances, and cognizant of its new role in Europe and the world”.

In this new Germany, national history will surely remain an important element in Germans’ efforts to understand who they are. But the handbook suggests that German national history is now a loosely knit fabric in which a number of themes coincide, overlap, and sometimes pull apart. It is easy enough to imagine that some future edition will include new themes – the histories of the environment, law, consumer society, communication networks, perhaps even the emotions. It is more difficult to imagine a new grand narrative that is powerful enough to combine these themes in a single story of the German past.

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