

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Wolfram Fischer with Konrad Fuchs, Bruno Jahn, eds. *Biographische Enzyklopädie deutschsprachiger Unternehmer*. Munich: K.G. Saur, 2004. 1990 pp. EUR 368.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-598-11587-5.



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For over a decade the turn from the formerly prevailing primacy of social and structural approaches to what is termed “cultural history” or “history of cultures and mentalities” has increasingly taken first place in current historiography, at least in quantity. The general trend is obviously a greater emphasis on the influence of great personalities on historical developments. But the “heroes” of this “school” are the great individual thinkers and philosophers who mold the cultural and mental changes responsible for the historical movements and courses of nations and societies, rather than the geniuses of statesmanship and warfare. Consequently, their biographies seem to take up an ever larger place in historical narrative and bibliographies.

This vogue can be detected even in the sub-disciplines of history closely connected with, or dependent on the research of the social sciences, like sociology or economics. Young and not so young scholars tend to turn less attention to macro-economic statistical and econometric analyses, and more to the dominating influence of innovative and risk-daring entrepreneurs—quite an understandable preference in the era of young high-tech tycoons sprouting everywhere like mushrooms after rain. The result in business history is a tendency for it to become a history of businessmen, or in the corresponding German terms: *Unternehmergeschichte* earning prominence in the field of *Unternehmensgeschichte*. The volu-

minous encyclopedia under review may therefore well be the answer to a growing scholarly demand. Its first two volumes contain no less than 9,200 short—only in some cases slightly lengthier—biographical sketches, of (solely deceased) men and women who left their marks on the economic development of German-speaking countries, from the late Middle Ages to the twentieth century. Most of them were selected from the twelve volumes of the *Deutsche Biographische Enzyklopädie*, edited by Walter Killy and Rudolf Vierhaus between 1995 and 2000 and produced by the same publisher, and its supplement (vol. 13) of 2003. Most of them seem to have been carefully re-edited and updated to the latest stand of research, based in some cases even on still unpublished biographies or doctoral theses and their bibliographical sources.

Important to note is the wide scope of those who are defined in the selection as “entrepreneurs.” Its proclaimed aim is “to present an overview of the life and work of owners-entrepreneurs and the leading managers of enterprises—including those who belonged to the state or the communes.... The spectrum comprises ... all economic branches, from agriculture and the handicrafts, where those with artistic orientation, like goldsmiths or printers are somewhat over-represented.... But it includes some professionals as well, as far as they functioned as entrepreneurs or acted in the framework of entrepreneurial business structures. This applies to master-

builders, architects, and engineers, but also to the directors of circuses, as well as to the founders and managers of private theaters, cabarets or film producers, or to journalists who were, simultaneously or for some time, not only the editors but also the managers of publishing firms" (p. vii). The outstanding, maybe even surprising, examples are the painter Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) "whom few would regard as an entrepreneur, but which he indeed was," (p. 212) or the famous Jewish autobiographer Glikl von Hameln (1646-1724, p. 347). Accordingly, in these cases "the emphasis of the biographical entry is on their artistic, rather than on their entrepreneurial achievements" (p. vii).

The reviewer of such a voluminous handbook can, of course, not claim to have read it through from cover to cover. Scanning the 1354 pages of the first two volumes, my sight was naturally caught by some of the more prominent names which momentarily arouse some public interest. One of them is the industrialist Friedrich Flick (1883-1972, p. 280f.), whose name has appeared repeatedly in the contemporary German press in connection with the current exhibition of the art collection of his son Karl-Friedrich in Berlin. The entry, written by Paul Erker (one of the signed contributions in the collection, which comprise only a minor part of all entries) takes up two whole columns. It is a comprehensive and objective description of its subject's impressive career and achievements from 1913 to his death, but at the same time all but a eulogy. Neither the rather dubious business tactics by which Flick cunningly exploited to his benefit the economic straits of the "Fatherland"—like the hyper-inflation of 1923, or the economic crisis of the early 1930s—nor his early connections with the Nazis and the artful manipulation of their regime's economic policies, successfully enriching himself from the spoils of the "aryanization" of Jewish properties before, and the exploitation of the German-occupied countries after 1939 are omitted. The bibliographical notes at the end cite publications up to the year 2000.

In reference to "aryanization," some less satisfactory unsigned examples from the side of its victims are worth mentioning, like the entry of only fourteen lines on Georg Wertheim (1857-1939, p. 1317). The family-owned chain of many department stores, still functioning today under its old name in many German cities, employed up to 100,000 people. The manner of its "aryanization" in 1937 with its depressing details in the business as well in the personal sphere (his non-Jewish wife partaking in the process after her divorce), deserve exactly two-and-a-half lines in this entry, based on a single publication from 1956—this limited coverage despite the widely published

recent litigation set in action by Wertheim's heirs, and the excellent comprehensive study of the family's history published in 1997 by Simone Ladwig-Winters.[1] About the same space is assigned to the "aryanization" of the famous Engelhardt breweries in the entry for its owner-manager Ignaz Nacher (1868-1939, p. 853), despite the detailed accounts of 1989 by Johannes Ludwig.[2] In this case, however, we find a bibliographical reference dating from 2002.[3]

The six hundred pages of the third volume contain the exemplary scholarly apparatus of this edition. All persons who were assigned personal entries in their alphabetical turn appear in chronological order in the timetable, dated from the twelfth century to their respective year of death up to 2003. As the editor rightly points out, this organization "enables an initial insight [into] in what periods entrepreneurs or families of entrepreneurs first appeared on, or disappeared from, the scene" (p. viif.). The spacious indexes of persons and firms include names that do not appear as specific entries in the first two volumes, thus enabling the interested reader to reconstruct linkages of families and/or enterprises that may have changed their names over time by fusion, conglomeration, or other reasons—like Jewish firms at the time of Nazi rule. This identification is also facilitated by the geographical index, beside its providing evidence of specialized "clusters of economic enterprise" (p. viif.).

These carefully compiled data make this encyclopedia a very useful and handy tool, not only for economic historians and their students, but also for genealogical research in other fields. Since its price is almost prohibitive for the individual craftsman, it certainly belongs on the shelves of every reading room in universities and other institutions of higher learning.

Notes

[1]. Simone Ladwig-Winters, *Wertheim. Geschichte eines Warenhauses* (Berlin-Brandenburg: Bebra Verlag, 1997).

[2]. Johannes Ludwig, *Boykott, Enteignung, Mord. Die 'Entjudung' der deutschen Wirtschaft* (Hamburg: Facta, 1989), pp. 15-86; idem, "Der Revolver lag schon auf dem Tisch," *Die Zeit*, April 12, 1989.

[3]. Henning Kahmann, *Die Bankiers von Jacquier & Securius, 1933-1945. Eine rechtshistorische Fallstudie zur 'Arisierung' eines Berliner Bankhauses* (Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang, 2002). I could not find an entry on this bank or its owners.

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