

Sabine Mecking. *Immer treu!: Kommunalbeamte zwischen Kaiserreich und Bundesrepublik.* Essen: Klartext Verlag, 2003. 423 S. EUR 29.00 (broschiert), ISBN 978-3-89861-161-9.



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Continuity among the Ruins

One of the most vexatious issues in modern German historiography has been the relationship of continuity and discontinuity. Various interpretations of the interaction between these two social and historical forces has spawned, among other controversies, intense debates about a German “special path” of development, whether modern Germany is a repeat of Weimar, and the structure and basis of the Final Solution.

Sabrine Mecking in her book on the history of public administration in the Westphalian city of Muenster in the first half of the twentieth century does not hesitate to confront this discussion head-on. Her purpose is to determine whether radical political upheaval, as seen in the years 1918, 1933, and 1945, had any significant impact on the structure and process of bureaucratic administration. She views the governmental official as both an *Amtsperson* and a private person, a place where the public and private spheres intersect. She rejects any general characterization of German civil servants as a whole as futile, given their different backgrounds, career paths, fields of activity and the sheer size of their population. Nonetheless, she contends that analysis of the reactions

of Muenster officials to political change can be an effective tool for answering broader questions of bureaucratic response to widely varying and vastly different “new” regimes. For Mecking, her study is more than just a part of the history of politics and administration in Muenster; it is a demonstration that even under the most adverse historical circumstances, administrative institutions can and will continue to survive. In her eyes, Max Weber’s contention that bureaucracy had become one of the most enduring modern social formations was “valid in reality” (p. 366).

Mecking divides her book into three major chapters: one on the Weimar Republic, a second on the Third Reich, and a third on the Allied occupation and early years of the Bundesrepublik. The content of each chapter is structured in a similar fashion. Besides a discussion of the political and legal events that had the greatest impact on the structure and processes of the bureaucracy, she pays particular attention to the bureaucratic elite, those paid and unpaid officials given the responsibility of overseeing and running administrative operations in the city. She analyzes their social backgrounds, political

affiliations, and age cohorts and reviews the impact of regime change on their careers. She demonstrates that of all three political upheavals described in her book, the soldiers' and workers' revolution of 1918 proved to be the most conservative, with hardly any alterations in personnel occurring in the upper ranks of officialdom. In contrast, both the National Socialists and the Allies were intent on removing the adherents of the previous regime from any role of leadership in the city. She also reviews the structure of the bureaucracy as a whole, providing valuable data on its size and pay scales, as well as the impact of political events on the partisan inclinations, affinities and loyalties of its members.

Mecking is at her best when specifically describing each of the three historical periods. The picture that she paints of Muenster's civil service is one of an immovable social structure whose outward public appearances followed the ideological desires of governmental leaders, but whose core activities remained the same from one regime to the next. In the Weimar Republic, while public administration completed its transition at the top level from honorary to paid officials, precious little else evolved in its composition. Social Democrats and women were unable to break into the ranks of the magistracy that oversaw the administration. Those who headed Muenster's bureaucratic machine in the new democracy were essentially the same legally trained, administrative experts of upper-middle class Catholic background who belonged to the Center Party. Despite all the upheavals of revolution, inflation, and salary and personnel reductions during the Depression, they remained a remarkably cohesive group, resisting virtually all efforts at modifying their perspectives, norms, and behavior. According to Mecking, they remained sympathetic to the monarchical state, were modestly tolerant of Weimar, and proved resistant to the blandishments of National Socialism. She concludes that in all levels of public service in Muenster, the supposed radicalization and nazification of officials that affected both the Reich and state governments simply did not occur. For her, Bernd Wunder's assessment was correct when he wrote, "Weimar, the democracy without democrats, was not destroyed by its officials." [1]

The Nazis, however, were determined not to make the same political mistakes as their liberal and socialist predecessors when it came to civil servants and public administration. Coming into office on a wave of electoral promises to clean out the Weimar "party-book" officials in Muenster's administration, they took rapid and decisive steps to remove virtually the entire bureaucratic

elite from both the Imperial era and the Weimar Republic. They also sought to insert party stalwarts in the middle and even lower ranks of the civil service and to politicize promotional standards and procedures to favor their followers. But even here Nazi efforts at change soon reached definable institutional limits. While party members and sympathizers were certainly given preference in terms of career advancement, very few National Socialists were promoted without the requisite expertise for the position. Far fewer officials were transferred, released or promoted under the provisions of the "Gesetz zur Wiederherstellung des Berufsbeamtentums" of April, 1933, than Nazi propaganda would have suggested. Mecking calculates that during the entire Third Reich in Muenster only 0.9 percent of those employed by the city were removed for racial, political or religious reasons. What the Nazis discovered was that a wholesale intervention into bureaucratic personnel and administrative practices was entirely unnecessary. Whether out of fear, seduction or opportunism, most members of the existing corps of public officials were more than willing to make an accommodation with the new rulers. The party did not need to jeopardize administrative continuity to achieve political loyalty on the part of public servants. Most members of the bureaucracy viewed themselves as essentially "unpolitical" and bound to their oath of loyalty to the state to follow accepted legal and administrative policies and procedures.

Indeed, despite proclamations about de-nazification and a cleansing of Muenster's bureaucracy of all undemocratic elements, the victorious Allies (in Muenster's case the British) after World War II followed closely in their Nazi predecessors' footsteps when it came to taking on an entrenched bureaucracy. While the Allies sought to re-establish continuity with the Weimar Republic by appointing politically untainted officials from that era to replace the magistracy and heads of administrative offices, their early efforts to do away with a career bureaucracy as a pillar of National Social rule soon foundered on the shoals of traditional practice. As Mecking proves, there was no "Stunde Null" in terms of the city's administrative structure, and after 1945 public servants were more a "mortgage" than a support for a new democratic beginning. Nonetheless, officials schooled in anti-democratic thought and beliefs continued to support the operation of the new democratic state just as they had the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich before it.

All of this information leads Mecking to fall on the side of continuity rather than discontinuity in the debate over the course of modern German history. She

cogently reveals that in the course of her research, she could not find in Muenster a single example of where an official left public service on grounds of individual conscience or loyalty to the previous regime. Despite momentous upheaval and shifts in governing regimes and ideologies, most civil servants, whatever their rank, took for granted their loyalty oath. They possessed no political judgments beyond accepting and following the bureaucratic “staendische Norm” (p. 364). She explains this continuity on the basis of the city’s need, regardless of the beliefs of its political leaders, to preserve the professionalism and expertise of a bureaucracy indispensable for maintaining vital public services, as well as the remarkable ability of officials to adapt to changing circumstances, no matter how dramatic their character and extent. She concludes that Muenster’s civil servants experienced state transformation “_Lebensgeschichtlich als Einheit, politisch als Bruch und berufsstaendisch als Kontinuitaet” (p. 368).

While I certainly agree with Mecking about the role of continuity in assessing the course of modern German history, I find her explanation of how bureaucratic tradition was preserved through three significant political upheavals to be wanting in terms of explanatory power. Clearly, public administration in Muenster was a formidable institution that even the most determined political leader could only alter around the edges. How it got to be that way and how it was able to preserve its structures and processes over tumultuous times remains an open question. Mecking admits in the introduction to her book that her story is skewed in part because a rich legacy of documentation for leading officials

is offset by scarce information about ordinary bureaucrats. In fact, the only time that the reader actually gains a sense of the daily life and work of middling and lower civil servants comes in her description of how governmental offices functioned under the Third Reich, when just one Nazi party member at a desk, no matter how lowly in rank, could generate enough fear to stifle discussion, expression of opinions, and quite possibly initiative. But simple fear and opportunistic adaptation to circumstances, layered over with a formal adherence to an oath of loyalty, does not seem sufficient to explain what motivated these men and women to stay at their posts and do their duty regardless of what was happening in the world around them. Issues of motivation and conviction bespeak of a social structure and formation with strong values and norms that commanded an obedience of conviction rather than rational calculation of personal costs and benefits.[2] Greater insight into these issues would have made Mecking’s intriguing book even better and would definitely have shed much greater light on the relationship of continuity and discontinuity in the terrible events of modern German history.

Notes

[1]. Bernd Wunder, *Die Rekrutierung der Beamten-schaft: Eine historische Betrachtung* (Konstanz: Universitaetsverlag Konstanz, 1979).

[2]. Charles Heckscher and Anne Donnelon, eds., *The Post-Bureaucratic Organization: New Perspectives on Organizational Change* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1994).

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