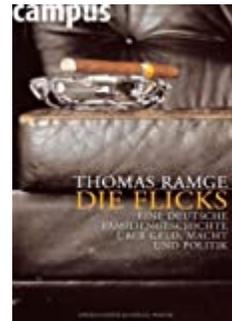




Peter Kessen. *Von der Kunst des Erbens: Die "Flick-Collection" und die Berliner Republik.* Mit einem Vorwort von Micha Brumlik. Berlin: Philo Verlag, 2004. 170 S. EUR 12.90 (paper), ISBN 978-3-86572-521-9.



Thomas Ramge. *Die Flicks: Eine deutsche Familiengeschichte über Geld, Macht und Politik.* Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2004. 288 S. EUR 24.90 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-593-37404-8.



Reviewed by Jonathan Osmond (Cardiff School of History and Archaeology, Cardiff University, Wales, United Kingdom)

Published on H-German (November, 2005)

The Flicks: A Family That Cannot Stay Out Of the Headlines

In 1996 the old Hamburger Bahnhof museum in Berlin re-opened as a vast and splendid white exhibition space for the art of the present. The visitor today can follow a passage from the main venue to the so-called Rieckhallen, the conversion of a huge warehouse once used by the eponymous haulage contractors. This functional, elongated, dingy space with sinister cellars is the seven-year home for a series of showings from the Friedrich Christian Flick collection of contemporary art. The first of these opened in September 2004, and—rather like too

many art exhibits in recent German history—caused a storm of public debate. Why it did so is the result of the history set out in these two lively volumes by Peter Kessen and Thomas Ramge.

For those unacquainted with the background, a brief genealogical narrative based upon Ramge's account may be helpful. Friedrich Flick (1883-1972) began an extraordinary and controversial career as an iron, steel, and coal magnate in the years before World War One. By 1932 he

was possibly the richest man in Germany, gaining extra notoriety through the assistance the Brüning government gave him in the depths of the Depression by purchasing the so-called Gelsenberg (Gelsenkirchener Bergwerke AG) shares. He prospered through the Third Reich, benefiting from close ties with Hermann Goering, from the "Aryanization" of Jewish enterprises, and from the extensive use during the latter stages of the war of slave labor. Prisoners of war and concentration and extermination camp inmates were put to work in Flick's concerns, and on account of this he was condemned by the Nuremberg Tribunal to seven years' imprisonment. Released early, FF, as he was known, resumed his stellar industrial and financial career. His contacts with the political and economic elites in the Federal Republic became as strong as those under previous regimes. When he died at the age of 89, Flick was honored in Düsseldorf at a huge memorial gathering. Leading politicians Hans-Dietrich Genscher, Franz-Josef Strauss, and Ludwig Erhard were in attendance.

Friedrich Flick had three sons: Otto-Ernst (1916-74), Rudolf (1920-41) and Friedrich Karl (b. 1927). The first and last of them became engaged in fierce public struggles over the running of the Flick empire and the eventual inheritance. In the early 1960s Otto-Ernst fell foul of his father's stern control over the business and the two of them became embroiled in years of high-profile and expensive litigation. In the end Otto-Ernst was effectively bought out. Excluded from the family business, he maintained his bitterness towards his father to the end, to the extent of not attending the funeral. Allegedly succumbing to alcohol, he survived FF by only two years. Meanwhile, Friedrich Karl took charge of the huge portfolio (now including Daimler-Benz), alongside Otto-Ernst's children, of whom more in a moment. FKF was—in complete contrast to his dour and ascetic father—an international playboy of renown. Apart from featuring in the gossip columns of the tabloid press, he then became known for a new Flick scandal in the 1980s. It appeared that for years Flick money (as well as money from other major businesses) had been illegally channeled in large amounts into the main political parties of the Federal Republic. Several prominent politicians were implicated, including Otto Graf Lambsdorff of the FDP, who was forced to resign. Subsequently, FKF disposed of most Flick enterprises to Deutsche Bank and lives comfortably on the proceeds in Austria and elsewhere.

What is—for now at least—the final phase in the family history concerns Friedrich Karl's nephews and niece, the sons and daughter of Otto-Ernst: Gert-Rudolf (b. 1943),

Friedrich Christian (b. 1944) and Dagmar. The two sons, known as "Muck" and "Mick" after a children's story, have both achieved gossip-column status through their jetset lifestyle and companions, their marriages and their divorces. More seriously, however, they have both become entangled in controversy about the use to which they have tried to put their vast fortunes. Educational and cultural initiatives have met international outcry because of allegations that any Flick money is tainted by its origins in Jewish property stolen in the 1930s and in the maltreatment of slave labor in the 1940s. In the mid-1990s Gert-Rudolf put up the money to establish a chair in European thought at Balliol College, Oxford, but protests from within the University and from Jewish groups led in 1997 to the gift being returned. Friedrich Christian meanwhile had been building up a major collection of contemporary art (in five years about 2500 works worth an estimated \$300 million), for which in 2001 he proposed a new-build museum home in Zürich. That project too fell in the teeth of international opposition, to be followed by the agreement to show the works in the Rieckhallen in Berlin.

The two books under review cover much common ground, including almost verbatim versions of standard anecdotes in the Flick story. Both Kessen and Ränge are journalists and their accounts reflect this. There is no suggestion of scholarly meticulousness and impartiality, and in each case the prose races along with the admittedly colorful story of the Flick family. The approaches are far from identical, however. Kessen's is a Philippic from start to finish, produced for the opening of the Berlin exhibit. It denounces the practices of the family and comes down clearly in opposition to Friedrich Christian's arrangements with the cultural and political authorities of Berlin. Kessen cites a range of primary sources in his footnotes, and also includes the text of a letter from Dagmar Ottmann (née Flick), criticizing her brother Friedrich Christian. At no point, however, does he admit to any nuances either in the historical or in the contemporary situation. He even has the audacity to make assumptions and judgments about private feelings: "If Friedrich Christian Flick had loved his father, there would logically have remained only rejection of his grandfather" (p. 99). Ränge on the other hand provides no documentary authentication of anything he says, apart from references to a clearly fascinating interview with Gert-Rudolf, and remains in contrast a relatively dispassionate observer of the crimes and foibles of Flick family history. In the final few pages he makes it clear that he does not share Kessen's condemnation

of Friedrich Christian, “Mick Flick.” The narrative is a strong one, interspersed for the general reader with effective references to the broader German and international contexts within which the Flick story unfolded.

To hammer home his hostility towards Flicks past and present, Kessen uses the device of a parallel life. Based upon the autobiography of and an interview with Eva Fahidi, he contrasts the wealth and influence of Friedrich Flick with the horrors of working in a German armaments factory in the latter phases of the war. Flick sat on the board of Dynamit Nobel from 1940 and later acquired the enterprise. Fahidi—a Jewish Hungarian from a bourgeois milieu—had been taken with most of her family to Auschwitz. They were murdered, but she was put to work as slave labor in Dynamit Nobel at Stadtallendorf near Marburg. Though dreadfully treated and experiencing further hardship in communist Hungary, she rose to become a senior sales director for—ironically—Hungarian steel exports. Her story is a harrowing one, but with aspects of reconciliation and personal happiness in the later stages of her life. Kessen’s point is that, despite repeated representations and legal actions, former slave workers like Fahidi were never compensated by Friedrich Flick. Indeed, throughout his life after Nuremberg, Flick refused to recognize that he was guilty. As Ramge points out in his book, to yield to compensation claims would have been an admission of responsibility that Flick was never prepared to make. Kessen goes further, though, in castigating the subsequent generations of Flicks for their alleged lack of repentance and generosity.

In the texts of both books are very detailed accounts both of the intricate financial dealings of the Flicks and of the decades-long wrangling over compensation. There is mention of certain compensation settlements made by members of the family, but Kessen in particular is adamant in his condemnation of Mick Flick for trying to purge the stains on the family name through the use of his art collection. However, at this point the reasons for Kessen’s distaste begin to multiply in a rather confusing way. It is not clear whether Friedrich Christian is being condemned primarily for refusing to pay compensation to the victims of slave labor; being pretentious about a late-discovered “interest” in contemporary art; lending his collection rather than donating it; benefiting from taxpayers’ money in the housing of his artworks; ingrat-

ating himself with politicians; refusing to include critical commentary on Flick history in the exhibit; or using otherwise socially critical artists to whitewash the name of Flick. All these are charges laid at Friedrich Christian’s door, and other players too do not emerge unscathed. The cultural elite of the Federal Republic is accused of complacent collusion. Having objected to the Zährich project, they were only too willing to accept Flick’s international hospitality and to sip champagne in front of fashionable pictures in Berlin. Federal politicians including Chancellor Schröder and Berlin politicians such as the governing mayor Klaus Wowereit are charged with cozying up to Flick in the hope of gaining political and cultural advantage in a German capital beset with desperate economic problems.

In the final section of his book Kessen widens his argument into a general onslaught on the politics and economy of the Federal Republic. He emphasizes that the Flick collection is being shown without critique in a part of Berlin replete with somber testimonies to the horrors of the past, including the long-established Topography of Terror installation and the new Holocaust Memorial. He attributes the economic success of the old Federal Republic to industrialization under Hitler, and he asserts that the entire German financial legacy is based upon the exploitation of millions of slave workers. “The Flick-Collection,” Kessen writes, “thereby becomes a monument of German inheritance” (p. 138). By this he does not only mean inheritance in money terms, but also as cultural legacy. To force this point home, the final phase of the book includes a diatribe against the colonization of former Jewish quarters of Berlin by cafés, clubs, and artsy society.

This is in all an extraordinary story, which raises many questions about the responsibility of successor generations and the extent to which art can be “innocent” of its provenance. Thomas Ramge provides an entertaining account and Peter Kessen a challenging invective. Both are well worth a read, though the Flick family predicament still warrants a new scholarly history and a judicious discussion of the points of principle. The Flick exhibit itself should be seen, both for its collection of provocative and disturbing German and international art, and in order to encourage reflection upon the often uncomfortable origins of cultural “heritage.”

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Citation: Jonathan Osmond. Review of Kessen, Peter, *Von der Kunst des Erbens: Die "Flick-Collection" und die Berliner Republik. Mit einem Vorwort von Micha Brumlik and Ramge, Thomas, Die Flicks: Eine deutsche Familiengeschichte über Geld, Macht und Politik*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. November, 2005.

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