



Olaf Briese. *Angst in den Zeiten der Cholera: Über kulturelle Ursprünge des Bakteriums (Seuchen-Cordon I); Panik-Kurve. Berlins Cholera-Jahr 1831/32 (Seuchen-Cordon II); Auf Leben und Tod. Briefwelt als Gegenwelt (Seuchen-Cordon III); Das Schlechte Gedicht (Seuchen.* Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2003. 1352 S. EUR 74.00 (gebunden), ISBN 978-3-05-003779-0.

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A Valuable Source Collection

This hefty, four-volume work presents a challenge to readers.[1] One cannot help but be impressed by the sheer scale of the study, particularly in the light of its price. Buyers get a lot of pages and source material of immense quality at a reasonable price. But just how good is it? There are two answers to this question: the sources alone, contained in volumes 2, 3 and 4, are worth the price of admission for library purchasers. Briese has collected documents, letters and even poetry concerning most aspects of nineteenth-century cholera epidemics and put them together in three massive, yet very useful volumes. With the number of English-language undergraduate courses on the history of infectious diseases at an all-time high, a translation of this wonderful collection would certainly be welcome.

The second answer, focusing on the monograph presented in volume 1, is more complicated. This study is innovative and very different from anything previously written on cholera epidemics (or similar topics in the history of infectious diseases). It is a diverse, wide-ranging effort that can be labeled a cultural history of cholera. It studies the effects of naming, considering why the term cholera was used. It includes a splendid section that analyzes misogyny in medical culture through female images of infectious diseases and the stereotyping of cholera as a morally dubious young woman on the run. The book works its way into the harder fabric of society through

an intriguing analysis of militaristic traditions of infectious disease control in Prussia. All of these sections are full of thought-provoking, challenging ideas that succeed in painting a complex, fascinating picture of cultural responses to cholera.

The book does not present a master narrative or a case study of a single outbreak. It proceeds from the general to the specific in that it starts with cholera metaphors, examines cholera control and medical knowledge and then goes on to the military and the rise of bacteriologic thought, focusing on Koch and the impact of the discovery of *vibrio cholerae* in 1883. Perhaps the book is incomplete, since the price to pay for this cultural emphasis comes with a distinct underplaying of the social impact of the disease. Mortality figures are very loosely quoted, a well-known debate about the impact of cholera epidemics on urban society is not touched upon and the social structure of cholera mortality is not studied either. The reader can easily become lost, as the book contains numerous case studies, with a side-step here and an appended subplot there. The exploratory, wide-ranging nature of the book makes it a gold mine, in which researchers will find enlightening quotes and source material that has hitherto been overlooked or remained unknown. It is astonishing to see how much material Briese has found dealing with the outbreaks in Prussia in 1831-32. This, however, points to a limitation:

the analysis is predominantly concerned with the first wave of cholera epidemics and does not deal with regional disparities—looking beyond Prussia and possibly even Germany would have helped to sharpen the analysis and confirm that Prussia itself, however valuable a case study it may be, does not tell the whole story.

There are more serious limitations. Even in a wide-ranging, loose account of cholera, one would expect a substantial, systematic analysis of the existing historiography. The bibliography is extensive, but discussion in the text is unsatisfactory. This is not to say that the author ignores historiography altogether, but rather that the book fails to engage systematically with an abundant historiography on nineteenth-century health, hygiene and medicine. Two examples may suffice: the debate on Ackerknecht's famous juxtaposition of anti-contagionists as liberals and contagionists as conservatives finds no discussion (p. 192); Peter Baldwin's magisterial study is also dismissed without further reflection (see p. 193, n. 101). It is symptomatic that the very title of the work was used before by Richard J. Evans for an article in a ground-breaking collection published in *Das Kursbuch* in 1988. Neither Evans's article nor Garcia Marquez's novel (*Love in the Time of Cholera*, [1985]) are acknowledged. This may be an oversight, but the term

Angst is hardly taken up at any point in the book. This omission is even more surprising, given the sophisticated (albeit recent) historiography of emotion in health and illness. Finally, one of the book's major hypotheses—that Koch's bacteriology was no more than a successful amalgamation of contagionist and anti-contagionist thought—is not particularly new. A recent and well-cultivated historiography provides a differentiated and subtle analysis that moves well beyond Briese's exclusive emphasis on Robert Koch.

But if readers are aware of these issues and look at this book as essentially a cultural history of cholera during the first pandemic, they will find a stimulating, interesting, thought-provoking and well-written cultural history. The author deserves to be congratulated for having revived historical interest in cholera, which has been dormant since Evans' *Death in Hamburg* (1987). In that sense, despite its many limitations, this book truly is ground-breaking.

Note [1]. The titles of the volumes are: volume 1, *Über kulturelle Ursprünge des Bakteriums*; volume 2, *Panik-Kurve: Berlins Cholerajahr 1831/32*; volume 3, *Auf Leben und Tod: Briefwelt als Gegenwelt*; and volume 4 *Das schlechte Gedicht: Strategien literarischer Immunisierung*.

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