



Esther Leroy. *Konstruktionen des Germanen in bildungsbürgerlichen Zeitschriften des deutschen Kaiserreichs.* Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2004. 271 S. \$50.95 (paper), ISBN 978-3-631-53070-2.



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The Modern Search for Ancient Ancestors

Much has been written about the role played in the history of German nationalism and nation-building by the knowledge of (and stories about) the Germanic tribes. In the seventeenth and eighteenth century, German authors wrote literary works about Arminius, the Cheruscan leader; after Johann Gottfried Herder popularized the search for national myths and folk-literature, the Romantics intensified this preoccupation.[1] With the founding of the German Empire in 1871, a veritable obsession with the *Germanen* surfaced with renewed vigor, such as in Felix Dahn's historical novel *Ein Kampf um Rom* (1876) or Carl Theodor von Piloty's grandiose painting "Thusnelda im Triumphzug des Germanicus" (1873). In the present book, Esther Leroy attempts to illuminate how this interest was disseminated among the educated middle classes, in other words, how it went beyond both artistic representations and the "völkisch" movement (p. 15). She does so by examining a previously unexplored medium: cultural periodicals.

For her study (based on her 2002 Kiel dissertation), Leroy selected three "bildungsbürgerliche Zeitschriften" with moderately different political orien-

tations and circulations: *Nord und Süd*, *Die Grenzboten* and *Der Kunstwart*. *Der Kunstwart* was by far the most popular of the three, but even it had a limited reach, with a circulation of about 23,000 at its highest just before World War I (p. 36). After an extremely short introduction, Leroy offers a brief overview of previous scholarship on the image of the *Germanen* in the German Empire. Missing here, however, is a discussion of important works on earlier and later reception of the *Germanen* in German culture. Especially since Leroy intends to argue against a direct link between the reception of the *Germanen* in the German Empire and under National Socialism, some discussion of the latter connections in the scholarship would have been useful.[2] In part 3, Leroy provides a short introduction to the three periodicals, including rudimentary information about editors and each periodical's cultural orientation.

Parts 4 and 5 of Leroy's book are based on close readings and present numerous quotations from essays in the magazines covering much of the period from the 1870s to the years just prior to World War I. Part 4 divides the views presented by various essayists and cul-

tural critics according to three main categories (nation, *Volk* and race) that Leroy sees as part of the construction of a group identity. In part 5, Leroy addresses the core of her project—what she calls the “instrumentalization of the Germanic man” in socially relevant discourses of the Kaiserreich.[3] This section does a good job of placing her detailed analysis of the periodicals’ essays in the context of other important discourses of the German Empire, such as Darwinism and related scientific views; religion; notions of class and the collective vs. the individual; the crisis of culture; and concerns about German regional specificity and the Germany’s status in the world.

In her comparison of those discourses with the periodicals under consideration, Leroy comes to the occasional conclusion that these journals presented a relatively moderate view of Germanic culture and ideas for their educated middle-class readers (p. 170). Most importantly, however, she concludes that the *Germanen-Ideologie* as it appeared in these periodicals lent itself via its “Wandelbarkeit und inhaltliche Offenheit” to a range of uses (p. 227). While Leroy’s extensive examples from the periodicals over a period of four decades do indeed suggest this malleability of the ideology of the Germanic peoples, her presentation also suggests at times the far greater importance of these other issues (Darwinism, fear of the masses and Social Democracy and racialism, and so on) in the educated middle-class construction of the German *Volk*. In short, Leroy does an admirable job of tracing the myriad references to the Germanic people in these diverse essays, but one is left wondering what it means that this was such an open and multivalent construct for the cultural critics of the German Empire. Ultimately, the discussion in Leroy’s book goes only part way in explaining her conclusion—that our understanding of how the *Germanen* were viewed in the German Empire can be neither limited to the use the *Völkisch* ideologues made of them nor conflated with the image the National Socialists had of them. Indeed, didn’t the Nazis also fill the Germanic period with whatever significance and associations served their own ideological needs?

While Leroy provides careful explanations of the work of Darwin, Haeckel and Gobineau, she is sur-

prisingly reticent about defining some of her own key terms. More than once, terms such as *nordisch*, *germanisch*, *arisch* and *indo-germanisch* are used interchangeably. This lapse may stem in part from Leroy’s propensity to follow her sources too closely. Thus, her reason for not explaining the difference between some of the terms just listed might be that “in der Konstruktion dieses Bildes wird der Germane explizit als nordischer Mensch konzipiert” (p. 11) or that “‘deutsch’ wird dabei stets mit ‘germanisch’ gleichgesetzt“ (p. 123). Rather than interrogate this lack of clarity about terms in her sources, however, Leroy passes this confusion of concepts along to her readers. Similarly, she often quotes previous scholarship with little commentary or reflection, but rather deploys it to reinforce her own summary of the magazine articles. While this strategy may help to validate the theories of other scholars, it fails to deepen our understanding of the issues at hand.

Certainly, Leroy can be credited with having identified a worthwhile project. Her book is founded on an extensive search through these three periodicals and her book will provide future scholars with a volume of carefully organized and categorized evidence. As such, it gives us further testimony for the prevalence of the image of the Germanic people in the search for a German national identity in the late nineteenth century. Yet, I was left wishing for a conclusion that might have delved deeper into this preoccupation and how to make sense of it.

Notes

[1]. Richard Kuehnemund, *Arminius or the Rise of a National Symbol in Literature, from Hutten to Grabbe* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1953).

[2]. One example would be Jost Hermand, *Der alte Traum vom neuen Reich. Völkische Utopien und Nationalsozialismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Athenaeum, 1988).

[3]. It is odd that the title of the main chapter, like the title of the book itself, includes an unexplained use of the singular *der Germane* which stands in uneasy contrast to the predominance of cultural, ethnic and community discussions of *die Germanen* in Leroy’s sources.

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