

Andrea-Katharina Hanke. *Die niedersächsische Heimatbewegung im ideologisch-politischen Kräftespiel zwischen 1920 und 1945.* Hannover: Verlag Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 2004. 191 S. EUR 22.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-7752-5923-1.



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Home Sweet Home

Ever since the *Sonderweg* controversy broke out into open civil war in the ranks of German historians in the early 1980s, one of the most vexing questions for our profession has been the role of the bourgeoisie in the rise and fall of the Weimar Republic, the assumption of power by the National Socialists in the Third Reich and the reestablishment of democracy after the Second World War. Notions of petite-bourgeois revolutions and finance capitalist manipulations have been abandoned in favor of more generalized interpretations of a complex cultural, socioeconomic stratum that had to undergo the purgative fires of total warfare, total destruction and the Holocaust before abandoning its anti-modernist and anti-democratic values and sentiments. This perspective assumes that during the thirty years between Weimar and the Federal Republic, the German bourgeoisie underwent significant changes in the way they viewed politics and the ideology they used to justify political action.

Andrea-Katharina Hanke's book on the *Heimatbewegung* in Lower Saxony between 1920 and 1945 is a direct challenge to such assumptions. She argues that at least one important segment of the German bourgeoisie,

what she calls the "Heimatler," continued to adhere to a set of beliefs and principles throughout its history and up to the end of the twentieth century. "Völkisch-konservativ" in orientation, "unpolitical" in sentiment, and mostly professional and bureaucratic in socioeconomic background, these leaders of a regional movement to uphold the values and traditions of the Lower Saxon *Heimat* doggedly held to a system of convictions that withstood the massive changes occurring in the world around them. They demonstrated an intriguing ability to adapt to a wide variety of political regimes without losing their own internal cognitive and cultural integrity. Indeed, as Hanke concludes, "right to the end of the twentieth century, the *Heimatbewegung* remained faithful to the principles of its founding era, even if under changed socio-structural circumstances" (p. 159).

Hanke's story begins with the collapse of the Second Empire and the establishment of the Weimar Republic. For *Heimatler* in Lower Saxony, defeat and social upheaval represented long-awaited opportunities to introduce a reform of Prussia and the Reich on the basis of "völkische Stammesstaaten" (pp. 20-21). Their goal was

to establish a Lower Saxon Reich province, resting not on notions of equality and democracy, but on the distinctions of race, regional heritage and local diversity. Much to their horror, they soon found themselves to be a meaningless political entity. Given their historical ties to the Hannoverian Guelph party, their “anti-modernist” federal goals, and their opposition to the social and political premises of the new Republic, they were unwelcome in the Social Democratic governments of the city and state of Hannover. Their reaction was to express opposition by declaring the “unpolitical” nature of their movement and to retreat to a call for *Heimatliebe* as a way to preserve some measure of their local authority and the status quo. Temporary succor came from a most unlikely quarter. The Hannoverian Chamber of Industry and Commerce, in an effort to establish a self-administered, decentralized economy, free from Social Democratic political intrusion, saw in the *Heimatler* the popular support they required to establish the economic region of Lower Saxony. Cloaking themselves in the mantle of *Volkstum*, *Heimat* and tradition, economic interests sought to mobilize local *Heimat* consciousness and organizations on behalf of their cause. But these efforts too soon proved fruitless.

By the end of the 1920s, the *Heimat* movement found itself in crisis in the face of social change. Its efforts to uphold old values and traditions seemed increasingly “unmodern,” especially among the youth of the day. In the words of one of the leading *Heimat* organizations in Lower Saxony during its annual meeting in 1930, it had to overcome the prejudices among the wider public that *Heimatschutz* was nothing more than the prejudices of “a patriarchal romanticism that played itself out in the brains of aged burgher and heads of families” (p. 99). Calls arose to transform the movement from its historical, backward-looking roots to a living, practical entity able to attract a youthful membership on the foundation of German *stammes- und heimliche* cultural values. Despite such attempts at modernization, however, the composition of the movement changed little during the Republic. A review of leadership lists of the *Heimatbund Niedersachsen*, one of the two most prominent *Heimat* organizations in Lower Saxony, revealed that from 1926 to 1930 and in the pivotal year of 1933 the old bourgeois *Honoratioren* still remained firmly in control. Professors and teachers formed a little over 30 percent of the leadership, while public administrators, politicians and representatives of trade and commerce constituted another third. Workers, craftsmen and peasants were scarcely represented.

According to Hanke, the National Socialists between

1929 and 1933 offered both wings of the *Heimat* movement in Lower Saxony a way out of their dilemma, one that emphasized simultaneously a backward-looking critique of “civilization” and a forward-oriented societal dynamic. The *Heimatler* responded enthusiastically. They saw the Nazis and the Third Reich as yet another opportunity to restructure society on the basis of their principles and convinced themselves that the party bosses under Hitler shared their ideals. They were soon to be disillusioned. For the new regime, the concept of *Heimat* was yet another strategic tool for educating the public in Nazi values and practices and for the glorification of Germany and the party. While the *Heimatler* expected a Third Reich that would essentially allow them to continue what they had always done, namely to care for and protect the *Heimat* free from political interference, the new holders of power were completely disinclined to allow organizations speaking to the vital issues of *Volk* and *Heimat* to remain autonomous. What followed over the course of twelve years, in peace and in war, was a complex dance for influence and control, with the *Heimatler* exploiting the irrationalities and overlapping and competing cultural organizations of the Nazi regime to stave off annihilation right to the end.

With the conclusion of the war and the return of democracy to Germany in the form of the Federal Republic, *Heimatler* took one last step in their long journey to establishing their dream of a Lower Saxon state resting on *stammes- und heimliche* principles. Quickly forgetting its undeniable support for National Socialism, the *Heimat* movement presented itself as the savior of a tradition whose time-tested values were sorely needed in a period of social tension and despair. While it returned to its posture of criticizing “civilization” and its suspicions concerning political democracy, during the chaos following the collapse of the Third Reich it had a better opportunity to determine developments in Lower Saxony than at any other time in its history. With the eventual establishment of the Federal State of Lower Saxony, *Heimatler* achieved their long-awaited goal. In the process, they demonstrated that political success in Germany rested as much on perseverance as it did on change. Over the course of a century, as Hanke so ably shows, an important segment of the local bourgeoisie had persisted in their adherence to traditional values of *Heimat*, modernized and adapted them where necessary, and used them to withstand the onslaught of at least two deadly opponents—the socialists and democrats of the Weimar Republic and the National Socialists of the Third Reich. In the end, it was the state which accommodated their values, beliefs and

wishes, and not the other way round.

Unfortunately, as intriguing as Hanke's tale might be, it leaves open as many questions as it answers. For example, Hanke never tells the reader why the *Heimat* movement was such an attractive political ally for so many different groups, from large industry and commerce to Nazi party bosses. What was it that it brought to the political table in trade? Hanke hints at a response when she notes that industry and commerce sought out *Heimatler* in the belief that they could generate a popular consciousness around the idea of Lower Saxony as *Heimat*. Such "consciousness" would have been a powerful tool in overcoming the reluctance of states such as Oldenburg, Braunschweig and Schaumburg-Lippe to enter into a Lower Saxon regional economic union, let alone the larger prizes of Bremen and Hamburg. Similarly, the Nazis were eager to exploit local *Honoratioren* in their quest to achieve legitimacy and popular support. Then there is the whole issue of the meaning of the concept of *Heimat* itself. The leaders of these organizations in Lower Saxony were obviously trading in a cultural capital of great import in the political marketplace. At least three significant studies of the last generation (by Celia Applegate, Alon Confino and Jennifer Jenkins) have addressed the nature of this capital and why it was so essen-

tial for the bourgeoisie to preserve its integrity over time. But only Applegate's book appears in the references, and it seems to have had little impact on Hanke's analysis.[1]

Hanke's work should be read by all scholars interested in the political activities of the German bourgeoisie in the twentieth century. It demonstrates that under the rubric of *Heimat*, significant elements of the educated and economic bourgeoisie were able to maintain over time a form of conservative political thinking and action that may very well have been peculiar to Germany. Such values and beliefs allowed their adherents to adapt to significant changes in political regime without altering their goals and to exploit that ideological continuity for their own survival and success.

Notes

[1]. Celia Applegate, *A Nation of Provincials: The German Idea of Heimat* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Alon Confino, *The Nation as a Local Metaphor: Wuerttemberg, Imperial Germany, and National Memory, 1871-1918* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Jennifer Jenkins, *Provincial Modernity: Local Culture and Liberal Politics in Fin-de-Siecle Hamburg* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

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