H-Net Reviews in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Martin Kitchen. *A History of Modern Germany 1800-2000.* Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2006. xvii + 455 pp. $39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4051-0041-0.

Reviewed by Jacob L. Hamric (Department of History, University of Tennessee)

Published on H-German (July, 2006)

Returning a Narrative History to the German Question

With the present volume, distinguished historian Martin Kitchen adds to an already impressive collection of recent general histories on modern Germany.[1] The author boldly asserts that his narrative approach is preferable to theoretical approaches of the postmodernists, whom he criticizes for dissolving history "into a series of unconnected events, trends, and data" (p. 8). Kitchen uses a narrative approach to explain the key watersheds in modern German history from the Napoleonic occupation to reunification and beyond. Kitchen's book at first glance could appear to some observers as simply a review of some well-trodden facts and figures and arguments about the "particular" or "peculiar" course of Germany's turbulent past. However, Kitchen offers a much more nuanced story of that historical record, one that notes the good (such as Germany's multifaceted cultural and religious modes and its vibrant democratic and liberal traditions); the bad (embodied in the growth of political antisemitism during the Wilhelmine period); and the ugly (Germany's decline into barbarism and genocide during the Nazi dictatorship). Likewise, the author eschews approaches that retell the German story predominantly through the lens of major political powers, such as the Blood and Iron Chancellor Otto von Bismarck and the rise of Prussia, or do the exact opposite by neglecting these forces in favor of social, cultural, or economic developments. Overall, Kitchen largely succeeds in employing his narrative approach to put together a comprehensive and in some ways provocative study of modern German history.

Although most of Kitchen's chapters follow a chronological sequence, there are some notable exceptions. Most striking is chapter 2, entitled "German Society in Transition: 1800-70," in which the author predominantly focuses on class, gender and the family, before shifting back to a chronological approach of these same years in the following four chapters. In this second chapter, Kitchen points out often striking variations within social groups. For instance, the petit bourgeoisie, which consisted of artisans and their apprentices, was united in its opposition to economic liberalism because it threatened small business, but it was intensely divided regarding political matters. As Kitchen puts it, the artisans were "archconservatives," who found common cause with the reactionary forces in 1848 in hopes of turning back the clock to an age in which artisans "commanded respect," while apprentices "felt exploited and stifled" by their masters and saw little opportunity for economic advancement (p. 44). He also argues there was no German working-class consciousness in the first half of the nineteenth century, noting that "differences in status and in income were so vast as to make the concept meaningless" (p. 44). Kitchen uses other interesting periodizations for chapter divisions, such as chapter 5, which he labels "The Struggle for Mastery: 1850-66." In this chapter, he surmises that the answer to the contemporaneous German question, namely the *kleindeutsch* versus *grossdeutsch* debate that befuddled the 1848 Frankfurt Parliament, was essentially solved during the 1860s by *Realpolitik* and Bismarck's audacity; by Prussian military prowess; and by the *Zollverein*, which was crucial to keeping the southern German states within the fold of the German Confeder-

ation. The emphasis of this periodization is that Kitchen implies that the German question was solved in 1866 as a result of the Austro-Prussian War and *before* the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71. The author also divides his coverage of Nazi Germany into two chapters, the first explaining the nature of the Nazi dictatorship, including its hopelessly confusing bureaucracy and the implementation of Adolf Hitler's murderous racial policies, and the second detailing Nazi foreign policy and the rise and fall of Germany's fortunes during the Second World War.

One exceptional attribute of Kitchen's study is his inclusion of class and gender. Besides chapter 2 noted above, the author describes the conflicting aims of social groups during the 1848 revolutions, the age of Bismarck, and the period of two Germanys; he offers keen insights regarding the role of women in the Bismarckian and Nazi periods. Kitchen does not shy away from controversy, unabashedly criticizing what he calls "the persistent myth that German women were chained to Kinder and KÃ¼che" in Nazi Germany, to name but one example (p. 289). Here the author notes the greater percentage of women in the German work force in contrast to female labor in Great Britain and the United States. He juxtaposes this fact against Nazi measures geared towards establishing a racial utopia: the banning of abortion; the almost complete unavailability of birth control devices for women; and the awarding of the so-called Mother's Service Medal. Further accentuating the absurdity behind and the contradictions between Nazi ideology and practice was the ranting of the Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels, who insisted that women "were being removed from public life in order to restore their essential dignity" at a time in which the Nazi government desperately needed, and for the most part made use of, female labor for the German war effort (p. 290).

Kitchen integrates the concept of "many Germanys"–which stresses local and regional identities rooted in daily life–remarkably well.[2] He explains that even after unification became official in 1871, the German empire in fact "comprised four separate kingdoms, with four separate armies, and a number of semi-autonomous entities," and notes that only during Nazi rule was Germany a centralized state (p. 8). He offers numerous insights into and analyses of key moments, traditions and religious and political orientations of the peoples in German territories outside of Prussia, including the Rhineland, Saxony and especially the south German states of Baden, WÃ¼rttemberg and Bavaria. For example, Kitchen describes how the reforms carried out during the Napoleonic Wars profoundly affected the southern German kingdoms. As a result of Napoleon's abolition of the Holy Roman Empire and creation of the Confederation of the Rhine, "Baden had increased four-fold and WÃ¼rttemberg had doubled in size," and "Bavaria now included 80 autonomous political entities that had to be integrated" (p. 22). These kingdoms enhanced centralized power while allowing for religious equality. This development was especially noteworthy, considering that Protestants in Baden suddenly became a minority and Catholic Bavaria in turn incorporated thousands of Protestants. Most notable in this regard, at least to Kitchen, is the secularization of church lands in southern Germany. In the case of Bavaria, its government took over control of church lands, about half of which had been owned by monastic orders, and sold them to the peasants at extremely low prices. This policy "created a large number of small farms and modest peasant holdings," which the author states contrasted with Prussia, "where the liberalization of the serfs had benefited the large estates" (p. 22).

More than anything else, Kitchen is interested in tracing the course of the German question in modern German history. His objective is to define what has constituted being "German" in the last two centuries. Amid all of the complexities and ambiguities in Germany that he himself brings attention to, the author provides some useful answers to this question. Kitchen begins his study by connecting the emergence of a German national identity to the late eighteenth century and the Napoleonic era, at which time the German territories underwent vast geographic and political changes. The author describes early German nationalism as "abstract, humanistic, cosmopolitan, philosophically rarified, and apolitical" (p. 1). For many Germans, life under the brutal Napoleonic occupation led to many of these attributes becoming associated with "an arrogant feeling of cultural superiority" to compensate for the reality of foreign domination and "a reactionary obsession with a mythological German past" (p. 2). Kitchen finds that these multitudinous characteristics of German national identity have each contributed to what it means to be German. For instance, most nineteenth-century German liberals promoted the advancement of humanistic ideas that stressed basic civil and political rights. These beliefs were promulgated in the imperial constitution of 1871, which included statements of civil liberties, provided for universal manhood suffrage and established a political institution, the Reichstag, which was directly responsible to the German people. When Germany experienced hard times during the First World War, the Reichstag remained as a symbol (if

not an effective institution) of German democracy, much to the delight of many Germans like the Social Democrats and to the dismay of conservatives, radical nationalists and the military. At the same time, Kitchen criticizes the role of these same liberals for having emphasized "national egotism," which he states triumphed over a universal right to national self-determination. As the author bluntly puts it, "it was a fatal flaw of this new form of nationalism that it was based on ethnicity rather than the acceptance of a shared sense of values and respect for a common legal system" (p. 3). This feeling became much easier for liberals to propagate after the failed revolutions of 1848, which resulted in the near certainty of a *kleindeutsch* solution to the German question, meaning that a potentially unified German state would probably exclude Austria and its numerous minority ethnic groups. During the *Kaiserreich*, German Jews were the object of a "new, virulent, and secular anti-Semitism" that consisted of prejudices spread not only by conservative newspapers such as the *Kreuzzeitung*, but also by one of the most popular middle-class journals, the *Gartenlaube*, which "blamed the stock exchange crash (of the early 1870s) on Jewish speculators" (p. 134). The author does not articulate this point simply to establish a prelude to Hitler's rise to power and the Holocaust. Quite to the contrary, he surmises that the problem of ethnic nationalism persisted during the government of the Federal Republic, which essentially characterized a German citizen as "someone born of German parents, not someone born in Germany" (p. 376). Kitchen notes that recent debates about citizenship laws in Germany show that ethnicity remains a hotly contested issue in Germany after reunification.

Despite the seemingly innumerable provocative insights contained throughout the book, Kitchen saves his boldest statements for the last few pages, at which point he makes several propositions as to how Germany should address its current challenges. He advocates a stronger federal government with firm control over the budget. He understands that this measure was unfeasible following the Second World War, but argues that since a healthy democracy has developed in Germany, now is the ideal time for the individual German states to relinquish some of their power. According to the author, a large part of the problem lies in proportional representation, which is used to elect half of the seats in the Bundestag, and allows smaller parties, most prominently the Free Democrats and the Greens, to exert a disproportionate role in the political process. In fact, Kitchen argues that the disappearance of these parties "would be no great loss," and supports the majority voting system (p. 410). Furthermore, he claims Germany could solve its high unemployment rate by enacting vast overhauls to its overly complex tax system and its "obese welfare state" (p. 410). In summary, Kitchen promotes the transformation of the German economic and political systems into a close approximation of the British form of government, which he states would establish legitimate electoral and fiscal responsibility.

The author is to be commended for having produced a highly readable and insightful study on modern Germany. Kitchen is fully aware of the problems that abound in a general text, including "oversimplifications, omissions, and oversights" (p. 8). Yet, the author sometimes goes too far in his boldness, perhaps best exemplified in his labeling the battle of Trafalgar between the British and the French in 1805 as "the most decisive naval victory in history," a statement that might draw the ire of some of his fellow military historians (p. 10). Likewise, Kitchen is overly critical of Bismarck. One can readily agree with the author regarding Bismarck's dubious role in the formation of the imperial constitution, which the chancellor clearly designed to accentuate his own power to the detriment of German democracy. However, the author describes Bismarck's foreign policy as untenable, belittling the value both of the League of the Three Emperors (1873), which he argues "was basically inconsequential," and the Reinsurance Treaty (1887)–Bismarck's two major diplomatic agreements with Russia (p. 164). While tensions between Austria-Hungary and Russia created a significant roadblock for peaceful German-Russian relations, differences between the latter two countries were not irreconcilable. Suggesting otherwise ignores contingency, which Kitchen himself recognizes when he so aptly discusses the disastrous course of German foreign policy during the Wilhelmine period.

But these points do not diminish the value of Kitchen's work. The author is extremely effective in connecting economic, social and cultural developments with political and diplomatic trends, the latter category receiving its due merit despite what this review might otherwise suggest. Although his writing style should appeal to a popular audience, Kitchen's text does assume a basic understanding of German and European history. Combined with the many helpful maps and the exceptional bibliography of modern German history inside this volume, Kitchen's work is especially recommended to graduate students in the field.

Notes

[1]. By way of introduction, consult Holger Herwig,

Hammer or Anvil? Modern Germany 1648-Present (Lexington: D.C. Heath, 1994); Mary Fulbrook, ed., *German History Since 1800* (London: St. Martin's, 1997); Gordon Craig, *Germany, 1866-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); William Carr, *A History of Germany, 1815-1990* (London: Routledge, 1991); David Blackbourn, *History of Germany 1780-1918: The Long Nineteenth Century* (Malden: Blackwell, 2003); and Volker Berghahn, *Modern Germany: Society, Economy, and Politics in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

[2]. For instance, Michael StÃ¼rmer uses this term to describe Imperial Germany. See StÃ¼rmer, *The German Empire: A Short History* (New York: Modern Library, 2000), pp. 43-60.