



Manfred Hettling. *Volksgeschichten im Europa der Zwischenkriegszeit.* Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003. 372 S. EUR 28.90 (broschiert), ISBN 978-3-525-36273-0.



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Of Babies and Bathwater: The Nature and Legacy of *Völkisch* History

The title of this volume may be expected to elicit two responses from members of the German studies community—historians, critics, linguists, anthropologists and others—who have only casually followed the German historiography of the last two decades. Some will be surprised at the use of the plural and at the reference to a continental rather than specifically German context. Was not the interwar construction of the popular ethnocentric historical narratives that mingled geographical, biological, cultural and other factors, they might ask, a characteristically and specifically German phenomenon? Secondly, many may be likely to presume that any historical tradition tainted by its association with *völkisch* conservative and later National Socialist thinkers will be dismissed as a discredited, reactionary dead end in the construction of a meaningful historical research agenda. To its great credit, this collection of essays, typified by close attention to nuance and context, successfully challenges both complacent presumptions, suggesting that while racism may have discredited *Volksgeschichte*, its practitioners introduced concepts and approaches that survive.

The dozen contributions collected here may be seen as a product of the historiographical controversy initiated in 1993 by Willi Oberkrome's book *Volksgeschichte*, and the often bitter debates following that work that occupied and succeeded the 1994 Leipziger Historikertag.[1] At issue has been the question of whether the Nazi political sympathies and engagement of some of those in the *Volksgeschichte* movement had entirely discredited their tradition (and the postwar historians who built upon it), or whether the methodological innovations of the *Volksgeschichte* tradition had in fact provided a useful and usable basis on which Western Germany's postwar democratic tradition of social and structural history could build.

In his adroit introductory essay, editor Manfred Hettling justifies the comparative ambitions of this work, pointing out that "*Volksgeschichte* ist keine deutsche Besonderheit," and suggesting that throughout interwar Europe "[r]ecourse to the *Volk* could gain significance where stabilizing factors were missing or weakly developed" (pp. 34; 36). In nearly all its variants throughout the regions considered here, he argues, the history

of the *Volk* arose from the interaction among the conditioning factors of state, space and culture. More specifically, Hettling describes all the various *Volksgeschichten* considered here as combinations of six types of factors—cultural, historical, political, religious, territorial and “biologistisch.”

It is the last of these components of the conceptual brew of *Volksgeschichte* that is most likely to arouse the suspicions and hostility of contemporaries. Given the course of German history between 1933 and 1945, it is difficult to separate the biological emphasis of *Volksgeschichte* from interwar racism and the murderous hierarchies it spawned. And Hettling points out that many German historians of the interwar era—Adolf Helbok, for example—conceived the concept of the *Volk* both as a “community of blood” and as an explicitly racial and racist concept. On the other hand, he insists, this position does not exhaust the range of varieties of *Volksgeschichte* practiced by Germans: “In der Diskussion der letzten Jahre über die deutsche Volksgeschichte ist bisher nicht hinreichend unterschieden worden zwischen Volksgeschichte, die sich derwissenschaftlich nicht belegenden—Annahme rassischer Merkmale angeschlossen hat, und jener Volksgeschichte, die eine wie immer auch begründete und unterschiedlich konsequent verfolgt Distanz zum Rassedenken behielt” (p. 35).

Subsequent essays attempt to elaborate the qualities of *Volksgeschichte* in the settings of European lands that include, in addition to Germany, Italy, Sweden, France, the Baltic states, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Serbia. Others examine the meaning and status of *Volk* as a concept in international law at the close of the First World War, the continuities of *völkisch* history with postwar German history as exemplified in the work of Otto Bruner and the influence of *Volksgeschichte* on German Zionism between the wars.

Moshe Zimmermann’s evaluation of the Zionist engagement with *völkisch* history in Germany illustrates with particular clarity the ways in which nationalistic thinkers could tease useful meanings from the components of *Volksgeschichte*, exploiting applicable elements while abandoning (or at least minimizing) those of less utility. Biological components of the *Volk* identity, for example, though they received some consideration from Martin Buber, Arthur Ruppin and others in the German Jewish community, had less impact on Zionist historians in interwar Germany than cultural factors and, unsurprisingly, spatial or territorial considerations. The

Volk was a product of its historical, linguistic and cultural development, and formed an “organic” link with its space or territory only out of the interaction of these elements with the territorial. “Cuius lingua eius terra,” wrote the Zionist historian Yechezkel Kaufmann, for example. “Erst kommt das Volk, dann das Land” (p. 117).

It is perhaps to be expected that the nations of eastern Europe, outside of the Soviet Union, proved particularly fertile ground for the development of *völkisch* historical theories in the interwar period. Embroiled in chronic political, economic and inter-ethnic turbulence, these lands between the wars embodied the lack of “stabilizing factors” that Hettling identifies as one of the key factors in the expansion of *völkisch* thought. In her essay on “Volksgeschichte im Baltikum?,” Anna Veronika Wendland pays close attention to the links between Baltic German exponents of *Volksgeschichte* and the development of its Estonian, Lithuanian and Latvian variants. While the ethnocentric elements of the *völkisch* historical tradition undoubtedly proved handy for antisemites, nourishing a traditional hostility to Jews that had horrific consequences when unleashed under the Nazis, *Volksgeschichte* caught on here primarily as a handy cultural/historical tool for legitimating the dominant position of the governing ethnic group. The ethnocentric components of the Baltic *Volksgeschichte* tradition, she writes, were typified by “eine Konzentration auf die Geschichte des eigenen Volkes unter Ausblendung anderer Einflüsse und Beziehungen, die aber weitgehend frei von der rassentheoretischen und biologistischen Aufrüstung war, die für erhebliche Teile der deutschen Volksgeschichte stil- und terminologiebildend geworden ist.... Allen drei baltischen Staaten gemeinsam ist sicherlich die innenpolitische Zielsetzung der ethnozentrischen Historieographie, die die Führungsrolle der Titularnationen legitimieren sollte” (p. 235). Broadly similar conclusions are reached in essays on the other eastern European states.

These essays also make it clear, as George Mosse once observed, that the powerful appeal of *völkisch* theories was never confined to the Right, nor did their triumph necessarily culminate in National Socialism. Bo Strath, in his essay “Integration von links,” shows how progressive historians around Lauritz and Curt Weibull in Sweden developed a social democratic *Volksgeschichte* that obstructed, despite a considerable racist presence in the nation’s intellectual milieu, the emergence of any Swedish “Blut und Boden” myth: “In den Besonderheiten des Volksbegriff in Schweden—der Gleichheit der Freien; dem nicht elitären Bildungsbegriff; der poli-

tischen Besetzung des Begriffs, ohne ihn jedoch auf einen unpolitischen holistischen Gemeinschaftsbegriff zu beziehen—kann man Bedingungen erkennen, die ein Überhandnehmen einer völkischen Interpretation wie in Deutschland verhindert haben” (p. 203).

At the same time, *Volksgeschichte* failed to succeed in Italy, as Christian Jansen demonstrates, despite many of the same structural and cultural factors—economic turbulence, widespread hostility to the Versailles dispensation, the popularity of biologist political models—present in Germany. So, “why no *Volksgeschichte* in Italy?” he asks. In part, at least, due to the historical romanticism of Mussolini and his followers. “Dem Fascismus war völkisches Denken ebenso wie Antisemitismus ursprünglich fremd. Im Gegensatz zu Hitler, der die Deutschen als Herrenrasse bezeichnete, stilisierte Mussolini die Italiener zur natione proletaria.... Die imperiale Zielvorstellung der Fascismus war ein multiethnisches Weltreich nach dem Vorbild des antiken Rom” (pp. 145-146).

Several of these essays end with calls for further research, and there is no doubt that this volume raises more questions than it resolves. This is not necessarily a defect. The historical profession could use more such fertile and enlightening heuristic works, and these essays constitute a valuable contribution to the construction of an important historiographical research agenda. The debate about the extent to which the *Volksgeschichte* movement influ-

enced western Germany’s postwar historical profession, however, and about the qualitative nature of the influence, will undoubtedly continue. Few would today contest the disastrous impact of the völkisch conception of race, and the discarding of this aspect of the völkisch legacy must be considered as progress. Nevertheless, this much is clear: in its attention to masses rather than men, in its focus on the constitutive role of culture in the delineation of ethnic identity, in its careful attention to the evolution of material culture and the quality of everyday life and in its concern with the spatial components of national and ethnic self-awareness, the German and European völkisch movement of the interwar era exhibited a constructive intellectual vitality that has since been creatively harnessed by researchers with far different political agendas. This well-edited and thematically unified volume considers the dimensions and impact of that vitality in a wide variety of settings, and by so doing contributes materially to our historiographical understanding of the West in an era of turbulence and transition.

Note

[1]. Willi Oberkrome, *Volksgeschichte. Methodische Innovation und völkische Ideologisierung in der deutschen Geschichtswissenschaft, 1918-1945* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993). For background on the controversy, Peter Schöttler, ed., *Geschichtsschreibung als Legitimationswissenschaft 1918-1945* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997).

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