



**Florentine Fritzen.** *Gesünder leben: Die Lebensreformbewegung im 20. Jahrhundert.* Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2006. 366 S. EUR 69.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-515-08790-2.



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## Reforming Lifestyle, Transforming Society

Finding an orderly narrative in the disorder of historical reality, “im Gewirr ein System zu erkennen,” as Florentine Fritzen puts it, is one of the historian’s main tasks (p. 11). Since they became a topic of interest to historians in the 1960s, the sprawling, interconnected German groups working for *Lebensreform*, or life reform, have defied easy systematization (p. 23). Beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century, Germans organized themselves into groups for all kinds of reform-related projects, including vegetarianism, natural health care, nudism, clothing reform, educational reform, reform of city living, and opposition to vaccination and alcohol. Previous historians have emphasized the quasi-religious nature of life-reform ideas, or seen the groups’ emphasis on nature as a rejection of modernity.[1] Florentine Fritzen’s book narrows down the central idea of *Lebensreform* to “healthier living,” and sees its critique of modern, unhealthy society as evidence of its participation in the modernity of that very society.

This approach leads Fritzen to exclude many groups usually understood as part of the sphere of *Lebensreform* from her study. However, by using it she is able to cre-

ate an orderly story linking the natural health movement (*Naturheilkunde*), the vegetarian movement, and, in a new contribution to discussions of German reform movements, the *Reformhaus* movement, whose heirs (the numerous health food stores with that name) are still found in Germany today. Uniting these groups was a new concept of health that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century. Not merely the absence of sickness, health was now a state of optimal well-being, which an individual could influence by his or her lifestyle decisions (p. 279). Healthy individuals, in turn, could help transform the whole society, a fundamental part of the vision shared by the groups she discusses.

Fritzen begins by discussing the institutional history of the movement for *Lebensreform*. The vegetarian and natural health movements of the *Kaiserreich* were the earliest promoters of “healthier living,” presenting not just diet and health care advice, but visions of a new lifestyle and a utopian future. The prewar years saw the birth of *Reformhäuser* as well, which provided products to facilitate the “reformed” lifestyle. During the interwar years, the number of stores increased (from 200 in

1925 to 1,000 in 1932) while natural health and vegetarian club memberships declined (p. 49). The stores took on the role of the earlier clubs, providing not just places to buy goods but meeting places for like-minded people and sites of education through their customer newspapers.

That stores took on the mantle of life reform demonstrates the increasingly important role consumption played in people's lives over the course of the twentieth century. This is one of the new insights Fritzen brings to the study of German *Lebensreform*. Her early history of *Reformhäuser* helps put to rest any notion that Germany became a consumer society only after the Second World War. In her discussion of the historiography of consumption, Fritzen refers intriguingly to reform products themselves as embodiments of reform ideas and to new relationships between goods and consumers (p. 21). At the same time, she eschews as too sociological any discussion of *Reformhaus* customers (p. 22). Fritzen uses industry newsletters and customer newspapers to analyze the institutional history and health ideas of the movement, and these new sources add credibility to her study. Yet, more could be examined here: what made the jam sold in a *Reformhaus* "better"? What made customers willing to spend more on products there than for similar items at other establishments? These questions are difficult to answer because the book does not investigate who the customers were. More discussion of the products themselves and the people meant to buy them would have enriched this study.

Fritzen describes a dynamic interplay between the life-reform movement, specifically the *Reformhaus* movement, and German society. After the First World War, many of the movement's alternative lifestyle ideas became part of the mainstream. In order to carve out new space for itself, the movement of the 1920s and 1930s stressed living more "vitality," a concept promoted through advertisements for vitamins and other nutritional supplements (p. 201). *Reformhäuser* found an official place in the National Socialist reorganization of the food industry: a "Reform House Department" was included in the retail trade economic group, alongside other, less alternative, categories like fruit and vegetables, chocolate, and candy (p. 87). The association of *Reformhaus* owners aligned itself with the new regime, with

many storeowners joining the NSDAP. The association's four Jewish members were expelled (p. 80).

These facts, along with the parallels between National Socialist ideas about the "people's health" and life-reform visions of social health, might lead readers to associate the movement with Nazi ideology. Yet, Fritzen is eager to show the distance of the life-reform movement from any of the ideologies of the twentieth century. As she sees it, the movement's vision of itself as a "third way," oriented around "reform" broadly conceived, allowed it to fit into any regime and keeps it from being overly tarred with the Nazi brush (p. 323).

After the Second World War, the movement turned from "inner nature" to "outer nature," with a new focus on the environment. Fritzen sees the period from the 1980s on as one of decline for *Lebensreform* ideas, with a focus on individual "wellness" edging out the social and environmental concerns of the earlier movement. Fritzen's book ends with the death of both of the earliest prophets of life reform, and of *Lebensreform* itself as a movement (p. 335). Yet, viewed with a wider lens, the contemporary period could be seen as another phase in the transformation of German concepts of health. Much in the relationship between the reform lifestyle and the marketplace in present-day Germany remains to be explored.

Fritzen's book provides a thorough look at the institutions and ideas of the movement for *Lebensreform* in the short twentieth century. The organization of the book and the German convention of numerically labeling each subsection interfere at times with attempts at creating a flowing narrative. Despite this minor problem, Fritzen has contributed a new framework, new sources, and new insights to the study of the still relevant German movement for life reform.

#### Note

[1]. For example, Wolfgang R. Krabbe, "Die Lebensreform. Individualisierte Heilserwartung im industriellen Zeitalter," *Journal für Geschichte* 2 (1980): 8-13; and Diethart Kerbs and Jürgen Reulecke, eds., *Handbuch der deutschen Reformbewegungen 1880-1933* (Wuppertal: Peter Hammer Verlag, 1998).

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