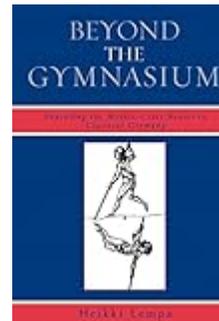




Heikki Lempa. *Beyond the Gymnasium: Educating the Middle-Class Bodies in Classical Germany.* Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2007. 306 pp. \$38.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7391-2090-3.



Reviewed by Benita Blessing (Department of History, Ohio University)

Published on H-German (November, 2007)

One Hundred Years of Dietetics, Gymnastics, Dancing, Walking, Cholera, and Schools

There is an intriguing, albeit hidden, argument in this book about the intersection of science and politics in the nineteenth-century German public imagination of the individual body. It is only possible to identify it, however, after sorting through a confusing, unbalanced labyrinth of deceptively labeled chapters and over 240 pages of description of diverse topics that the author believes are related to it and fit together to form a narrative about modernity. Early on in the book, Heikki Lempa argues “that a study of the body and its practices tells an important story about the formation of the German educated middle class and that this story is about anachronistic modernization in which social practices and intellectual vocabularies were accommodated to changing socio-economic and political conditions but the willingness to change social conduct and decorum was combined with a reliance on old models and conceptualizations of the body” (p. 8). I cannot explain what “anachronistic modernization” might be, although I suspect it has something to do with Lempa’s concluding four sentences, which abruptly raise the topic of National Socialist Germany. We must realize, Lempa explains, that “pre-modern arguments were fully capable of producing modern polit-

ical strategies. Rather than use it might have been the careful hiding of the modern characteristics of German pre-modern body culture that made the Nazi revolution of German society so successful” (*sic*, p. 240).

But new revelations of how the Nazis came to power are not really the point of the work: Lempa’s true focus is a social history of nineteenth-century bodies (p. 6). The structure of the book, divided thematically (dietetics, gymnastics, dance, walking, and cholera, with occasional chapters that include themes that did not fit in to these clear topics) is the key to lending some form to Lempa’s prose. The argument that Lempa seems to proffer is that the transformation of the field of dietetics (*Ern ahrung*) from a scientific field to the domain of everyday practices reflected and contributed to other national discourses about the role of the body in the formation of self and state. Thus new attention to the health and welfare of the individual body could be harnessed in order to create a stronger national body. This argument is not new, and Lempa’s lengthy description of Turnvater Jahn’s contributions to this movement will be familiar to most historians of nineteenth-century Germany. Lempa

has moreover created a straw man who, he asserts, has previously attempted to understand Jahn's appeal primarily in terms of his charisma without analyzing influences on Jahn's work, such as Johann GutsMuth's (p. 77). Lempa's description of Jahn's goal of creating a "tribal body" actually brings him further away from his argument, immersing the reader in a narrative that often appears tangential to the analysis. Similarly, the statement that Jahn's decision to "evoke the early Germans" in using the word *Gerwerfen* instead of *Speerwurf* "carried the memory of the tribal community; an act of this exercise became a reenactment of the tribal community" (p. 85) conflates a history of Jahn's own ideologies with larger social developments regarding dietetics and the body.

Lempa's inclusion of discussions about walking and dancing have the potential to add a new dimension to body studies, but instead of providing interpretation and informed speculation to link these areas, Lempa opts for excessive description and pleas of ignorance. Thus, after noting that "physical exercise found its way into academic curricula" at the end of the seventeenth century, he states that "[t]he reasons for this are not quite clear" (p. 69)—a confusing statement in a study of the body. Introducing the topic of his book in the preface, Lempa claims that "we do not know" the answers to questions about whether nineteenth-century German intellectuals' interest in the "autonomous self" was a political agenda or whether it promoted a social revolution (p. ix). In discussing the rise of the "science of dancing," Lempa notes that dancing "was not a uniquely urban activity," thus missing a possibility to tie this observation in with his interest in Jahn's "tribalism" (p. 122). Lempa also contradicts his own theories about social class by noting that dance was not cultural capital but rather an act of "mutual recognition," a theory that does little to support his analysis and sends him off on a description of the history of dance that could easily be a separate book, and does not belong here.

Most troubling in this study is the constant reference to theoretical paradigms, particularly those of Michel Foucault, without actually using them for analysis, while rather important theoretical studies and secondary literature are entirely absent. How can a book about the body and movement not draw upon the very rich literature about these topics by the pioneer of movement analysis, Rudolf Laban?[1] Modernity and the variations of it that Lempa employs—modernism, pre-modernity, and so on—also have no set definition in this text. Along these same lines, it is odd that a book about the role of education in nineteenth-century Germany does not engage with

the key work on schooling in that period, by James Al-bisetti.[2] Indeed, a brief overview of Lempa's endnotes shows surprisingly few secondary sources—although his bibliography is quite long—so that it is not clear whether he is aware that he is repeating claims made in much of the extant literature. In many places where he does include secondary literature in his notes, the book would have profited from explicit discussion of the material in the text itself. It is time-consuming to reach a discussion of "the new Brunonian theory" or cameralism and then only find explanations and definitions of these terms in the endnotes (pp. 19 and 20, respectively). The definitions in the endnotes are lengthy, but this method does not make for a smooth or logical narrative structure. In references to some literatures, there are no endnotes at all. For example, he claims that the fields of the history of education and sports history have covered the "Lorinser-debate," but not a single title or author supports this assertion.

To further complicate the reading, Lempa's book lacks balance in its treatment of topics. Although the title refers to the *Gymnasium*, which he explains in other places in its linguistic context of education and sports, the chapter on the *Gymnasium* is only eleven pages long, with an additional five-and-a-half pages of endnotes (pp. 216-232). Other chapters are closer to forty pages in length, although several contain lengthy sub-chapters that could have been omitted entirely or at least shortened. For instance, the "Gymnastics" chapter contains a meandering account of the "forgetfulness of history," which caused the gymnastics movement "according to its own historical understanding" to be "forgotten by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries" (p. 88). Aside from the way in which such language obscures his intended meaning, this excursus does not adequately introduce the rest of that particular section. On the other hand, the chapter on dance takes on dimensions that would easily qualify it for a book in and of itself (pp. 112-162).

Finally, some restraint in the preface would have made the book easier to digest. I remain unclear as to how his generation—which must also be my generation—was a disillusioned one in the 1980s, so that its members "turned away from those great political projects that had shaped the lives and aspirations of [our] elders and mentors in the 1970s" (p. ix). I did not find myself in his contention that "[w]e were not fascinated by social upheavals" and that we believed that the "techniques of self ... would ultimately help build a better world" (p. ix). Such apologist prose does nothing for understanding his

motivation for researching this subject, nor does it provide a starting point from which to begin the reading.

A book about private and public bodies is one worth reading; the field of movement studies demands more scholarly attention. The arguments that I believe to have identified in this work provide much inspiration for further research on a variety of the topics that Lempa touches on. I would not recommend the book as a definitive study for a scholar at any level, but beginning re-

searchers will find some helpful ideas and sources in it.

Notes

[1]. See Rudolf Laban, *Laban's Principles of Dance and Movement Notation*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Plays, Inc., 1975).

[2]. James Albisetti, *Secondary School Reform in Imperial Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

View the author(s) response to this review:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=h-german&month=0711&week=c&msg=vN4wgPLZ3648agGUawNzOQ&>

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Benita Blessing. Review of Lempa, Heikki, *Beyond the Gymnasium: Educating the Middle-Class Bodies in Classical Germany*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. November, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13894>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.