



Jürgen Danyel, Jan-Holger Kirsch, Martin Sabrow, eds. *50 Klassiker der Zeitgeschichte*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007. 247 pp. EUR 19.90 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-525-36024-8.



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Joining the Contemporary Canon

What is contemporary history? According to the editors of this new volume, which offers a contextualization and critical re-reading of fifty “classics” in this genre, contemporary history is characterized by an “Offenheit zur Gegenwart” and a “beständige Revision von Perspektiven, Standpunkten und Erkenntnissen unter dem Eindruck öffentlicher und wissenschaftlicher Debatten” (p. 11). Each of the individual entries provides a concise overview of the selected work, as well as an account of its reception and enduring relevance. The result is a comprehensive survey of how the evolution of contemporary history in (West) Germany since the 1940s has been shaped by political events: the turmoil of the *Stunde Null*, the peaks and troughs of the Cold War, the *Machtwechsel* of 1969, the *Wende* of 1982, the collapse of the GDR in 1989—and also by developments in historical methodology: the rise of *Alltagsgeschichte*, *Erfahrungsgeschichte*, visual history, the history of mentalities, and so on.

Eclecticism is a key and very welcome feature of the collection, as reflected in the positioning of biographies of leading statesmen and works of political theory alongside structuralist accounts and em-

pirically based social and political histories. As one of the contributors, Thomas Schaarschmidt, comments, “sowohl innerwissenschaftliche Debatten als auch neue nationale und globale Herausforderungen haben einen neuen Pragmatismus begünstigt, der sich in Perspektivenvielfalt, Methodenpluralismus und einer Entideologisierung wissenschaftlicher Debatten ausdrückt” (p. 132). Thirty-five years ago, during the heyday of the Bielefeld school, things of course looked very different, as Schaarschmidt reminds us in his brief but informative discussion of Jürgen Kocka’s *Klassengesellschaft im Krieg* (1973), and as Andreas Rüdiger shows in his critical account of Hans-Ulrich Wehler’s *Modernisierungstheorie und Geschichte* (1975).

All of the individual contributions, in fact, are interesting, thoughtful and well grounded in contemporary theoretical debates. For instance, the late Michael Zimmermann’s superb analysis of Detlev Peukert’s book on Nazi Germany, *Volksgenossen und Gemeinschaftsfremde* (1982), convincingly places this study at several important methodological and historiographical intersections that are still relevant today: “zwischen allge-

meiner Faschismus-Theorie und der Akzentuierung der spezifischen Seiten des Nationalsozialismus; zwischen Gesellschafts- und Alltagsgeschichte; zwischen marxistisch inspirierten Deutungsversuchen, fortschrittsorientierten Modernisierungstheorien und einer durch Michel Foucault, Norbert Elias, Max Weber und Jürgen Habermas geprägten, zwar skeptischen, aber nicht kulturpessimistischen Entkoppelung von Moderne und Fortschritt” (pp. 167-168). He also draws links between Peukert and several other works of contemporary history that appeared in the late 1970s and 1980s, including Lutz Niethammer’s oral history project on the Ruhr, Ulrich Herbert’s study of enforced foreign labor in wartime Nazi Germany, Klaus Theweleit’s two-volume *Männerphantasien* (1977-78), and the publications on youth cultures produced by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham (pp. 167-168).

Meanwhile, Dan Diner provides a highly convincing account of the “kaleidoscope” nature of Hannah Arendt’s style of argumentation in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), “in dem sich alles ständig verschiebt und neu komponiert” (p. 40); and Martin Sabrow suggests—again with great insight and empathy—that Sebastian Haffner’s *Die Verratene Revolution* (1969) is no “klassisches Werk der Fachhistorie ... wohl aber ein klassischer Referenztext für die Entwicklung der zeithistorischen Literatur in der Bundesrepublik” (p. 122).

Admittedly, some omissions are made here too, or rather, the reader will find areas that are not covered particularly well. Thus, the important contribution of feminist historians in the 1980s to our understanding of National Socialist racism fails to get a mention.[1] The same applies to the work of feminist historians on the social history of the First World War, or on the history of youth.[2] Meanwhile, GDR scholarship is represented by the inclusion of just one work by an East German author: Olaf Groehler’s *Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland*, which actually appeared in 1990, after the fall of communism. Admittedly most earlier GDR works on contemporary history are now probably best forgotten, largely because of the heavy ideological baggage they carried with them. There are one or two exceptions, however, such as the multi-authored, three-volume work *Deutschland im Ersten Weltkrieg* (1968-69), which was generally well received in the West and filled in many gaps in historical knowledge, especially in relation to the anti-war movement in Germany, bourgeois as well as socialist. Its continuing importance can be seen in the decision by the Leipziger Universitätsverlag to republish it in 2004.[3]

These omissions point to a bigger question: namely, what makes a “classic” and what simply makes a good book of lasting value and interest? Eschewing the methodology of an earlier volume, which relied on a questionnaire answered by 168 experts, the editors of the present collection opt for an apparently more subjective and personalized approach, “die stärker die Handschrift der Herausgeber und Autoren erkennen lässt” (p. 17, n. 7). To be fair, the outcome is not entirely random and arbitrary, but neither can it claim to be wholly systematic. Thus, some works have been chosen because, in spite of intervening decades, their conclusions seem to have borne up to close public and scholarly scrutiny, or because, in retrospect, they appear to have been “ahead of their time.” Others are deemed “classics” because they represent a particular time period during the immediate postwar or Cold War eras; in other words, because they themselves have become “documents of contemporary history” (p. 15). Still others have been selected on the basis of their instant success, although they arguably have had little or no time to establish themselves as classics. Can it really be claimed, for example, that a volume of essays on the social history of the GDR has already become a classic when it was only published in 1994 and when research on the GDR in general is still in its infancy?[4]

Finally, Rüdiger Hohls, in his discussion of Jürgen Falter’s study, *Hitlers Wähler* (1991), reminds us that, irrespective of whether a book reads well, or sells well, or is translated into other languages, an important criterion, at least in the political and social sciences, is its “Zitationsfähigkeit ... in führenden Fachzeitschriften anhand des ‘Social Sciences & Humanities Citation Index’” (p. 220). Falter certainly performs highly on the latter score. However, whether Hohls thinks this should be a key determinant across the board, or only in the individual case he has chosen, is unclear.

All this discussion points to a central contradiction that the editors recognize but do little to resolve: How can a discipline that claims to be open to constant revision and critical reinterpretation in a rapidly changing, media-driven, and celebrity-obsessed world nonetheless produce works deemed to be canonical texts of high quality and timeless value? The circle can only be completed, it seems, if we redefine and therefore relativize the meaning of the word “classic” itself.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, Renate Bridenthal, Atina Grossmann, and Marion Kaplan, eds., *When Biology Became*

Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984); and Gisela Bock, *Zwangssterilisation im Nationalsozialismus. Studien zur Rassenpolitik und Frauenpolitik* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1986). Interestingly, *When Biology Became Destiny* was the subject of a special twentieth-anniversary discussion in *German History* 22 (2004): 600-612.

[2]. Ute Daniel, *Arbeiterfrauen in der Kriegsgesellschaft. Beruf, Familie und Politik im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989); Dagmar Reese, "Straff, aber nicht stramm - Herb aber nicht derb".

Zur Vergesellschaftung von Mädchen durch den Bund Deutscher Mädchen im sozialkulturellen Vergleich zweier Milieus (Weinheim and Basel: Beltz, 1989). See also my review of the recent English translation of Reese's book, H-German Reviews, January 2007.

[3]. Fritz Klein et al., *Deutschland im Ersten Weltkrieg*, 3 vols. (Berlin [East]: Akademie-Verlag, 1968-69), republished by the Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2004.

[4]. The same question was raised in a review of this volume by Christian Esch under the title "Der kurze Weg zum Klassiker," *Berliner Zeitung*, May 22, 2007.

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