

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Daniel E. Rogers. *Politics after Hitler: The Western Allies and the German Party System.* New York: New York University Press, 1995. xiv + 207 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-7461-8.

Reviewed by Diethelm Prowe (Department of History, Carleton College)

Published on H-German (September, 1995)

The (West) German party system has been one of the critical factors in the democratic stability of the Federal Republic. The Basic Law of 1949 gave political parties a central role in West German democracy, and despite the well-founded criticism that party-managed politics has endured lately by such notables as Richard von Weizsäcker, the political system has helped to assure predictability, moderation, and reasonable responsiveness to the popular will without the vacillations of multiparty instability and the demagoguery of the previous decades. In this comprehensive study of the Allied role in licensing and managing the establishment of political parties during the critical postwar foundation years from 1945 to 1949, Daniel Rogers has amassed considerable evidence to show that the Western Allies played a critical part in shaping the system of large, moderate parties that have characterized German politics. British, French, and American military governments did not arrive in Germany with clear plans for the creation and control of parties. British and American officials were predisposed toward broadly based parties rather by their own political traditions. The French, meanwhile, were probably guided more by their determination to keep German political activity as manageable as possible and to block nationalist or centralist tendencies.

Rogers begins with the apparently obvious supposition that the Allies formulated their policies in reaction to their experience of the immediate past rather than to their future expectations. The instability of the Weimar Republic, the rise of Hitler, and the war experience shaped Allied policies far more profoundly than did the emerging Cold War. Rogers thus confronts head on the “new scholarship” of the 1960s and 1970s, wherein “the Allies – but above all the Americans – emerged...as the

most calculating and prescient of statesmen...determined from the very start to crush the political left, which after the war, to follow this reasoning, would have been ascendant” (50). In his extensive primary research in the archives of all four countries involved – Britain, the United States, France, and Germany – an impressive feat of scholarship in itself, Rogers finds a very different reality. The Allies’ first concerns were denazification and the prevention of a resurgence of nationalist parties – a fact that has not been in much dispute. Rogers shows, however, that this anti-nationalist policy was not simply replaced by an anti-socialist agenda. Rather it was expanded into a policy against radical parties of the right, left, and other marginal interests such as regionalism and monarchism. Indeed the spectre of the multiparty instability of the Weimar years prompted the Allies to discourage *any* splinter and special interest parties which might have threatened the major ones. Thus the Allies moved against particularist, refugee, and other one-issue parties including an international law party. Of special interest in this context is Rogers’s argument concerning the much-discussed Allied prohibition of the Antifa [Anti-fascist] committees, which rose spontaneously in a number of cities to organize local services and to eliminate Nazis. His evidence suggests that military governments disliked the Antifas not because they were often dominated by communists or socialists, but because they were aggressively political when political activity was not permitted. Thus one conservative local action committee was dissolved as well.

These findings make the book an important part of a larger debate. It makes a significant contribution to the ongoing reevaluation of the Allied and especially the American role in laying the new Germany’s foundations.

Rogers harmonizes closely with a wave of recent literature that has taken a new look at the occupation by examining a broader range of Allied military governmental activity, from cultural projects to foreign exchanges to the creation of non-governmental institutions. Such studies have not only created a more differentiated view, but have reached a notably more positive judgement on the Allied contribution to German democratization than earlier studies which had focused on the political struggles over such hot issues as denazification, decartelization, socialization, dismantlement, or the formal reeducation program. The new work includes Hermann-Josef Rupieper's *Die Wurzeln der westdeutschen Demokratie* (1993), Edgar Wolfrum's *Franzoesische Besatzungspolitik und Deutsche Sozialdemokratie* (1991), two important essay collections (Jeffrey Diefendorf, Axel Frohn, and Hermann-Josef Rupieper, eds., *America's Policy toward Germany, 1945-1955* [1992], and Reiner Pommerin, ed., *The American Impact on Postwar Germany* [1995]), Volker Berghahn's recent presentation, "America and the Shaping of West Germany's Social Compact" (AHA 1995 Annual Meeting), and ongoing studies on cultural programs.

By returning to a core issue of democratization, Rogers has taken the debate back to the essential issue raised in the 1960s: did Germans take the road to democracy under Western Allied control, or did they – as the revisionists argued – miss their chance for a "genuine" democratic renewal? Rogers clearly applauds "the enduring effects for the Allies on two concepts: moderation and stability." In this argument Rogers joins the supposition recently advanced by Volker Berghahn with respect to labor policy, namely that the Western Powers made a decisive contribution for an ultimately successful democratic society, which not only triumphed over the old nationalist right, but also over a utopian and perhaps even demagogic postwar radical left, whose "genuine democracy" was never more than a potentially constrictive chimera. Although Berghahn's recent work was not yet available to Rogers, Rogers makes this link quite explicit when placing his thesis into the context of

Charles Maier's famous 1981 *American Historical Review* article on stabilization in the two postwar eras – an article which also served as an inspiration for Berghahn's work on America and the German labor compact.

Yet no book is perfect. There are a couple of places where the author does not take into account recent revisions. For instance, Rogers still describes a fierce conflict between the French military government and the Social Democrats based on the ascerbic relations between top French officials and Kurt Schumacher. This description ignores the aforementioned work by Wolfrum (listed in Rogers's bibliography) which argues that these relations were more differentiated. More important, it is perhaps inevitable that an author becomes so convinced of his thesis that he exaggerates it. Rogers makes a convincing case that the Allies combatted radicalism and splintering in the German party system, but he often finds American and British officials highly indecisive. Thus the Allies might have been less influential than factors within German postwar political culture in the movement toward large, moderate parties. Many historians have noted the strong drive of postwar Germans toward synthesis and cooperation, as demonstrated not only in the Catholic-Protestant fusion in the CDU, but also in the comprehensive labor union organization and in the broadening of the Social Democratic Party, all of which sprang from historical lessons well learned from the Weimar Republic and in the anti-Nazi resistance. Once again, as in building local and federal democratic structures, Allied efforts to build broadly based parties may look more forceful in retrospect because they harmonized so well with even more determined home-grown efforts. But these are simply debating points. Clearly this is a significant, impressively researched, and well-written book, which deserves to be read and discussed widely.

Copyright (c) 1995 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

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

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

Citation: Diethelm Prowe. Review of Rogers, Daniel E., *Politics after Hitler: The Western Allies and the German Party System*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. September, 1995.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=155>

Copyright © 1995 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.