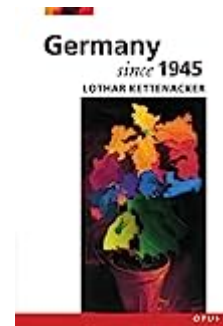


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Lothar Kettenacker. *Germany Since 1945*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. 332 pp. \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-289242-3.



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Those of us who have taught courses in European history since the Second World War have had cause to bemoan the lack of affordable, accessible texts, so naturally Lothar Kettenacker's new history of Germany since 1945 raises expectations and hopes. At first glance this seems a comprehensive, affordable book, priced at about fifteen dollars, complete with excellent maps, lots of tables and statistics, a detailed chronology and an attractive cover. While *Germany Since 1945* contains a considerable amount of useful information, my own feeling is that for the most part Kettenacker has missed an opportunity to write a truly significant book.

Part of the problem concerns the author's approach: this book is high politics, and high politics with a vengeance. Most of Kettenacker's discussion of what has happened politically in Germany over the past half century is restricted to the deliberations of a handful of those at the very top. The first five chapters of the book, dealing with Allied occupation, the split between the two republics, foreign policy, economics and the constitutional framework, all follow this line. It is not necessarily a wrong approach (especially given the spectacular political apathy amongst Germans in the West after 1945), but readers might wish that the author had done something to make historical figures such as Konrad Adenauer or Helmut Schmidt come to life. We learn, for example, that

Adenauer was actually an avuncular sort of chap who had a wry sense of humour, but there are no anecdotes or stories that might animate this portrait.

Kettenacker also focuses overwhelmingly on events, such as they were, in the Federal Republic, and this may have been the wrong choice. Oddly, the one spot in the first half of the book where Kettenacker's prose really comes to life can be found on pages fifty to fifty-two, during a discussion of the East German uprising of July 1953. Drawing on the archival-based work of two young German historians, Kettenacker suggests that we need a new interpretation of this seminal episode in modern German history. But his discussion is limited to a couple of pages, with one solitary footnote directing curious readers to two sources. The events of 1989 are treated in similarly frustrating fashion. Coverage of the most crucial eruption of mass politics in German history is quickly sidelined in favour of a long discussion of the tortuous course of Helmut Kohl's cabinet policy. Kettenacker mentions that the Stasi archives contain sensational revelations (especially on the astonishing number of Stasi collaborators, which demolishes the notion of a united nation battling heroically against foreign oppressors), and briefly the mood lightens for the reader. But take my word for it, the author soon has us back to the grind.

The pages can crawl by at times. Kettenacker's discussion of economic policy in chapter four features a hair-splitter on "neo" versus "ordo" liberals that will lose any but the most ardent specialist. There are many parts of this book that are similarly obtuse. At times it reads like a series of in-jokes or asides among members of an exclusive fraternity. One could also detect a slightly whiggish tone to Kettenacker's interpretation of modern German history. Fortunately the merits of this book are substantial enough to overcome any such reservations.

One thing this book shows conclusively is that Kettenacker is an historian who possesses a profound understanding of German public opinion. The two middle chapters of the book (dealing with party politics, public opinion and culture) are by far the best and contain a multitude of perceptive observations. The discussion of West German politics during the period from the late 1940s to the mid-1960s is fairly predictable, although the author does stress the ineptitude of the Social Democrats as a factor contributing to the long tenure of the Christlich-Demokratische Union (CDU). Kettenacker also proves that the political party system in Germany during this period was much different than the notoriously fractious Weimar party system: perhaps an obvious point but one that bears repeating. It was not until the late 1960s that German democracy weathered its first major challenge, surviving converging attacks from both extreme left and extreme right. Kettenacker is surprisingly generous towards the student radicals of 1968, pointing out that they were part of an important shift in German political thinking away from the authoritarian mentality of the past to a more open and tolerant social climate (p. 140). Kettenacker goes on to cover the rise of the Greens in the 1980s, and argues that they have now probably re-established themselves as a permanent party on the German political scene. The Greens have overcome early divisions and blunders, developed a coherent program and found a bedrock constituency.

The recent success of the far right Deutsche Volks Union in the Sachsen-Anhalt state elections prompted yet another round of hysterical speculation in the world press about the impending revival of Nazism in Germany. Yet I doubt Kettenacker would have been surprised by the results of the vote. We have seen such eruptions of far-right support under previous, and roughly similar conditions where high unemployment, disillusionment with the major political parties, and xenophobia have all fuelled the growth of protest parties. Kettenacker points out that such successes are short-lived and almost never

translate into success in national elections. Does anyone today remember the National-Demokratische Partei Deutschlands (NPD) which caused such consternation in the late 1960s?

More serious than the threat posed by the far-right, according to Kettenacker, is the apathy induced by the claustrophobic grip of the major parties on the German political system. Kettenacker regrets the loss of the earnest, party-transcending debates in the first (East German) democratic parliament after 18 March 1990. Using a memorable metaphor he conjures up the image of West German party machines moving east like gigantic combine harvesters to mow down the new grass-roots organisations following reunification. Research has shown conclusively that Germans are now profoundly disillusioned with their political leadership, the logical result, Kettenacker argues, of the failure of the Fuehrer and his false promises; then, after 1968, the realisation that democracy was no panacea either; and finally, the collapse of the socialist utopia (p. 158).

German reunification means that the period from 1945 to 1990 is now seen as a self-contained historical period, to be summarised in future textbooks as "Germany Divided" or "The Time of Division" (p. 236). During these years the government in Bonn pursued a policy of patient "small steps" in attaining a degree of reconciliation with the East. Much contempt was heaped on this policy, but as Kettenacker notes, it was ultimately successful. He holds few illusions about the reintegration of the east, pointing out that it will be a long time before easterners feel that they are something more than just poor relations. Kettenacker also suggests that the "small steps" policy offers a guide to the future. By incrementally contributing to the integration of Europe, perhaps Germany can "redeem its past" (p. 244).

Given the writing style and detailed nature of the subject matter, *Germany Since 1945* will likely prove most attractive to academics and specialists. This is unfortunate since a more general approach aimed at a wider audience might have been much more successful. Such a book is certainly needed. Still, no one interested in the recent course of German history should lose sight of the considerable value of Kettenacker's contribution.

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