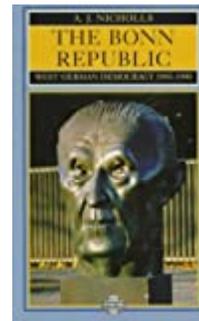


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Anthony James Nicholls. *The Bonn Republic: West German Democracy 1945-1990.* London and New York: Longman, 1997. 341 pp. \$49.60 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-49230-1; \$112.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-582-49231-8.



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“Bonn is not Weimar.” This quotation, which became the title of a best-selling account of the early years of the Federal Republic of Germany, has become one of the most cherished clichés in postwar German politics. Like most clichés, it has survived continuous use because it contains an important truth. Indisputably, the second attempt to build a democratic Germany in a provincial cultural town proved more successful than the first. While many in the 1950s and early 1960s would decry the relatively sterile intellectual and cultural life in West Germany, and while they expressed nostalgia for the free-wheeling neo-decadence of the 1920s, no one can deny that the unspectacular but more enduring accomplishments of the Bonn Republic were preferable to those of her flashy but doomed Weimar ancestor.

The Bonn Republic’s image underwent many changes over the years. Originally conceived (officially, at least) as a provisional state with a “seat of government” instead of a capital and a “Basic Law” instead of a constitution, it only gradually gained public support. In its first decades it came under attack from nationalist critics of the Right and Left for betraying national unity in favor of integration into the West, while even its most ardent defenders proclaimed their desire to see it replaced by a reunified Germany. As the years passed and the provisional appeared to be permanent, most West Germans reconciled

themselves to the Republic with many arguing that national division, no longer anomalous in a “post-national” world, was a logical and permanent price to pay for Germany’s past. References to national unity were repeated and used for political purposes, but no one seriously expected reunification within their lifetimes. When unification finally did come, swiftly and unexpectedly, followed by a decision to return the government to Berlin, many Germans even began to express nostalgia for the good old days on the Rhine.

For better or worse, the Bonn Republic, which outlasted Weimar by more than a quarter century, has become part of history, a victim not of its failure but its success. The Berlin Republic, once again at the center rather than the frontier of Europe, will face new challenges and opportunities. For historians, the Bonn Republic has thus become a discrete historical era. With many familiar controversies now freed from their immediate political connections, historians can begin evaluating the various stages of West German development to see how the pieces related to each other and how they influenced the evolution of West German democracy. This is a project that will certainly last many years. Along the way, however, specialists, students, and general readers will need a concise and readable survey of the events as they integrate the history of the Bonn Republic into the

context of modern German history.

The latest attempt to fill this need comes from distinguished scholar Anthony Nicholls. His book is the newest volume in Longman's valuable series, *The Postwar World*, of which Nicholls himself is a co-editor. As with the other volumes in this series, Nicholls's book offers an attractive, easy-to-follow, largely narrative history that can be useful to a wide spectrum of readers.

The book demonstrates many significant strengths. Nicholls has a sure command of the political and economic developments he describes, and after the first few analytical chapters, which outline the political and social structures bequeathed by the occupation period, he offers a solid and compelling narrative. The chapters themselves are clearly divided into subsections for easy maneuvering through the text. Nicholls also writes very well, with a quintessentially English knack for the historical *bon mot*. For example, in describing the Bundestag election of 1953, in which many Protestant voters abandoned their traditional nationalism and voted for Konrad Adenauer's CDU/CSU, thus setting the Federal Republic on its clear course of Western integration, Nicholls writes, "It was the moment when the Prussian *Bildungsbürgertum* lost its innocence; when faced with a choice between idealism and material interest, it chose the latter. The choice was a wise one" (p. 114).

Despite the narrative structure, Nicholls also offers some clear and challenging interpretations that will interest specialists. He is unafraid to take firm positions on familiar controversies, dismissing historians who attack Adenauer for rejecting Stalin's 1952 offer of unification with the declaration: "there is little doubt that Adenauer was right, and that Soviet moves were mainly designed to sow confusion in the West" (p. 128). He is no more charitable to the Christian Democratic opponents of Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik*, attacking Franz-Josef Strauss and his conservative allies for sowing "confusion and malevolence" within their own party and for pandering to nationalist sentiments (pp. 236-7). Nicholls also tries to counter recent revisionist trends in German politics by distancing Ludwig Erhard's economic thinking from contemporary *laissez-faire* enthusiasts who have sought to make Erhard an advocate of unregulated capitalism. Nicholls demonstrates his own expertise on the subject (on which he has written widely) by emphasizing the "social" aspects of the "Social Market Economy" and the significance of this balance to the German "Economic Miracle" (pp. 59-61; 93-103). Amidst the political

and economic analysis are also included a few interesting discussions of German society, particularly Nicholls's discussion of the increasing significance of tourism in postwar German life (pp. 182-5).

Nicholls's history clearly has its own set of heroes and villains, which helps drive the narrative. The heroes include politicians who combined bold ideas with pragmatic statesmanship such as Adenauer, Erhard, Brandt, Hans-Dietrich Genscher and Helmut Kohl. The villains are those who allowed their ideology to drive their political action, such as the nationalist SPD Chairman and Adenauer opponent Kurt Schumacher, and especially Nicholls's *bete noire*, CSU leader Franz-Josef Strauss. Here Nicholls almost goes too far, making Strauss a virtual cartoon villain, appearing regularly throughout the text simply as a foil for the "good guys." This personalized focus makes for entertaining reading, and reinforces Nicholls's implicit argument that political moderation was the key to the Bonn Republic's success, but it is also open to criticism.

Beyond this caveat, and a few minor proofreading errors, the book does have some more significant weaknesses. Recent history receives relatively scant attention. The years from 1945 to 1969 are covered in great detail (220 of 322 pages of text; eight of eleven chapters), while the last twenty years of the Republic are discussed in a few short chapters supported by few references. Although one could certainly argue that the early years are key to understanding later developments, such heavy chronological frontloading undermines the book's attempt to paint a complete picture of the Bonn Republic and weakens its usefulness as a course text. That the entire process of reunification in 1989-90 receives only about eleven pages of attention will especially frustrate instructors who would like a deeper discussion of events, as will the absence of a comprehensive conclusion to describe more explicitly the major themes that Nicholls sees in the story.

In sum, this is a very good book, probably the best of the current crop of discussions of postwar West Germany. That it nonetheless leaves room for improvement merely indicates how much more work needs to be done in order to understand the history of the Bonn Republic.

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