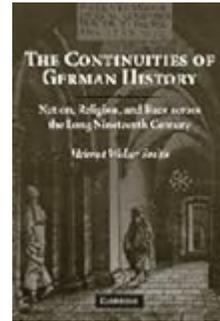


**Helmut Walser Smith.** *The Continuities of German History: Nation, Religion, and Race Across the Long Nineteenth Century.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 254 S. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-89588-0; \$22.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-72025-0.



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## H. Walser Smith: The Continuities of German History

In their 2003 volume 'Shattered Past' historians Konrad Jarausch and Michael Geyer defined the destruction and reconstruction of community as a central theme for modern German history. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, and in the wake of dictatorship, genocide and division, they argued that analyzing the making, and more importantly the unmaking, of civil society would provide new purchase on the past century's complex and painful path. Helmut Walser Smith takes up this point, placing the topic of community at the center of his new book. Yet, as is evident from their titles, Smith's 'The Continuities of German History: Nation, Religion and Race Across the Long Nineteenth Century' differs markedly from Jarausch's and Geyer's 'Shattered Past'. While the latter traces several possible chains of continuity across the twentieth century, Smith focuses on one particular strand of thought and action. Rather than analyzing the role of elites, social structure, political organizations or the development of industrial capitalism—all loci of earlier studies of continuity—Smith focuses on ideological continuities, specifically those found in Christian religion and its intersection with nineteenth-century nationalist thought. Starting with the destruction of the Re-

gensburg synagogue in 1517, he traces the enactment of symbolic scripts of anti-Jewish exclusion and anti-Semitic violence over the course of several centuries.

Citing the work of Hannah Arendt, Smith starts from a philosophical standpoint rather than one rooted in social or political history. His overarching theme is the loss of 'human solidarity', the breaking of the bonds of friendship and care which underlie civil society. In Germany, he writes, the breaking of these bonds had a particular shape, a long history and a fateful outcome. Their dissolution opened the door to the depravity that both marked the Holocaust and made it possible. The disappearance of feeling toward one's fellow man led to the unhinged violence and bestial cruelty of its face-to-face killing. Arendt, however, claimed to be analyzing modern politics and the modern state. She saw the dissolution of civil society in the context of the high imperialism of the late nineteenth-century and the intertwining of racism and state power which made it possible. Smith, by contrast, takes up the theme in a chronologically expansive fashion. He is interested in the 'longue duree'. Stating that the neglect of longer time spans has

led historians to posit short-term, and in his view incorrect, explanations for the Holocaust (incorrect as they de-emphasize the force of anti-Semitism in his view), he emphatically endorses the longer term perspective stretching back over centuries. The 'longue duree' here, and the essential continuity of German history it sets out, is the tangled and violent history of Christian-Jewish relations (p. 132) from the vanishing point of 1941 back to the early modern period. What results, in the end, is history written in the mode of memory.

Smith writes about the creation of a particular type of nationalist memory culture. In his telling feelings of solidarity were continually destroyed through the enactment of ritualized scripts of expulsion, which unceasingly imagined the removal of the Jews from Christian communities. These progressed from word to deed in the course of the centuries, from play to act. From the expulsions of the sixteenth century, Smith moves to the intertwining of violence and religious community in the Thirty Years War, and the memory culture it created, to the anti-Semitic Hep Hep riots of the early nineteenth century. From there he moves to the radicalization of this mode of thinking at the end of the century (in which interestingly all of the salient episodes happen outside of Germany) and the intertwining of anti-Semitism, nationalism and racial thought. The move toward mass expulsion and killing is set in the context of high imperialism and the First World War. Anti-Jewish violence is at the core of his book and, according to Smith, at the center of German history. Its scripts echo through the centuries, its enactments and reenactments increasing, slowly but surely, toward a massive and violent end. From ritual, it moved to massacre and, and after the radicalization of killing in the First World War, to genocide. It is anti-Semitism, Smith writes, which provided the structuring force (p. 220) of Germany's history from the sixteenth century to the twentieth.

Throughout Smith lays emphasis on the recollection of events, their commemoration rather than their facticity, their social complexity or the located ways in which they translated into political discourse and political action. The partial account of events which memory provides (as memory, however much it promises wholeness is always partial), and its contribution to nationalist discourse is his main focus. He explores the ways in which a particular memory culture—created by the religious wars of the early modern period and their scripts of exclusion—bequeathed a legacy to German nationalist thought. In this account German nationalism, which

Smith traces from Fichte to Treitschke to the rantings of Heinrich Class in 1912, is sustained by this memory culture. Transnational developments, including colonial practices and acts of violence toward racial others, provided a radicalizing impetus. Although the book ends in 1914, according to Smith this form of German nationalism, steeped in anti-Semitism, made the Holocaust possible by making it conceivable. Where does continuity lie? Smith asks. Not in genocide, he writes, but in the imagination of expulsion, in the severing of ties to others, and in the violent ideologies, nationalism, anti-Semitism and racism that make these things possible to think, support, and enact. (p. 233)

This is a bold but limited argument. Smith writes movingly about the ruins of religious violence, the marking of sites of destruction and the rituals of re-enactment. This is a large topic that deserves more attention. The problem arises with his almost ahistorical emphasis on ideological continuity and his dismissal of whole rows of scholarship on modern Germany and the Holocaust as simply wrong. Smith takes particular aim at social historians such as Detlev Peukert and his work on the genesis of the Final Solution out of the spirit of science. He wishes his work to displace Peukert's, but it is hard to see how such a direct competition would be possible. Smith's work is written in a different mode and idiom, with conceptions of society, agency, ideology, politics and continuity that differ from Peukert's. Moving strongly onto the terrain of ideology, Smith wishes to track connections across four centuries by analyzing a handful of selected texts. Given the lack of social and political context for much of what he describes (the text runs to only 233 pages), it becomes difficult to trace such large and portentous continuities, and their movement from thought to deed, in anything but an impressionistic fashion. 1941 was not 1517, although this book would have us think that the latter created the strong possibility for the former.

Cultural history has transformed the writing of German history. Cultural history here, however, is limited to the tracing of a memory of violence through chosen symbols and scripts. Smith has pointed to an important topic, but its exploration needs to be done in connection and dialogue with existing works in the field. In the opinion of this reviewer, it would be far more useful to think through Smith's and Peukert's work together, rather than using the former to dislodge or silence the latter.

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