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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Tuska Benes.** *In Babel's Shadow: Language, Philology, and Nation in Nineteenth-Century Germany.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008. xii + 418 pp. $54.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8143-3304-4.

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**Published on** H-German (September, 2009)

**Commissioned by** Susan R. Boettcher

## When Philology Became Destiny

With *In Babel's Shadow*, historian Tuska Benes aims to chart the history of nineteenth-century German philology. She also traces the importance of developments in the field of linguistic study to shifts in German national sentiment and scholarly understanding of what it meant to be German. As a detailed study of the "national question" in German philology, Benes's work is quite successful. She provides a well-constructed intellectual history of German-language scholars from Wilhelm von Humboldt to Friedrich Nietzsche. These are important men–and they are almost all men (Benes periodically comments on the immense gender bias of her subjects)–and the author provides considerable detail about their lives and work. The book focuses very heavily on the "what" of history. The book readily informs the reader, for example, of Johann Gottfried Herder's view of the role language plays in national consciousness and human history. It does not, however, delve deeply into the significance of those views outside the narrow frame of scholarly linguistics, nor in any other contemporary context save the intellectual world in which, admittedly, her scholarly subjects spent a great deal of their time and energy. As such, the book tells an important, if narrow, story with convincing detail and a tight framework.

Benes divides her work into six mostly chronological chapters that trace the development of German linguistics from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries. Her story begins with the rise to prominence of German philology in the late eighteenth century under the aegis of such luminaries as Johann Georg Hamann, Herder, and Johann Gottlieb Fichte, among others. Voicing a Romantic response to the Enlightenment's belief in language as a perfectible tool, these scholars instead proposed that words "lived," that they were "active and unwieldy" subjects tied closely to a national spirit (p. 25). Following this not-yet-biological belief, German philologists distinguished themselves–and made Germany the world leader in linguistic study–through their impeccable investigations of the links between language and nationality. In particular, these scholars and their students searched for the linguistic origins of Germanness. Benes spends her second, third, and fourth chapters presenting the three options comparative philologists investigated most extensively: *Urheimat Asien*, particularly India; *Urvolk Germania*; and *Urbild* Hellas. In these chapters, Benes delineates philologists' search for the language system most closely tied to biblical revelation (hence the *Ur-* in the above designations) and their endeavors to link that language as closely to German as possible, thereby granting legitimacy to German claims to national status. These chapters are, far and away, the most entertaining of the work, as Benes skillfully details the motivations of German linguists who were desperately trying to link Prussia with Sparta, or Bavarian with Sanskrit. The work's most important chapter, however, is surely the fifth, in which Benes outlines the transition of previously liberal linguistics into ever more explicit racialist

and biological language during the *Kaiserreich*. Her observations about mid-century Orientalist Max MÃ¼ller could easily be applied to the whole scholarly cadre in the early years of the empire, namely that its "linguistic determinism closely resembled a racialist view of world history, even if it celebrated words and conjugation patterns rather than the Aryan body" (p. 219). The sixth chapter is, in essence, an extended epilogue. In it, Benes shows the importance of nineteenth-century linguistics for Nietzsche and Ferdinand de Saussure, thereby tracing the roots of poststructuralism to one of the same sources as Nazism. As Benes notes, when "placed in the constellations as such ideas assumed in the first half of the twentieth century, the German tradition of linguistic thought could be mustered in support of a criminal regime. This, however, was not a necessary outcome and not the only legacy of comparative philology" (p. 289). While intriguing, this argument is not as well developed throughout the narrative as Benes maintains.

The strength of each of these chapters lies in Benes's portraits of her subjects. Seemingly every major German linguist of the period is covered in striking detail. The most notable characters are those who appear less frequently in work on German nationalism. Historians will be familiar with Herder, Fichte and Humboldt; but they will certainly learn something new about the foundational comparative philologist Franz Bopp or the influential teacher of both Nietzsche and Saussure, Georg Curtius. Benes is clearly in her element while elaborating the scholarly connections, sometimes strained, that linked her subjects together in a broad endeavor. This material is nothing less than the nuts and bolts of intellectual history done well.

The book's strength is also its primary weakness, however. While Benes deploys her considerable knowledge of her subjects to good effect in her portraits of their work and their interactions with one another, she is less adept at spelling out the precise relationship between that work and the wider world. The world does make occasional appearances, such as when Benes credits the Napoleonic invasion with fostering renewed focus on German equivalence with Greece during the Roman conquest, as both Germany and Greece were beset by invaders who spoke Romance languages, or when she notes the effect of a unified German state after 1871 on linguistic endeavors to trace the roots of the German nation. Such contextualizing moments are few and far between, however. It remains largely up to the reader to situate Benes's analysis within the broader scope of German history. In addition, the work is clearly written about great men thinking great thoughts. Benes makes no apologies for this limitation, which is to some degree inherent in the genre of her critique, but the reader will nonetheless occasionally wish for more discussion of where these men–and the philology they practiced–fit into the broader story of German nationalism in the nineteenth century.

These problems should not distract from the book's overall value, however. The work provides a useful, thorough history of German philology from Immanuel Kant to Nietzsche. What it lacks in context, it makes up for in depth. Interested specialists or graduate students looking for a primer in this field would do well to peruse this volume.

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**Citation:** William F. Morris. Review of Benes, Tuska, *In Babel's Shadow: Language, Philology, and Nation in Nineteenth-Century Germany.* H-German, H-Net Reviews. September, 2009.

**URL:** http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=25096

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