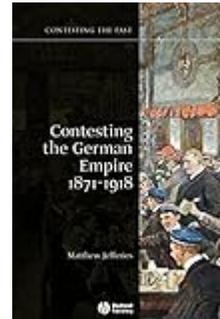




Matthew Jefferies. *Contesting the German Empire 1871-1918.* Contesting the Past. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007. 248 pp. \$92.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4051-2996-1; \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4051-2997-8.



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The Contentious Historiography of Imperial Germany

Matthew Jefferies begins his book by explaining a problem that confronts students of imperial Germany: the equivocations, ambiguities, complexities, and contradictions posed by recent scholarship make one wonder whether anything at all can be known about this period. He argues repeatedly that this diversity and multivocality are cause for celebration rather than regret, but that the cacophony of recent historiography has its cost: undergraduates and graduate students often shun the period altogether or are drawn to earlier works that provide more coherent narratives and secure judgments. In this updated, ambitious work, which addresses older and newer histories of the empire, Jefferies has written a book of great value to researchers in Wilhelmine history. Citing nearly seven hundred books and articles, the volume will benefit scholars, advanced undergraduates, and graduate students looking for a comprehensive bibliography of significant work on imperial Germany. Jefferies's aim in writing the book was "to provide an accurate and accessible guide to recent debates, reflecting the main schools and approaches, while at the same time

offering its own perspectives on the competing claims, and providing pointers on future developments" (p. 2). He achieves some of these goals more fully than others, but he certainly succeeds in writing a clear and accessible guide.

The book's accessibility and clarity result in large part from Jefferies's fluid writing style and his organization of the historiography. Chapter 1 provides an overview of a century of historical writing on the empire from 1871 to the present, and outlines the contentious nature of the empire's historiography almost from its start. Chapters 2 through 5 are organized around major questions posed in different fields or "genres" of history: biography, political history, social and cultural history, and international history. Jefferies notes the main question that agitates current discussions in each field in the chapter title. Chapter 2 ("Great Men? Otto von Bismarck and Kaiser Wilhelm II") examines the historical reputations of these figures and the biographical or "great man" approach to imperial history. Chapter 3 ("Democracy in the Undemocratic State?") evaluates recent historical writ-

ing on the empire's constitutional structures and political parties. Chapter 4 ("Familiar Features in an Unfamiliar Light': Social and Cultural Perspectives") reviews post-structuralist inquiries in the areas of *Alltagsgeschichte* and gender and cultural history. Chapter 5 ("The Kaiserreich Transnational? Foreign Policy, Colonialism, and the First World War") looks at research trends in imperial foreign relations broadly conceived. A brief concluding chapter investigates how the empire is recollected today in the "memory studies" of professional historians and by the German public. Subsections in each chapter pose additional questions that have guided research on the empire. This structure organizes the historiography of the German Empire into fields defined by research problems and methods while presenting findings by various historians. Unfortunately, economic history is not treated as a separate field of inquiry.

Although Jefferies's survey of major schools and approaches to the fields or genres outlined above begins in the mid-nineteenth century, the weight of the book falls on developments after 1960 and especially after 1980. In chapter 1, Jefferies explains the development of a fairly closed and nationalistic "historical guild" that constructed the accepted canon and leitmotifs of German history from the 1890s through the 1950s. Of particular importance is the idea that Germany followed a special political and historical path in its construction of political culture and "national character," an idea whose positive and negative variants touched upon all debates about the history of the Wilhelmine empire through the 1990s. Jefferies contends that most historians consider the controversy over Fritz Fischer's 1961 book on Germany's aims in World War I the turning point toward the social science tendencies that eventually came to predominate in historiography on imperial Germany. Jefferies explains concisely and extremely well the important academic and highly political stakes of this very public controversy. He also highlights the emergence of a new paradigm for imperial history by the late 1960s that shifted focus away from the Rankean emphasis on the state and "great men" to society as a whole with the emergence of a "historical social science" among younger historians such as Hans-Ulrich Wehler, Jürgen Kocka, and Heinrich August Winkler, who focused on socioeconomic structures. The remaining chapters attend to the methods, conclusions, and master narrative of these social science historians (the Bielefeld School). According to the author, the steady flow of English-language monographs after the mid-1970s made a key intervention that challenged the "new orthodoxy" and continues to provide new di-

rections for the history of this period.

Chapters 2 and 3 deal with the core problems raised in research on the *Sonderweg*. Chapter 2 highlights how the debate over the role of Bismarck as "founder" of the German Empire has ended in stalemate, although Jefferies sides with scholars who, like Geoff Eley, downplay the role of the "Iron Chancellor." Jefferies then goes on to state that most recent histories are skeptical of major claims by the Bielefeld School; major elements of this interpretation include a conservative "union of iron and rye" (the so-called second founding of the empire) in the late 1870s, Bismarck's "Bonapartist" rule, and Wilhelm II's marginal role in imperial governance. Jefferies notes that recent histories contend that Bismarck had no grand design but pursued the most expedient course at any moment and that, even if Wilhelm did not enjoy "personal rule," no rule was possible without his consent, although his influence declined in the 1900s. Chapter 3 stresses the paradox of imperial politics: an authoritarian government, appointed by the kaiser, accompanied by a boisterous, elected parliament. Key historical debates revolve around the nature of the constitution, government, and political life. Researchers who followed the lead of David Blackbourn critiqued the historical social science view that the imperial polity was inflexible, concluding instead that it was flexible and capable of change. Jefferies provides a good overview of the "optimistic," "pessimistic," and "skeptical" positions on these issues.

The next chapters turn more clearly to Jefferies's own view of the field. In chapter 4 Jefferies makes his strongest case that postmodernism and the turn to "history from below" transformed historical writing on the *Kaiserreich* by turning it away from structural models and *Sonderweg* thesis toward process models and analyses of symbolic systems and gender. He contends that loss of faith in progress and other "grand narratives" in the early 1980s formed the backdrop for the new research paradigms of "everyday life," gender, and culture. While members of the Bielefeld School concede that the rise of cultural history in the 1990s was as significant a shift in the field as their own emergence in the 1960s, they remain sharp critics of the methodology and evidentiary basis of the new cultural history. Chapter 5 is less convincing as support for Jefferies's arguments about the transformative effect of the new perspectives and methods since the 1980s, because he reviews only a handful of new works on foreign affairs. The author sees most leading experts on imperial external relations as traditionalist in outlook; that is, basing "their arguments on existing corpus of diplomatic documents rather than the use

of new methodologies” (p. 164) and sharing much with “old orthodoxy” of the pre-Fischer era. Such an outlook falls outside the criteria of theoretical or methodological innovation that drives Jefferies’s selection of works for extended review. One subsection of this chapter, “Fritz Fischer’s Legacy Today,” critically engages the issue of German war guilt, but the author spends the majority of space analyzing the claims of Mark Hewitson. Jefferies concludes that “in such a lively and contested field of scholarly activity any conclusions must be regarded as tentative and provisional” (p. 190). Nonetheless, he believes that any attempt to revive the argument that Germany fought a defensive war is untenable—even if the scope and nature of the war imagined in Berlin and Vienna are still open to debate.

Despite the comprehensive historiographical review provided in the book, however, Jefferies’s treatment of the competing parties is not entirely even-handed. Sometimes his search for “accuracy” causes him to get sidetracked in providing perspectives on their claims. Moreover, as a historian, Jefferies himself is part of the fray; the analysis does not always demonstrate a fully critical distance from poststructuralism and the other new paradigms that he appears to favor in his own work. Thus, although he makes many apt criticisms of the pre-Fischer “old orthodoxy” and the post-Fischer “new orthodoxy” (Bielefeld School), he generally does not subject what he terms “recent scholarship” to the same rigorous criticism he makes of pre-1980 historiography. Nor does he define the terms “postmodern” or “poststructuralist” or put them in his index (though the bibliography includes works on this matter). This tendency poses at least two problems. One of them results to some extent from definitional practice in the work: “recent scholarship” as Jefferies uses the term is not merely work that has come out lately; it also uses “new methodologies.” Thus, Jefferies does not consider the latest Bielefeld School scholarship recent because it follows a paradigm developed in the 1960s—even if it has modified that paradigm under subsequent theoretical, methodological, and empirical critique, much of it from “cultural historians.” Jefferies does not systematically assess methodological and evidentiary differences between the two approaches. Although he illuminates important differences of perspective between them, the book succeeds less well at evaluating their respective methods and uses of evidence. As a consequence, the two major paradigms discussed in his account often talk past more than to each other. A second and related problem of perspective diminishes the accuracy of his account of recent debates. Jefferies is

willing for the most part to repeat criticisms of the Bielefeld School by practitioners of the new history with approval, but tends to dismiss criticisms of the new history by the still lively Bielefeld School without explanation. In doing so, he highlights key paradoxes and weaknesses of the “new orthodoxy” while downplaying those of the new cultural history, even when he acknowledges them. For instance, in his assessment of the history of everyday life, he states that the field promised more than it has delivered. He concedes that history is more than past experiences and involves a balance in perspective between top and bottom, between the general and the particular. Yet, his overall assessment suggests that *Alltagsgeschichte* made a positive contribution to imperial history. The reader is thus often left with the impression of a one-way contestation and debate since 1990.

Impressions about Jefferies’s attitudes toward the paradigms he describes also extend into his discussion of East German historiography on the Wilhelmine empire, where readers may find some of his judgments relatively unspecific. In his review of this body of literature, Jefferies first asserts that “no historian works in an ideology-free zone” (p. 37). While he makes frequent reference to the ideological and political motivations of “old orthodox,” “new orthodox,” and East German historians (a fairly easy task), however, he does not make evident the ideological and political motivations of postmodern and cultural historians beyond the description of a vague “pluralism.” Moreover, he does not speculate on their extra-historical motivations, as he does with other historical schools. “Recent historians” seem to operate in a relatively “ideology-free zone” in his account, a problematic assessment. Of course, it is likely that the political stakes for German-speaking and English-speaking historians of imperial Germany are not entirely the same, but that theme remains undeveloped in most of the book as well.

In many ways, this book treats historiographical fashion; the narrative structure of the book gives the most recent fashion the upper hand in both tone and emphasis. While Jefferies states the intention to “provide an accurate and accessible guide to recent debates” (p. 2), that intention would have been fulfilled more effectively had the analysis treated all recent scholarship in the way it treats the work of historical social science and recent work on German foreign relations. In his account, these works are described not as definitive conclusions that have swept the field, but rather as driven by a series of propositions that their authors seek to validate via historical evidence, argument, and debate. New knowledge

is generally provisional and open to challenge from any direction, including the questions, methods, sources, and theories of older paradigms. Such a description would have fit more fully in the notion of “contestation” developed in the book and series titles.

Since the author contends that loss of faith in progress and other “grand narratives” in the early 1980s helped to spark the more recent research he admires, it should be pointed out that the book does have a grand narrative of its own. In sum, in his view, imperial German history moves from rigid canon to rich diversity; this new master narrative appears inherently progressive, and in it, the present state of research is good or at least an improvement over that of the past. As Jef-

feries notes, “One thing is certain: the task for those who synthesize and summarize historical knowledge has become more difficult than ever before” (p. 202). He is to be applauded for tackling this increasingly difficult task. A brief review cannot do justice to his rich discussion of recent historiography. An ambitious undertaking that assesses a vast amount of historical literature on the empire, it offers ideas for future research within a broad cultural history paradigm. Although the book is less a review of recent historiography *in toto* than a review of “new trends,” teachers could profitably use this book as a rich historiographical resource in an undergraduate or graduate seminar on imperial Germany. The book thus constitutes a substantial achievement.

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