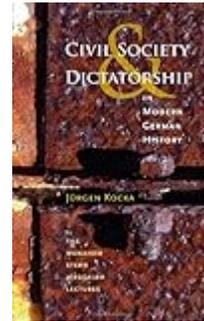




Jürgen Kocka. *Civil Society and Dictatorship in Modern German History.* Hanover: University Press of New England, 2010. xi + 162 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58465-865-8; \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-58465-866-5.



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Civil Society and Dictatorship

When a distinguished scholar like Jürgen Kocka sums up the work of several decades, his reflections should attract attention. Now in his early seventies, he can look back at a truly outstanding career. Trained in social history under Gerhard A. Ritter at the Freie Universität Berlin, he gained his first professorship four decades ago at the new University of Bielefeld on the basis of a path-breaking comparative study of white-collar workers in the United States and Germany as well as an innovative reflection on class relationships during the First World War. After co-founding the so-called Bielefeld school of *Historische Sozialwissenschaft* with Hans-Ulrich Wehler, he subsequently moved back to the Freie Universität. As a central figure in the politics of history he was a member of the German Science Council, founder of the Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung, director of the Zentrum für Vergleichende Geschichte Europas, head of the social science think tank Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin (WZB), and finally, president of the International Congress of Historians.

The slim volume *Civil Society and Dictatorship in*

Modern German History is the revised and updated publication of the Menachem Stern lectures which Kocka presented during a guest professorship in Jerusalem in 2001. The topic is obviously central to understanding German development in the twentieth century. His retrospective reflections discuss four overriding themes such as “Bourgeois Culture and Civil Society” within a European context; the “Social History of the German Democratic Republic” through a comparison of dictatorships; the development of “Collective Memories and Politics in Germany” both after 1945 and 1989; and the changes in “Fashion and Truth” in the work of historians. A lengthy set of notes summarizes not only Kocka’s own contributions to these debates but also the development of the scholarly literature on these topics in general.

In the first essay, Kocka focuses on the parallel development of a distinctive *Bürgertum* and civil society in Central Europe. Acknowledging their surprising strength, he nonetheless cites corresponding “structural deficits” in explaining their demise, but also discusses their revival after 1945. In the second chapter, the au-

thor presents a nuanced comparison between the Nazi and Communist dictatorships in order to establish the difference between the two, with the former more murderous and the latter more invasive. In contrast to condemnations of an *Unrechtsstaat*, he sees complexities and contradictions in the GDR. The third reflection addresses the development of collective memory after the Third Reich and the SED (Socialist Unity Party) regime, describing the reluctant effort to come to terms with Nazi atrocities, which inspired a more vigorous effort to deal with Communist repression. While he concedes competition, he argues that fears of displacing the Holocaust were exaggerated and that coping with both dictatorial pasts actually reinforced critical views of both. Finally, the fourth essay muses about the rapid methodological and thematic changes of contemporary history, making a bow to the constructive impact of fashion, while maintaining a moderate constructivist position in regard to striving for historical truth.

These stimulating reflections are in many ways truly impressive. Kocka has mastered an immense literature and reviews his own contributions with considerable modesty. As always, his presentation is orderly and his concepts are clearly defined, while the tone has become more sovereign. The judgments have surprisingly mellowed, with past controversies attenuated through the passing of time. The comparative European sweep of his perspective has softened the prior insistence on a special German path, the controversial *Sonderweg*, which he maintains without earlier polemics. As a result of vigorous arguments with younger historians, he has expanded and modified his history of society approach to include everyday, gender, and transnational issues, proving more flexible than the combative Hans-Ulrich Wehler.

Due to their clarity, Kocka's essays also raise some questions that should inspire further research. For in-

stance, how is the double failure and renaissance of the *Bürgerertum* and civil society to be explained? It is one thing to describe their collapse in the face of the Nazi onslaught and their postwar reemergence, but it is something else to offer a convincing explanation. Similarly, what was the relationship between repression and relative normalcy in the GDR which stabilized the system for decades and ultimately led to its rapid collapse? This central paradox of only conditional legitimacy deserves further explication. Moreover, has there been any progress in creating a more nuanced understanding of the GDR or do arguments between neototalitarians and SED apologists remained trapped in circularity? While the stages of the halting evolution of confronting the Nazi past are described in some detail, the development of debates about the second German dictatorship remains a bit hazy. Finally, how can scholars balance the innovative potential of intellectual fashion with the need to ground their explanations in empirical evidence? Welcoming new trends is certainly helpful, but criteria also ought to be spelled out for resisting mere faddishness.

By provoking such interesting questions, Kocka has presented a magisterial volume. It is a daunting record of scholarly achievement that only occasionally alludes to the fierceness of the controversies from which it has sprung. As summary of the central issues of earlier debates and as entry point into the development of German scholarship it should therefore become essential reading, especially for Anglo-American graduate students. The fundamental values which have inspired Kocka's methodological approaches and interpretative arguments as well as his lifelong involvement in academic and public discussions, are firmly grounded in the liberal Enlightenment heritage. In this way, these essays are also an exemplar of the intellectual Westernization and democratization of postwar Germany which continue to animate the Federal Republic.

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