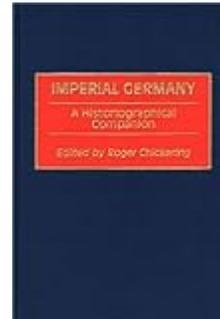


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Roger Chickering, ed. *Imperial Germany: A Historiographical Companion*. Westport, Conn., and London: Greenwood Press, 1996. vi + 538 pp. \$99.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-313-27641-5.



Reviewed by James Retallack (University of Toronto)

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Among recent and forthcoming encyclopedias of German history, the conceptualization of Chickering's outstanding collection stands distinctly apart, in three main ways. First, the individual essays are long enough to deliver the sophistication, nuance, and sense of intellectual debate that characterizes the best work of this genre. Second, the essays are uniformly authoritative and informed: they have been written by leading scholars from six different countries who have themselves participated in pathbreaking empirical research or in crafting recent reinterpretations of the Imperial era. In this regard Chickering is *primus inter pares* with his three impressive monographs on the German peace movement, on the Pan-German League, and on the historian Karl Lamprecht. Third, the annotated bibliographies at the end of each chapter are as inclusive as one could possibly expect—a heartening feature in an age when publishers are eager to do without bibliographies and indexes at all, in order to save money. In this instance, of course, considerable largesse (\$100) is also demanded of the purchaser.

Still, any encyclopedic treatment must live or die on the breadth of its coverage as much as on its depth. How does Chickering's volume measure up? In his introductory essay, entitled "The Quest for a Usable German Empire," Chickering can be forgiven for being re-

markably brief. He begins with an extensive analysis of two neglected historiographies of Imperial Germany—the one predating the work of Fritz Fischer, the other emanating from the former East Germany. Then Chickering's introduction ends rather abruptly. It notes in two short concluding paragraphs that ferment in the field has been fueled in the late 1980s by such developments as the "new" cultural history and the history of gender, and in the 1990s by the fall of the Berlin Wall. Nevertheless, Chickering's brevity is mitigated not only by the strength of this volume as a whole, but also by the fact that in the 1990s alone, four major surveys of Imperial Germany have been published: by Volker Berghahn, Wolfgang J. Mommsen, Thomas Nipperdey, and Hans-Ulrich Wehler. These surveys have already generated a battery of reviews and review articles; shorter summaries have become available (for example, by Lynn Abrams); and other historiographical companions have recently appeared or will do so in 1997 (by Dieter Buse and Jürgen Doerr, Michael John, and this reviewer). Hence we do not presently lack interpretive overviews.

The contributions to Chickering's volume can be slotted into three main thematic groups. The first of these offers a window on social change, economic modernization, and regional cleavages in Imperial Germany (1888-1918). Potentially one of the most innovative treatments,

Norman Pound's essay on "Historical Geography" is disappointing. The topic cries out for the visual and cartographic elements that are conspicuously missing from German historiography in general. Instead one finds only two quite small maps, lacking in detail. Happily, Pound's contribution is complemented by Dan White's essay on "Regionalism and Particularism," which offers a provocative discussion of this important topic. There is some helpful overlap among the essays by Rita Aldenhoff on "Agriculture," Frank Tipton on "Technology and Industrial Growth," and Jean Quataert on "Demographic and Social Change." This overlap strengthens the volume in that it provides a range of perspectives on such questions as labor markets, sectoral diversity, and government intervention. Quataert's essay offers the added bonus of suggesting new ways to think about how (gendered) political frameworks "bred new ways of thinking about the human life cycle" (p. 121). Gangolf Huebinger's essay rounds out this group with an analysis of "Confessionalism." Huebinger's overall argument is convincing; however, it suggests too categorically that Protestant-Catholic tension was responsible for "polarization ... between two distinct political cultures" (p. 168) and for "Germany's failure to develop like other Western industrial nations into a pluralistic social order" (p. 177).

A second group of essays offers new perspectives on state and society. Michael John's contribution offers a detailed analysis that judiciously balances historians' rival interpretations about how "Constitution, Administration, and the Law" combined to determine the course of Imperial politics. John's essay is bolstered by over eight pages of bibliography. James Albisetti's typically splendid essay on "Education" is even more explicitly historiographical in conception. Albisetti guides the reader through a maze of contending interpretations to the somewhat surprising conclusion that research on schools and education in Imperial Germany "may be entering a period of diminishing activity" (p. 261). Ruediger vom Bruch's contribution on "The Academic Disciplines and Social Thought" suffers in comparison with Albisetti's effort. Numerous awkward phrases—for example, "The ambivalences of modernity ... oscillated in often brilliant fashion" (p. 348)—make the reader wonder who is responsible for the poor translation. Vom Bruch's essay also falls down on the rudiments of good organization. There is no linear thread to the argument, and with frequent backtracking the author attempts (unsuccessfully) to fill in arguments whose earlier introduction was so brief as to confuse most non-specialist readers. Some of this deficit is made good by Andrew Lee's es-

say on "State and Society," which provides a welcome account of the evolution of Imperial German social policy (and of its leading advocates). In the best essay in the entire volume, Peter Jelavich surveys "Literature and the Arts." Those familiar with Jelavich's previous work will hardly be surprised that the subject and its treatment both display "extraordinary richness." Last in this group is Chickering's study of "Imperial Germany at War": another relatively brief *tour de force*. Not all readers will agree with the editorial decision to reserve consideration of the years 1914-18 for a concluding chapter. As Chickering acknowledges, "the authors of every chapter in this volume could well have extended their analyses into the war years" (p. 489). The analytical payoff of doing so might have been enormous. Nevertheless, Chickering is more than up to the task of demonstrating how the prolongation of the war translated hardship and grumbling into a "crisis of political legitimacy" at every level of government.

The third group of contributions tackles politics and foreign policy. Vernon Lidtke's essay on "The Socialist Labor Movement" is a brilliant summary that shows great sensitivity toward both more and less convincing findings currently emerging from empirical research. Brett Fairbairn's study of "Political Mobilization" engages current historiographical debates much more implicitly; yet it addresses the implications of recent research with just as much assurance and level-headedness. The last three essays in this group are by Jost Duelffer on "Foreign Policy"; Woodruff Smith on "Colonialism and Colonial Empire"; and Stig Foerster on "The Armed Forces and Military Planning." These essays offer barely a hint of explicit historiographical debate, and they naturally suffer more than others from the decision not to venture beyond July 1914. On balance, however, each essay is a well-written and informative introduction to the subject.

Two conspicuous elements inform virtually all contributions to Chickering's book. First, no reader coming away from these essays will fail to appreciate the regional diversity of German society, economics, politics, and culture. Second, in one way or another the political dimension infuses every topic considered here. Whereas this reviewer is inclined to think that this is a positive good (and not unwarranted in terms of past historical scholarship), other readers might find this perspective too traditional or narrow for their taste. The impression that this volume falls short of the cutting edge of current scholarship might also arise from the book's long gestation period, its relatively underdeveloped exploration of women's and gender history, and Chickering's acknowl-

edgment that a chapter on class and culture unfortunately perished along the way. Nevertheless, the authors have collectively been remarkably faithful to their mandate. Sidestepping the unrealizable goal of presenting a synthetic or structural analysis, they have instead engaged in a critical stocktaking that promises to keep the

field of Imperial German history vibrant and contentious into the twenty-first century.

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