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Luke Springman. *Carpe Mundum: German Youth Culture of the Weimar Republic*. Peter Lang, 2007. 299 pp. \$62.95 (paper), ISBN 978-3-631-56244-4.

Reviewed by John Williams

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Seizing Their World?

Luke Springman of Bloomsburg University has given us the fiftieth volume in Peter Lang's series on youth culture, and *Carpe Mundum* is an interesting addition to that valuable endeavor. The book's subtitle is a bit misleading, for Springman's subject is not the everyday grassroots culture of young Germans. Instead, the book is a series of case studies of textual genres that adults produced for the edification, entertainment, and indoctrination of the young generation.

The first chapter concerns the sex education books that abounded in the relatively liberal climate of the Weimar Republic. In view of the disastrous consequences of the war for the family, there was a tendency for welfare and educational elites to take on the responsibility of guiding young people toward sexual correctness. Springman asserts here that conservatism, pro-natalist nationalism, and a "peculiarly German affinity to holistic philosophy" informed most sex-education books. They "buried intercourse and sexual gratification under a blanket of diatribe, with a glaze of biology, mixed with pious wonder, and all designed to instill guilt" (p. 51). Only in a few works by left-wing figures was there a more scientific and candid discussion.

Chapter 2's subject is the campaign to censor so-called *Schund und Schmutz* (trash and smut), Weimar adults' charming epithet for the cheap, mass-produced pulp fiction that adolescents avidly consumed. Despite the 1919 Weimar constitution's pledge to avoid state censorship, the urge to ban literature that was thought to

brutalize and demoralize the young mind was strong and, by 1930 or so, beginning to show some effects in the legal system. In this chapter there is a tendency to underplay progressive currents in Weimar. The anti-*Schund und Schmutz* conservatives faced strong opposition from liberals and socialists; yet Springman tells us very little about it. However, he does convince the reader that the scapegoating of pulp fiction enabled conservative adults to ignore the real causes of juvenile delinquency—the psychological and social aftereffects of total war.

Chapter 3 focuses on militarism and social darwinism in three popular novels for young people: *Der Wanderer zwischen beiden Welten* by Walter Flex (1917); *Die Biene Maja* by Waldemar Bonsels (1912); and *Der Wehrwolf* by Herman Löns (1910). All three, Springman asserts, justify warfare as a natural, inevitable, and desirable human activity and provide a pseudo-scientific foundation for militant racist nationalism. Most insidiously, the immensely popular *Maya* used "romantic," pantheistic language to paint an "eat or be eaten" portrait of human nature. Chapter 4 likewise offers a negative evaluation of youth literature, in this case books about history by three Jewish authors. Wilhelm Speyer, Stefan Zweig, and Berta Lask tended to write historical allegories that "turned past events into instructional fairy tales" (p. 130) rather than teaching history in a suitably rational and objective way.

In the last four chapters, Springman argues that adult control over youth culture began to erode in the middle to

late Weimar years with the rapid growth of a large youth consumer market. As more and more young people consumed mass phenomena like illustrated magazines, science fiction novels, radio, and sports, their own desires and interests began to influence both the style and content of Weimar cultural modernity. Among illustrated youth magazines, *Der heitere Fridolin* (Merry Fridolin) was the most progressive in that it was visually flashier, more humorous, and more interactive; eschewed conservative emphases on religion and nationalism; reflected the curiosity of its readers about nature, science, and history; dealt directly with rapid technological change instead of trying to escape from it; and “signaled a strong identification of young people with their own generation, a true community of youth” (p. 156). Science fiction, on the other hand, was a kind of throwback to the nationalist and pro-war literature discussed in chapter 3. Its “techno-totemism” and “gigantomania” became fused with a “spiritual holistic view of nature” and a nationalist “cultural despair” that saw technological superiority as the only way for German to reach a position of world dominance.

As for radio, the late 1920s and early 1930s were a phase of expansion and experimentation. These years saw ever more young people being included in radio production, either through performance or by posing questions that would then be answered by adults. “Children participated, at least precariously . . . in current world events, new technology, and sports . . . and constructed at least an illusion of mastery over their existence” (p. 246). The final chapter on sports focuses specifically on “bourgeois” sports literature for girls. Weimar sports in general were “nothing less than the culmination of all the modernist developments in Weimar youth culture: egalitarianism, rationalism, technology, and experimentation” (p. 261). Yet authors of stories about female sport heroes did their best to “apply conservative ethics to the modern age,” first by presenting a heroic young female athlete as protagonist, and then by binding her back into the conservative gender system of separate spheres. Thus were the traditional values of domesticity and motherhood perpetuated.

Springman’s conclusions about the late Weimar trend toward a more modern youth culture are mostly pessimistic: “Youth-centered modernism, with all its new pragmatism, still harbored metaphysical undercurrents, such as the persistence of religious projections and mystical worlds in magazines, the melding of science and the supernatural in technical literature, and in the spiritual construction of the body in sports” (p. 153). In other

words, culturally produced irrationality was the problem that kept Weimar youth culture from advancing to more genuinely “modern” and politically progressive forms. By emphasizing what he considers the dominant intellectual tendency in Weimar culture—reactionary “cultural despair” in the face of urban-industrial modernity and “romantic” anti-rationalism—the author signals his commitment to a thesis of cultural misdevelopment that has been superseded in the historiography of Germany.[1] There is no space here for a detailed critique of this “peculiarity” thesis; suffice it to say that the teleological quest for “irrational” intellectual precursors of the Nazis leads to an oversimplification of the complex realities of Weimar. Weimar culture was seriously contested between reactionaries, liberals, and socialists and was anything but a one-way street toward the Third Reich. Thus one overarching flaw in *Carpe Mundum* is a lack of attention to more liberal and socialist forms of youth culture, which had little if anything to do with proto-Nazism.[2]

The other problem with Springman’s approach, in my view, is his argument that the texts under scrutiny had a direct ideological influence on their youthful readers. He asserts, for example, that popular literature contributed to the “brutalization” of the young in the aftermath of the war. Yet Springman also argues that adult-produced youth culture increasingly reflected the interests and desires of the young. He seems to be implying a back-and-forth process of influence between the generations that was mediated through culture, but not enough evidence is provided to convince the reader that this was the case. Perhaps making use of some of the many sociological surveys of youth during the era would have helped him develop a more convincing psychogram of everyday youthful mentalities.

Despite these criticisms, this reviewer appreciates the diligent research and keen textual and visual analyses that Springman offers in *Carpe Mundum*. The book will prove of great value to all those who are interested in the efforts of conservative adults in a time of instability to instrumentalize culture in order to control the young.

Notes

[1]. Founding texts for this cultural *Sonderweg* or “peculiar path” thesis include Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961), and George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1964). Springman is also influenced by a more recent version of the thesis that argues for an increas-

ingly technocratic bent among reactionaries in Weimar and the Third Reich, i.e., Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

veloped concepts of nature that were surprisingly progressive. See John A. Williams, *Turning to Nature in Germany: Hiking, Nudism, and Conservation, 1900-1940* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

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[2]. Often such moderate and left-wing initiatives de-

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