

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Adolf M. Birke. *Die Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Verfassung, Parlament und Parteien.* München: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1997. x + 153 pp. DM 29.80 (paper), ISBN 978-3-486-55716-9.

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Published on H-German (September, 1998)



This is Volume 41 in the *Enzyklopaedie Deutscher Geschichte (EDG)* series, which is expected eventually to encompass some one hundred monographs. The series represents another step away from the master-narrative format of the notorious *Gebhardt*. Each volume is divided into three parts: a compressed portrayal of the subject matter, a discussion of the most important literature thereon, and an extensive bibliography listing printed primary sources as well as scholarly studies. In trying to appeal to a wider audience, the publisher and the series's general editor Lothar Gall have borrowed this design from their earlier collaboration on the highly successful *Grundriss der Geschichte* series. But while the latter was confined to high politics, the *EDG* is conceived to include volumes on everyday life, mentalities, culture, and societal issues. In line with this approach, Adolf Birke states in his preface that constitutional history can no longer be written without regard to foreign affairs, economics, social developments and attitudes of mind. It is somewhat disappointing, then, that one can hardly trace any elements of this interdependence in the ensuing narrative.

Birke starts out with a discussion of the occupation period. He correctly stresses the crucial importance for later developments of the structures created during this interregnum, including the pre-parliamentary *Frankfurter Wirtschaftsrat* and the constitutions of the restructured states in the western zones that preceded the *Basic Law*.^[1] Conceding that the allies sometimes intervened in the making of all of these constitutions, Birke nevertheless takes pains to point out German independence and the absence of an allied dictate. This and the section on the (re-)establishment of political parties makes for a reliable account of the Federal Republic's prenatal phase, even if the notion of a consistent Soviet occupation pol-

icy does not reflect the results of recent scholarship.^[2]

Moving into the 1950s, the author's description of Konrad Adenauer's leadership style provides an insightful comparison of constitutional theory and political reality. The decade itself was characterized by the ideological rivalry between the Christian Democrats, who slowly degenerated into a *Kanzlerwahlverein*, and the Social Democrats, who managed to shed their Marxist outlook only in 1959. What is conspicuously absent from Birke's analysis, however, are the very factors he promised to include at the outset. We learn nothing about the persistence of prewar elites in postwar German society; nothing about the aspirations of women in a demographically shattered population or about their role in parties and parliaments; nothing about strategies of discourse in these groups (how they set the parameters of public discussion, did or did not reflect the experiences of the population or segments thereof, or the degree to which the public was able to influence the political discourse). It is telling that the affair surrounding the publication by *Der Spiegel* of material allegedly sensitive for national security and the ensuing prosecution and harassment of reporters in 1962 is only analyzed with regard to its consequences for the Adenauer administration. The larger implications for the notion of a pre-eminent *raison d'état* (which was traditionally strong in Germany), for the relationship between executive and legislative powers in the Federal Republic, for the growth of investigative journalism as a fourth power, and for the critical outlook of a younger generation are not mentioned.

The history of the Grand Coalition is portrayed as a success story, while the proverbial spirit of the sixties is imperceptible. In fact, Birke does not consider what might have given rise to rebels and new social move-

ments, but rather implies that these merely exploited certain topics. He does, however, succeed in describing the grave consequences that the reform movement, aborted by its own radicalization, had for the generational make-up of the Social Democrats and a general turn to the left in the 1970s.

The truly inconceivable aspect of this volume, and one for which the author is probably not responsible, is its time frame. Most studies on the Federal Republic will certainly view the years from 1945 to 1990 as a self-contained historical period. If anyone is looking for further periodization, 1968/69 would no doubt be the most logical one. The volume under consideration, however, chooses to discuss developments up to 1982. There is no convincing reason why West Germany's remaining eight years could not have been included in a book that had to be concise and sometimes cursory by its very nature. The absence of historical scholarship on this period is hardly an excuse, since the same applies for the previous decade as well and is, in fact, the reason why Birke explicitly confines his discussion of the literature to the FRG's first twenty years.

For students concerned with West German history and politics, the second part of this volume will certainly be the most valuable. Birke's discussions of studies in the fields of political science and the history of law provide history students with an excellent entree into the peculiarities of West Germany's governmental system. Also

very useful is the author's treatment of the literature on social reform legislation in the 1950s and of scholarship concerned with the electoral process. The review of the literature on the occupation period is somewhat uneven, however; a fact that may be due to the relative neglect of Anglo-American scholarship. Among the 459 studies listed in the bibliography, hardly more than half a dozen are of British or American origin.

Still, this volume succeeds in giving a reliable, if traditional, overview over constitutional, parliamentary, and political party developments in the Federal Republic of Germany, and it is an excellent guide to the German literature on this topic.

Notes:

[1]. For the U.S. zone, this process has now been described in detail by Barbara Fait, *Demokratische Erneuerung unter dem Sternenbanner. Amerikanische Kontrolle und Verfassungsgebung in Bayern* (Duesseldorf: Droste, 1998).

[2]. Most important is Norman M. Naimark, *The Russians in Germany: A History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation, 1945-1949* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995).

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Citation: Wilfried Mausbach. Review of Birke, Adolf M., *Die Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Verfassung, Parlament und Parteien*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. September, 1998.

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