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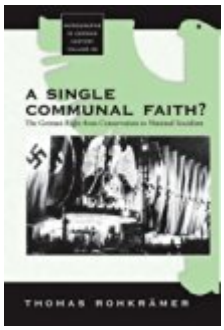

Thomas Rohkrämer. *A Single Communal Faith?: The German Right from Conservatism to National Socialism.* New York: Berghahn Books, 2007. 306 pp. $90.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-84545-368-8.

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Commissioned by Susan R. Boettcher

In his new book, Thomas Rohkrämer seeks to explain how the German Right was able to adapt to modern times, how it gained in popularity, eventually outdoing progressive alternatives, and ultimately how it maintained and even increased its popularity after gaining power in 1933. In contrast to recent works by Claudia Koonz and Peter Fritzsche that address the appeal of Nazism for the German people from a more immediate, shorter time-frame, Rohkrämer takes a long-range view of particular aspects of the Right's development, from the Romantic period of the early nineteenth century through the end of the Third Reich.[1] He should be commended for attempting such a bold and expansive study. It would seem, however, that the ambition may just have been too great. In the end, he argues that "the desire for a *single communal nationalist faith* played a decisive role in the fatal attraction that Germans felt for the extreme Right" (p. 6). It is an argument that is at once intangible and far too sweeping.

In his introduction, Rohkrämer argues against many of the traditional problems of German historiography of the past half-century, from variations on the "Luther to Hitler" search for intellectual pedigrees, to the *Sonderweg*, to monocausal explanations for Germany's fateful path to the Third Reich, but he ends up producing a work that falls prey to those very same pitfalls, if not always to the same degree. The book is clearly arranged in chronological fashion, with chapters devoted to the early-nineteenth-century Romantic movement, the period of pre-unification nationalism, the Second Empire, the First World War, Weimar, and finally the Third Reich. Connecting them like links in a chain, Rohkrämer discusses a number of thinkers who contributed to the developing relationship between conservatism and nationalism through the common, unifying vision of "a single communal faith," which all apparently shared. Whereas Fritz Stern once focused on Paul de Lagarde, Julius Langbehn, and Moeller van den Bruck in tracing the origins of the "Germanic ideology," Rohkrämer constructs a slightly different triumvirate, keeping de Lagarde, but replacing the other two with Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl and

Richard Wagner (though Langbehn and van den Bruck also play prominent roles).[2] Unfortunately, the chronology that structures the book as a whole is lost within each chapter. On the one hand, this strategy facilitates numerous allusions to Hitler, as for example with Lagarde (p. 69), or with an extended Wagner-to-Nietzsche-to-Hitler connection (p. 78). Beyond that, the lack of internal chronology confuses the picture, making a true sense of development, of the evolution of ideas and movements as they related to concrete historical context, much more difficult to discern.

The book's most fundamental problem stems from its eponymous notion of "a single communal faith." On one level, the term is simply never adequately defined. It is never clear what "a single communal faith" means, either to the author or the many, many individuals and groups he claims were all clamoring for it. A few examples of how the term is used may help make this lack of clarity apparent. For ex-soldiers from the Imperial Army, it meant "the continuation in civil life of altruistic service to king and national community, the obedient acceptance of the hierarchical order, and the choice of camaraderie instead of class struggle" (p. 94). For the life-reform movement, it meant "an industrialized nation in harmony with nature, instrumental efficiency serving higher communal purposes, a great nation united by shared values and beliefs" (p. 101). The reader struggles to differentiate the various visions of "a single communal faith" from what is otherwise much more easily defined as "nationalism" in all its rich variety of forms. In the particular context of Germany, the notion of ***Volksgemeinschaft*** comes readily to mind as a much more useful term.

If there is one distinguishing characteristic of all the visions of "a single communal faith" Rohkrämer discusses, it is the clear rejection of pluralism. According to the author, these communities of the future involved absolute unity of vision and purpose. On one level, nothing surprising is found in the anti-pluralist vision within German nationalism. Few would argue, for example, against the significance that the memory of the (albeit mythical) "August Days" and the "Spirit of 1914" had for many Germans following the collapse of the ***Burgfrieden*** and the increasing divisiveness that followed defeat and revolution. But it is also critical to remember that nothing is surprising in this rejection playing a role in ***any*** nationalism, since it represents one natural, logical outcome of nationalist thought--the desire for national unity in a very real and tangible sense, particularly for the purpose of accomplishing noble and worthy goals as well as providing a sense of security in the face of danger. As Eric Weitz has pointed out, in its most extreme form, that goal of ultimate unity has served as a critical element in the utopian visions that helped mark the twentieth century as a "century of genocide."[3] But Rohkrämer overshoots the mark when he makes the anti-pluralism of his "single communal faith" the overarching commonality not only of the German Right, but of German nationalism more generally. "From the start," he writes, "nationalism did not envisage a pluralistic state, but a community united in a single communal faith" (p. 52). Leaving aside the variety of national visions and the movements that develop around them, I find it impossible to attribute anything close to this level of unity, of vision, or purpose to the Right in Germany at any point in its history. If one unifying feature applied to the German Right of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it was a remarkable ***lack*** of unity.

In his effort to answer the questions he set out for himself, Rohkrämer seems to have been searching for a kind of "right-wing minimum"--a task reminiscent of those who sought a similar key to understanding fascism. The results appear equally unsatisfying. In trying to get at some bare minimum that binds all these thinkers and movements and connects them to the people at large, the definition ends up losing its explanatory power. It gets diluted and, when discussed in the fash-

ion displayed in this book, that is, much more on the level of ideas than concrete historical developments on the ground, obscures German "peculiarities"--in particular, the intensity of the crisis period of 1914-23 and then its experiences during the world economic crisis less than a decade later, which tend to get lost.

The result of such analysis is both sweeping and intangible. In pressing the significance of his discovery of the "single communal faith" as the unifying and central driving element of German nationalism, Rohkrämer is forced to make claims that are simply unsustainable. He is unable to establish the breadth of acceptance and desire for what he calls "the dream" of a single communal faith among the people over such a long period of time. Nor can he establish what that "dream" meant to Germans even within the Protestant middle class, much less beyond that particular milieu. In fact, in the end, he admits that the attraction of the people to National Socialism had less to do with any single concrete image or vision or symbol put out by the Nazis than with the open-endedness of those visions, which allowed Germans to fill in their own particular meanings and desires. "The Nazis were politically successful," he asserts, "because their visions were open to a variety of interpretations. In the 1930s, a growing number of people did not worry about the vagueness, the inconsistencies and contradictions within the movement, but saw the aspects most appealing to them as the true core" (p. 196). In the end, he concludes, Nazism "got closer than any of its predecessors in uniting a majority within the nation in a single communal faith, because this faith was expressed in a vague and suggestive way" (p. 228). If that constitutes "a single communal faith," what couldn't?

The tension between unity and pluralism is as old as nationalism itself and can be found playing itself out in a variety of national contexts. Robespierre sought to overcome it through his "Cult of Reason" at the dawn of French nationalism, while Americans are made aware of it every time they reach for spare change and read ***E pluribus unum*** on their coins or see a map of their country divided into blocks of red and blue on their television news broadcast. Certainly, some nation-states have dealt with it better than others, but none has managed to solve the dilemma entirely. A study of the Germans' efforts to balance the reality of pluralism against a desire for unity must pay much greater attention to the universal aspects of the problem through an awareness of the comparative issues, while also situating the German experience within a much more concrete and tangible context of crisis that transformed the nation's political culture and made a movement like Nazism not only possible, but attractive, to so many Germans.

Notes

[1]. Claudia Koonz, ***The Nazi Conscience*** (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2003); Peter Fritzsche, ***Life and Death in the Third Reich*** (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2008).

[2]. Fritz Stern, ***The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology*** (New York: Anchor Books, 1965).

[3]. Eric Weitz, ***A Century of Genocide: Utopias of Race and Nation*** (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

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