H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Wolf D. Gruner. *Der Deutsche Bund: 1815-1866.* Munich: Verlag C. H. Beck, 2010. 128 pp. EUR 8.95 (paper), ISBN 978-3-406-58795-5.

Mark Hewitson. *Nationalism in Germany, 1848-1866: Revolutionary Nation.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. xiii + 462 pp. $90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4039-1329-6; $34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4039-1330-2.

Reviewed by Roy A. Austensen (Valparaiso University)
Published on HABSBURG (October, 2012)
Commissioned by Jonathan Kwan

A European Germany or a German Europe?

As we approach the bicentennial of the Congress of Vienna (1814-15), historians are still very much concerned with the political settlements regarding central Europe that resulted in the creation of the German Confederation (the Deutsche Bund), a loose confederation of thirty-five states and four free cities that included the German territories of two great powers, Austria and Prussia. Under the presidency of Austria, the Bund provided a modest degree of unity for the German states while maintaining the sovereignty of its members. From its very beginning, the Bund was a disappointment to those who argued for the creation of some sort of united Germany; and dissatisfaction with the Bund only grew over the years, given its cumbersome political machinery, its inability to produce needed reforms, and its frequent functioning as a vehicle for the repressive policies of Austria and Prussia. The two volumes under consideration here examine the nature of the "German question" during the era of the Deutsche Bund, but from very different perspectives. Wolf D. Gruner's brief history of the confederation spans its fifty-one years of existence (1815-66) and emphasizes its continuity with the federative traditions of German history and its contribution toward maintaining stability within the European state system. Mark Hewitson's book on German nationalism between the revolutions of 1848 and the destruction of the Bund in 1866 traces in considerable detail the development of a public sphere of liberal nationalist opinion that ultimately accepted the legitimacy of a unified German state under Prussia.

Professor emeritus of European history and Jean Monnet Professor of the History of European Integration at the University of Rostock, Gruner has published widely on subjects related to the history of Germany in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this book, he draws on more than four decades of research and reflection on the "German question" in modern European history and offers a concise examination of the major issues surrounding the creation, history, and demise of the Bund. Following a brief introduction in which Gruner presents his case for a reconsideration of the Bund and its role in German history, the book consists of eight chapters that provide a chronological history of the Bund. The principal topics include: the founding of the Bund as part of the European settlement of 1814-15, the Bund and its member states, the Prussian Customs Union (Zollverein), the events of the 1830s and the Rhine Crisis of 1840, the revolutions of 1848 and the subsequent failure of attempts to create a national state, reform attempts after 1851, and the dissolution of the Bund in 1866. In the final chapter, Gruner offers his conclusions about the place of the confederation in German history. The book also includes a bibliography of primary and secondary sources, an index, an organization chart for the Bund, and a map of Europe following the Congress of Vienna.

Gruner believes it was only after the destruction of the German national state following the Second World War that it was possible to achieve a discerning view of German history between 1789 and 1871. Like the American historian James Sheehan, Gruner does not view the Germany of today as merely a postscript to the history of the state created by Prussia in 1871 and considers the Federal Republic to be more properly understood as another chapter in a German history that is much older and more complex. He believes that the history of the German Confederation is important in this larger context because "it levels the way to a necessary and long delayed federalization of German history and connects it to Eu-

rope" (p. 9). The dual mandate of the confederation of 1815 was to protect the security and independence of its members and to maintain peace and balance among the states of Europe. As such, it was not designed to frustrate the further development of the German nation, and Gruner argues that it was by no means inevitable that the integration of the German "*föderative Nation*" and the Bund did not happen (p. 11). The Bund was a work in progress from the very beginning, and the responsibility for its failure to reform and adapt to the changing circumstances of a modernizing German society lay with the expansionist ambitions of Prussia, the cluelessness of the Austrians regarding timely reforms, and the unwillingness of the middle-sized German states to agree among themselves on a plan of reform.

Despite the formidable obstacles to the further development of the Bund, Gruner believes that the creation of a *kleindeutsch* ("small German," i.e., without Austria) national state was not an inevitable historical development for the German nation. Even after the events of 1848-49, he thinks, it was still possible to create other suitable constitutional structures. As evidence for the real potential for reform, Gruner cites the many practical initiatives successfully undertaken by the Diet of the Confederation (Bundestag) and its committees in Frankfurt. These included drafts of new civil and criminal codes as well as various laws and standards regarding weights, measures, patents, copyrights, and the regulation of commerce. Much of this work was foundational for institutions of the North German Confederation (1866-71) and the German Reich after 1871. Gruner contends that the fixation of generations of historians on Prussia as the unifier of Germany blinded them to the federative foundation of German history, obscured the importance and real accomplishments of the German Bund, and marginalized historians who warned against creating a unitary German national state in the center of Europe. As an example of the latter, he cites the Göttingen historian Arnold Ludwig Hermann Heeren (1760-1842), who believed that a German monarchy with a strict political unity and all of the material resources of Germany at its disposal would find the temptation to seek supremacy in Europe irresistible, thereby posing a threat to European peace and freedom.

Hewitson, senior lecturer in German history and politics at University College London, is a prolific historian with a penchant for offering fresh interpretations on familiar subjects. Among his more recent works, *National Identity and Political Thought in Germany* (2000) and *Germany and the Causes of the First World War* (2004) have attracted attention partly for this reason. The book under consideration here is similar in that it is based on impressive research in both primary and secondary sources and offers what one might characterize as a way to view German unification in the nineteenth century from below. While Hewitson does not question the traditional view of the Reichsgründung under Prussia as the only practical way to create a German nation-state, his study of nationalist politics between 1848 and 1866 suggests a very different view of the popular forces that he believes helped to shape its final form. In a lengthy introduction in which he outlines the purpose and scope of the book, Hewitson describes the various ways in which he proposes to achieve a better understanding of political developments in the states of the German Confederation following the revolutions of 1848. These include examining the relationships between journalists and government officials, reassessing the continuing influence of 1848 on public debates and party organizations, investigating the effect that the revolution had on politics between the restoration of the confederation in 1851 and the wars of unification, and describing the nexus of nationalism and politics in the process of unification. His intentions are "to re-evaluate the national legacy of the Revolution, treating it as a first unification of Germany"; "to question the existence of a broad shift from liberal to conservative nationalism"; "to challenge the notion that cultural and ethnic forms of nationalism were particularly pronounced in Germany as a result of late unification"; and "to qualify the idea of a 'revolution from above' and the supposed neglect and manipulation of weak political parties, a muzzled or intimidated press, and a fragmented and immature electorate, all of which have been connected to a traditional concentration and undue emphasis on Bismarck" (pp. 21-23).

The rest of the book is organized into six chapters that approach the complex subject both thematically and chronologically, beginning with a chapter on the revolutions of 1848 in Germany and the debates and actions of the revolutionaries. The following chapters deal respectively with the diplomatic context in which decisions about unification were made; party and press depictions of the Habsburg monarchy; the political stance of governments and publics in the "third Germany"; the perception of Prussia, especially among liberals; and the shift in public opinion between 1864 and 1866 as a result of the conflict in Schleswig-Holstein. The last chapter offers Hewitson's conclusions about the role of liberal nationalism in the creation of the Prussian-dominated Reich. The book also has an extensive scholarly apparatus, including a list of figures, maps, and tables; fifty-eight pages of notes; a select bibliography; a glossary of German terms;

and an index.

Based on his research in the German press and other contemporary publications, Hewitson contends that a new public sphere of political activity emerged in Germany after 1848. It provided the context in which liberal constitutionalism and German nationalism were fused in a manner that was increasingly attractive to the politically active public throughout the non-Austrian German states. The catalyst for what became a national topic of discussion was the creation of the constitution for a united Germany without Austria by the Frankfurt parliament in 1849. He believes that the failure of this initiative in no way lessened the power of its ideas, which came to dominate political conversation throughout Germany in the 1850s and 1860s, especially among the small and middle-sized states of the confederation. Hewitson believes that the liberal movement in Germany after 1848, which is reflected in the newspapers and journals of the time, played a much more significant role in creating the outcomes of 1866 and 1871 than historians previously believed. Thus, when Bismarck used force to create a *kleindeutsch* state under Prussia, Hewitson contends, he was forced to compromise with liberal opinion in order to gain support for the North German Confederation and then for the subsequent creation of the Reich in 1871. "While it was true that the manner in which Bismarck pursued his aims … differed from those of Progressives and other liberals, the actual measures that he put forward and the results that he achieved closely resembled the objectives of liberal nationalists" (p. 362). Hewitson does concede that the force of this liberal opinion, which was concentrated in the middle-sized German states, did not prevent Bavaria, Baden, Württemberg, Saxony, and Hannover from joining the majority of the members of the confederation in support of Austria in 1866.

Although these books by two distinguished historians differ widely in their approach to the history of Germany under the confederation of 1815 and reach different conclusions about the Bund, they both offer valuable insights that are complementary to some degree. Gruner's work concentrates on the place of the German Bund in the context of German confederate traditions stretching back centuries and forward beyond the short-lived Hohenzollern Empire and the disastrous Third Reich, while the focus of Hewitson's book is on a period of less than two decades in the middle of the nineteenth century. Gruner's approach emphasizes the role of the German Confederation in the European state system after 1815; and, although Hewitson does not ignore the European context of events in Germany during the 1850s and 1860s, his focus is primarily on liberal and nationalist political activity within and among the German states. In addition, despite their different perspectives, both Gruner and Hewitson are generally in agreement regarding the reasons for the failure of attempts to reform and modernize the Bund in a timely manner.However, it would be difficult to find any congruence in the perspectives represented by these books regarding the legitimacy of the confederate organization of the German states created by the Congress of Vienna or the wisdom of replacing it with a powerful nation-state. Nonetheless, Gruner's encomium to the tradition of German federalism and Hewitson's account of the emergence after 1848 of an influential and uniquely German form of liberal nationalism can be welcomed as another sign that the dominance of a Prussian-centered version of German history is also history.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Roy A. Austensen. Review of Gruner, Wolf D., *Der Deutsche Bund: 1815-1866* and Hewitson, Mark, *Nationalism in Germany, 1848-1866: Revolutionary Nation.* HABSBURG, H-Net Reviews. October, 2012.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=36306

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.