

Stefan Berger, Chris Lorenz, Billie Melman, eds.. *Popularizing National Pasts: 1800 to the Present*. New York: Routledge, 2011. 376 pp. \$125.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-203-18228-4.

Reviewed by Alexander Maxwell

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Stefan Berger, Billie Melman and Chris Lorenz, by their own account, began their book “as an afterthought” to a five-year research project examining how national histories are written (p. xi). While studying formal academic histories, the editors and participants became increasingly interested in “forms of history in popular cultures,” so they organized a conference in Transylvania (p. xii). This volume resulted. The terms “popularize” and “national” both contain multiple meanings; the fourteen contributors differ sharply in their approaches. Some essays discuss the past as elites present it; others study attitudes toward non-national pasts. Still others examine nationalized media without considering any historical dimension. Generalizing about the volume as a whole proves difficult.

The chapter that most closely addresses the volume’s stated theme comes from one of the editors. Stefan Berger’s study of Kaliningrad (chapter 12) ably connects official history to popular attitudes. Drawing on a pleasing variety of sources, Berger analyzes interactions between Kaliningrad museums, popular media, the Russian state, and various German organizations, exploring how the region’s German heritage affects its contemporary Russian inhabitants. Berger sees evidence of Russian-German reconciliation everywhere. He even asserts that “there is *no evidence whatsoever* for

German designs to recuperate Königsburg” (emphasis added, p. 302), apparently forgetting his own account, two pages earlier, of East Prussian expellee organizations and their continued claims on the region. Berger would have done better to stick with less categorical language, as in his more plausible suggestion that renewed German interest in Kaliningrad is “*hardly ever* linked to demands of redrawing the map” (emphasis added, p. 302). Berger also criticizes Kaliningrad’s “Russification,” advocating instead “open regionalism,” a term which apparently denotes an attitude “conscious of the multi-cultural and multi-ethnic pasts” (p. 303). Berger nevertheless proves remarkably insistent that the city’s pre-1945 heritage be described as “German.” When Kaliningrad schoolchildren were asked to draw “those places in the city which they most liked and identified with,” Berger claims that they drew buildings that “showed German architectural designs,” even though Berger has no evidence that the schoolchildren themselves saw the architectural designs as “German,” and even concedes that “concern for the German cultural heritage ... does not necessarily mean identification with Germany rather than Russia” (p. 296). Might Kaliningrad’s Russian children theoretically identify with “old” monuments without ascribing them any national character? Berger’s insistence on nationalizing

the city's past confirms his claim that "post-national, regionalist perspectives on the oblast are hard to come by these days (p. 303).

Various chapters on elite national histories vary in their choice of elites. Balázs Trencsényi (chapter 6) provides a close reading of various works from a single Bulgarian intellectual, Janko Janev, demonstrating the influence of German philosophy on his thinking. Trencsényi's intellectual history professes to study "Janev's Popular Historiosophy," but since "Janev's German-language works were never published in Bulgarian" Trencsényi informs us that "his intellectual presence at home was minimal" (p. 166). Trencsényi suggests that Janev's ideas influenced "German public discourse," but mostly neglects the question of reception among German readers (p. 165). By my count, only five of seventy-six references refer to a German readership; a full fifty-eight cite Janev's various works.

Peter Aronsson (chapter 7) compares national museums of Denmark and Sweden. He provides a brief history of the museum buildings and their founders and reports on contemporary exhibitions, plausibly characterizing them as "a massive naturalization of the present order" (p. 192). Aronsson provides some comment on Swedish and Danish national narratives, but unclear terminology undermines his efforts. When he claims, for example, that "the establishment of a Nordic cultural nation and historical culture is the first important factor in the process of building Nordic nation states," he leaves readers to speculate what the singular "Nordic cultural nation" might be (p. 190).

One of the book's strongest essays depicts a "popular past" independent of the "national" (chapter 3). Billie Melman, the second editor to contribute a chapter, discusses popular depictions of the French Revolution by comparing Madame Tussot's London waxworks, Parisian "panorama" exhibitions (e.g., panoramas of Napoleonic battlefields), and similar tourist attractions. She insight-

fully analyzes these attractions not only within their respective political contexts, but as part of the history of tourism, showing for example how the Bastille, though not a "unifying symbol," nevertheless became an iconic "commercial spectacle" for tourists (p. 98). Indeed, Melman's work suggests that British and French visitors found popular depictions of the revolution similarly compelling, despite differing national attitudes.

Three solid contributions examine historical attitudes in popular entertainment (chapters 1, 5, and 10). Simon Goldhill usefully examines depictions of the ancient world in European opera from the years immediately preceding the French Revolution through the nineteenth century. Goldhill concentrates particularly on Viennese composer Christoph Gluck and his reception in various national contexts, arguing that "Gluck's classical operas find a particular place in the narrative of the French Revolution, of the rise of German nationalism, and of the British Empire's hostility to German power" (p. 53). Sarah Street's engaging essay on American, British, and German films about the Russian Revolution neglects the difficult question of reception, but effectively weaves the social context of film production into a detailed analysis of plot, scenery, and cinematography. Street lists national peculiarities of the respective national cinemas, but more compellingly shows that similar cinematic techniques crossed national frontiers. Oksana Sarkisova examines contemporary Russian films about the Brezhnev era, suggesting that nostalgia for the late Soviet period challenges the memory "stagnation" (p. 251). Goldhill, Street, and Sarkisova all describe cultural products at some length, which somewhat distracts from the historical analysis proper, but all three have a good eye for revealing details.

Two essays (chapters 11 and 9) discuss nationalism in contemporary television shows. Philip Bohlman entertainingly discusses popular attitudes toward the Eurovision song contest. He arranges national contests on a somewhat ob-

scure spectrum ranging from “centripetal” to “centrifugal” with “Brownian motion” in the middle, but supplements his problematic theory with insightful anecdotes about national song contests in Croatia, Germany, Georgia, and Israel (p. 272). Wulf Kansteiner compares xenophobia and chauvinism in American and German detective dramas. He might have done more to consider the question of representativeness, yet argues persuasively that, despite respective cultures of political correctness, “everyday cultural reproduction of structural racism and nationalism continues unabated” (p. 242). While interesting, both chapters lack a historical dimension.

Chapters on nineteenth-century media prove disappointing. Stephan Bann (chapter 2), comparing paintings and periodical illustrations from England and France, admits that studying “a scanty selection of images” exposes “art historians” to the criticism that “any significant differences might ... disappear from view if another range of visual data were highlighted,” but Bann does nothing to address the criticism he anticipates (p. 58). His article concludes: “Comedy and Romance in their different guises can be identified in the pictorial representations of history by British artists and in British publications. Yet the same is not so clearly the case for the narratives attached to visual symbols of the past on the other side of the channel” (pp. 72-73). Insofar as these comments have any meaning, they suggest that neither comedy nor romance can be identified, in any guise, in pictorial representations of history by French artists or French publications. How can such a conclusion be sustained from limited source material?

Borbála Zsuzsanna Török (chapter 8) examines the literary output of Transylvanian intellectuals, providing lively summaries of various interesting and obscure sources. Török displays considerable erudition, citing sources in Hungarian, German, and Romanian, including poetry, novels, and scholarly works. Her chapter nevertheless

lacks any overall theme, and instead of a conclusion ends with a final section called “Instead of Conclusion.” I failed to detect any argument, but the final paragraph unremarkably proposes that “fiction may be regarded as an archeological site of social knowledge” (p. 214).

Three additional chapters (chapters 4, 13, and 14) do not seem to fit with the book’s stated theme. Astrid Swenson’s well-documented and interesting essay examines historic monuments; more specifically, the public constituencies interested in their restoration or preservation. Swenson claims that her examples provide “a comparative perspective on popular histories” (p. 117), yet historical narrative plays no role in her analysis: her paper explores instead the tensions between commodification, aesthetics, and “authenticity” within heritage circles. Markku Jokisipilä’s normative article compares German, English, and Finnish Google results, paying particular attention to Wikipedia entries, concluding that “from a scholar’s perspective the average quality of online interpretations of history is clearly unsatisfactory” (p. 326). Jokisipilä advises historians to “abandon their futile and out of place efforts to subject the emerging genre of online history to the old rules of historical presentation” while simultaneously urging them to contribute by “writing new articles, editing existing ones, and providing ... references to up-to-date research” (p. 327). Berber Bevernage shows that Argentine mourning for the “disappeared” functions as a form of protest and historical contestation. Bevernage proposes a problematic distinction between “modern and non-modern concepts of mourning” (p. 346). He also uses Argentina’s tragedy to ponder philosophical questions, such as “how exactly social phenomena turn from being present into being past” and whether “the consumption of the past as history is not a profoundly political act” (p. 348). Bevernage, Jokisipilä, and Swenson may have difficulty reaching their target audiences in this particular volume.

Berger, Melman, and Lorenz, laudably seeking to broaden historical attention beyond the disproportionately studied great powers, have gathered case studies on Argentina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Finland, Russia, and Sweden, in addition to the usual suspects of Britain, France, Germany, and the United States. Several articles, furthermore, draw useful cross-national comparisons. Any volume with such a wide geographic focus, however, requires a narrow thematic focus to remain coherent. The volume, unfortunately, lacks a common theme. Some of the blame may lie with misguided interdisciplinarity. Though the editors all appear to be historians, the various contributions draw on art history, music history, digital history, film studies, and media studies. Some individual essays are strong, but the volume as a whole is less than the sum of the parts.

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