

**Winfried Baumgart.** *Kaiser Friedrich III.: Tagebücher 1866–1888.* Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh Verlag, 2012. 615 S. ISBN 978-3-506-77384-5.



**Reviewed by** Patricia Kollander

**Published on** H-Soz-u-Kult (December, 2012)

Although Frederick III reigned for only 99 days as German emperor in 1888, he has remained a subject of fascination for historians, because his political views were more liberal than those of his father, William I, and the son who succeeded him, William II. His liberalism was said to have been profoundly influenced by his wife Victoria who was the eldest daughter of Queen Victoria of Great Britain. In the minds of many historians, the course of German history would have proceeded along more liberal guidelines had it not been for his premature death of cancer at the age of 57. A tempting corollary to this assumption is that the catastrophes of World War I and World War II might have been avoided.

Frederick III kept personal diaries from 1848 onward, which provide some insight into his liberal views. During his lifetime, he gave excerpts from his diary from the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71 to his closest friends. He wanted the diaries to be published fifty years after they were originally written. But the first entries were turned over to the *Deutsche Rundschau* only six months after his death by one of Frederick's clos-

est friends, Heinrich Geffcken, in response to Chancellor Otto von Bismarck's press campaign to extinguish the memory and legacy of the late liberal emperor. The published selections attested to Frederick's association with prominent liberals and his work on behalf of unification. They caused a sensation as they also appeared to indicate that Bismarck had exaggerated the extent of his contribution to the creation of the German empire. As a result, Geffcken was arrested and brought to trial on libel charges. Victoria, who steadfastly insisted that she had nothing to do with the publication of the entries, nonetheless hoped that the incident would stir up interest in her late husband's liberal views and support her plans to create a Kaiser Frederick Society to promote them. She was disappointed when a liberal surge did not occur after Geffcken's arrest (the charges against him were ultimately dismissed), and the plans for the Kaiser Frederick society ultimately came to naught.

During the 1920s, as German historians strove to revise the commonly held view in the west that Germany was solely responsible for the

first World War, historian and archivist Heinrich Otto Meisner (1890–1976) edited Frederick's diaries, no doubt as part of an effort to show that German politics were not always consistently aimed at the kind of Weltpolitik that was trumpeted during the Wilhelmine era. The war diary of 1870–1 was published in toto in 1926; the diaries for the years 1848–1866 appeared three years later. The Great Depression, the rise of Nazism and World War II stifled interest in Frederick's liberalism. During the war, a vast majority of the diaries, save for the last volume, were moved from Berlin to the east for safekeeping. Meisner had planned to publish the remainder of the diaries, but since he resided in West Berlin and the diaries were housed in the Deutsches Zentralarchiv in Merseburg in East Germany, he had very limited access to them after the erection of the Berlin Wall in 1961.

The end of the Cold War brought all diaries under one roof at the Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz in Berlin-Dahlem, and Winfried Baumgart has picked up where Meisner left off. The published diary entries are not comprehensive; Baumgart excluded Frederick's record of troop inspections, dinners, concerts and the like in favor of highlighting his perceptions of culture and politics during the last twenty years of his life, along with his interactions with members of European royal families and the leading political figures of his day.

Baumgart's twenty-six page introduction to the diaries discusses Frederick's character traits as well as those of his wife, his relations with his father and Bismarck, his liberalism, his perceptions of the German empire, and his illness and death. Baumgart makes clear his conclusions about Frederick's character flaws, his wife's Angophilia, which made her an unpopular figure, his depression and sense of fatalism in the years prior to his reign, his growing dependence on Bismarck, and the nebulous nature of his liberal views. Though his conclusions are backed by solid

evidence, these should have appeared at the end of the diaries as a concluding chapter. Readers of the diaries should have the opportunity to make up their own minds about Frederick's views before reading Baumgart's assessments, however convincing they may be. The introduction might have gone into greater detail about the history of the diaries and their appearance in print, it might have brought the historiography on Frederick and his wife up to date, and may have showed how the diaries enhances this historiography.

In his preface, Baumgart notes that he had wished to enhance his volume by publishing certain selections from the correspondence between Frederick and his wife, which he regards in many ways as more revealing about their political views than Frederick's diaries. But the Archiv der Hessischen Hausstiftung in Fulda, which houses the correspondence, refused to permit publication. One can only hope that it will one day be possible to publish their correspondence so that historians can gauge differences between what he told his wife and what he confided to his diaries.

Organizational concerns notwithstanding, Baumgart's volume enhances our understanding of Frederick William's personality and political views, along with his involvement with key figures in the political history of his times; hence it is a very important contribution to the political history of the Second Reich.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

**Citation:** Patricia Kollander. Review of Baumgart, Winfried. *Kaiser Friedrich III.: Tagebücher 1866–1888*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. December, 2012.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37875>



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