

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Michael Fischer, Christian Senkel, Klaus Tanner. *Reichsgründung 1871: Ereignis - Beschreibung - Inszenierung*. Münster: Waxmann Verlag, 2010. 174 S. ISBN 978-3-8309-2103-5.

Reviewed by Jasper Heinzen

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (August, 2013)



## M. Fischer: Reichsgründung 1871

At the start of the twenty-first century, the Kaiserreich still exerts a palpable, if ambivalent, fascination on the German public. The editorial choices of popular history magazines like “Spiegel Geschichte” and “Geo Epoche”, not to mention citizens’ divided response to the rebuilding of the royal palace in Berlin, underscore the extent to which this period is widely seen as having laid the foundations for the economically powerful and united Germany we know today but also the genocidal authoritarianism of the Nazi dictatorship. While academic research on the Kaiserreich has long outgrown the schematic dichotomies of the Sonderweg debate, the cultural and social implications of national unification remain subject to lively discussion among historians. The present volume seeks to contribute to this endeavour by revisiting the question of how contemporaries experienced the act of unification and imbued it with meaning. As the provenance of the essay collection suggests – a collaboration of Sonderforschungsbereich 537 (‘institutions and historicity’) at the Technical University of Dresden and the German Folklore Song Archive in Freiburg/Breisgau – the authors cover a broad range of disciplines including theology, art, and politics. The stated aim of the editors is to shed light on the ways in which the historical watershed of 1871 intersected with confessional identities to create a multiplicity of discourses that, in turn, underwent change over time.

Johannes Wischmeyer opens with a survey of Protestant reactions to the establishment of the Hohenzollern empire. Based on a close reading of the theological literature, he examines the liturgical ‘epitome’ of the impe-

rial coronation at Versailles before turning to the subsequent appropriation of this deeply symbolic event by liberal and conservative Protestants. Wischmeyer supports newer scholarship on the complicated confessional dynamics of the Franco-Prussian War in emphasising that even Protestant churchmen – the primary beneficiaries of the new order – disagreed about strategies to remember 1870/71. Tellingly, the emergence of Sedan Day as the unofficial national holiday of the Kaiserreich represented a compromise between conservative Evangelicals and the Prussian court at the expense of the Protestant Association, which would have preferred a more pacifist format for commemorations, as Wischmeyer points out.

Peggy Renger-Berka follows up this deft introduction to Protestant church politics through a case study of the deaconal motherhouse in Dresden. Though the Lutheran managers of the motherhouse mistrusted the merger of Lutheranism and Calvinism in the state church of Prussia, Renger-Berka concludes that the deaconal nurses loyally aided the war effort in 1870/71 because they placed Christian charity above secular concerns. Bettina Bannasch illuminates another facet of religious integration – or lack thereof – by tracing Jewish reactions to Anti-Semitism in the Kaiserreich. She draws on examples from the field of literature to describe authors’ struggle to maintain a distinct profile as Jews while securing national acceptance from Gentiles who challenged their patriotic credentials. Shifting the focus from religious tolerance to teleologies of nationalism, Dominik Fugger sketches German unification from a left-liberal perspective. The prominent medievalist Ferdinand Gregorovius

saw in the coronation of Kaiser Wilhelm the providential workings of a Hegelian Weltgeist, he notes, but also a stepping-stone on the path towards a federalisation of European nation-states.

Nils Grosch sets the stage for the artistic theme that dominates the second half of the volume by filling in the background story of why “Heil dir im Siegerkranz” became imperial Germany’s semi-official anthem. The latter owed its popularity to the successful fusion of dynastic and national identity because the lyrics were vague enough to appeal to all Germans yet lacked the democratic flavour of more contentious hymns such as Ernst Moritz Arndt’s “Was ist des Deutschen Vaterland?” or August Heinrich Hoffmann’s “Lied der Deutschen”. With the author of the next chapter, Michael Fischer, Grosch shares an appreciation for the commercial incentives that fuelled the proliferation of patriotic music. Just as organ grinders helped to translate “Heil dir im Siegerkranz” into everyday life, so, too, did the publishing market create a demand for new hymns, as Fischer demonstrates in his case study of Richard Wagner’s “Kaisermarsch”. Katharina Hottmann cautions in the subsequent essay, however, that patriotic songs did not simply fall victim to commodification but thrived because they captured the personal – and thus emotive – experiences of participants in the Franco-Prussian War.

Two essays on monuments bring up the rear of the volume. Sebastian Kranich uses the quadricentennial of Martin Luther’s birth in 1883 as a launch pad to investigate tensions within Protestant national memory revolving around the aesthetic dichotomisation of Luther as religious reformer and sensuous Übermensch. Kai

Krauskopf tackles the other idol of the Protestant bourgeoisie, Bismarck, to pursue a somewhat broader line of enquiry, namely the role that post-unification hero-worship played in the development of new aesthetic sensibilities. The Bismarck cult, Krauskopf suggests, made a lasting impression on designers like Walter Gropius and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, who went on to pioneer the ubiquitous Internationalist Style in Western architecture.

On their own, the essays reviewed above possess incontestable scholarly merits (especially Wischmeyer’s and Krauskopf’s). When considered collectively, however, they leave the reader guessing what epistemological lacuna has been redressed. The editors make almost no effort in the introduction to situate their volume in the already well-ploughed historiographical landscape (for instance, one searches in vain for a reference to the natural companion piece “Das politische Zeremoniell im Deutschen Kaiserreich 1871–1918” edited by Andreas Biefang et al.). Andreas Biefang / Michael Epkenhans / Klaus Tenfelde (eds.), *Das politische Zeremoniell im Deutschen Kaiserreich 1871–1918*. Düsseldorf 2008. But perhaps even more problematic is the mismatch between the ostensible target of the editors – to tease out experiences, descriptions, and the symbolic (re-)staging of the Reichsgründung in 1871 – and the rather unfocused selection of topics, notably in the chapters by Bannasch and Kranich, which engage with the circumstances of German unification tangentially at best. Given the editor’s lack of a clear mission statement, this discrepancy seems not at all surprising and mars a publication that would have had the potential to make an important interdisciplinary contribution to the cultural history of the Kaiserreich.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

**Citation:** Jasper Heinzen. Review of Fischer, Michael; Senkel, Christian; Tanner, Klaus, *Reichsgründung 1871: Ereignis - Beschreibung - Inszenierung*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. August, 2013.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=39898>

Copyright © 2013 by H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redistributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the author and usage right holders. For permission please contact H-SOZ-U-KULT@H-NET.MSU.EDU.