
Reviewed by Kevin Cramer

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On July 2, 1937, Heinrich Himmler presided over a midnight ceremony in the crypt of the Quedlinburg cathedral in which the bones of the “first German king” were theatrically re-interred and sealed within a new sarcophagus. These remains, authenticated by SS-sponsored research, were those of the founder of the Saxon and Salian dynasties, Heinrich I, or "Henry the Fowler" (919-36). This funerary ritual was the culmination of the Fowler's "rediscovery" by nationalist nineteenth-century German historians as the warlord who effectively dissolved the German dukes' fealty to the rulers of the East Frankish kingdom that had emerged from the collapse of Charlemagne's Rome-sanctioned empire and, in defeating the Magyar tribes at Riade in Thuringia in 933, set the stage for his son and successor, Otto I "The Great," to launch Germany's Christianizing and colonizing mission in the Slavic lands east of the Elbe.

How the leader of the SS, along with a coterie of ambitious academics, corrupted Heinrich's history to legitimate the Nazi project of settlement, ethnic cleansing, and genocide in eastern Europe is the story Frank Helzel tells in this fascinating book. His description of the re-making of Heinrich into the patron saint of genocide illuminates yet another aspect of the atavistic, mystical world of the Nazi intelligentsia as presided over by Himmler and his minions. On the other hand, Helzel's conclusions about how history writing legitimates policy and national self-conceptions are less revelatory, if nonetheless solid. Indeed, the title of the book is somewhat misleading, as the bulk of the volume comprises an intellectual history of how German scholars, particularly medievalists, helped conceptualize, in various ways and capacities, the period's Ostpolitik, that is, the transformation of German-occupied eastern Europe into the racially pure bulwark of the Thousand Year Reich. Though Helzel's contribution to this story is compelling, it has been well and systematically examined elsewhere.[1]

Helzel aims to reconstruct, via a "literary sociology," how the history of Heinrich I was "received," or manipulated, in the service of genocide and imperialist expansion during the Third Reich. In examining the cultural construction of a political symbol, Helzel does not significantly deviate from Eric Hobsbawm's broad conception of "invented tradition" and Patrick Geary's theory of "ethnogenesis" as the building blocks of modern nationalism. How did Heinrich I become a central figure in the mythology of Nazi Germany? Helzel's answer to this question is relatively straightforward: the Saxon king's significance in the historical self-conception of the Germans lay in their evolving understanding of how, as he pushed eastward against the pagan Slavic threat, he laid the foundation of the modern German nation (pp. 12-13). From Friedrich Ludwig Jahn's and E. M.
Arndt's militant advocacy of a pure *Deutsche Volksthum* during the Wars of Liberation through late nineteenth-century völkisch nationalism to the conservative histories of Germany written during the Cold War, a conspicuous theme in German political history has been a focus on Germany's struggle for survival against the tyranny of Rome and the Asiatic threat of Slavic barbarism. Himmler's promotion of the cult of Heinrich I to legitimate German eastern expansion and settlement was part of this idealization of the German "mission" in Europe, as summed up in Stefan George's pronouncement "that one day the heart of the continent shall redeem the world."[2]

By the end of the nineteenth century, primarily through the work of Georg Waitz, Wilhelm Giesebrecht, and Leopold von Ranke, the nationalist narrative of the career of Heinrich I had been established around four main theses: one, that Heinrich had pursued the expulsion of the Slavic tribes beyond the Elbe; two, that this expulsion allowed Otto I to establish the protective border marches of Billunger, Nordmark, and Lausitz; three, that the expansion of the Ostgrenze constituted the vital core of German nationalist aspirations; and four, that Heinrich, in rejecting the spurious "Roman crown" of Charlemagne, had bequeathed to his successors the most authentic territorial conception of the German Reich. Giesebrecht saw Heinrich as "the founder of a new German Reich ... through the unification of the German tribes in a political community.... The history of the German Reich and nation began with Heinrich" (p. 67). Waitz, who Helzel identifies as the most important nineteenth-century authority on Heinrich, declared that "German culture and the German population are called upon to expand into the East" (p. 103). For his part, Ranke judged Heinrich's eastward orientation as "the first step in the emancipation of Germany from the rule of Church and Pope" (p. 69). To be sure, some prominent historians of the Prussian School, such as Johann Droysen and Heinrich von Sybel, had serious misgivings about the historiographical pro-
strumentalizing," via their advocacy of the essentially eastern orientation of German nationalism, the policy of genocide.

At best (and it is bad enough), it is clear that many German historians allowed their almost desperate search for a coherent national narrative to obscure the facts of Germany's tortuous territorial and political development. The deeper tragedy is that this narrative dovetailed all too neatly with Hitler's reduction of German history to the quest for Lebensraum. It was without a single shred of doubt or self-consciousness that Himmler could declare to an assembly of SS men, in the opening days of Operation Barbarossa in July 1941, that the invasion of the Soviet Union was "the same battle against the same sub-humans, the same inferior races who, under the name of the Huns and the Magyars, a thousand years ago were fought by King Heinrich I and Otto I... Today, under the banner of Bolshevism, they march under the name of Russians" (p. 192).

Notes

Hauptlinien der nationalsozialistischen Planungs- und Vernichtungspolitik (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1993). See also Norman Cantor's somewhat tendentious account in Inventing the Middle Ages (New York: William Morrow, 1991), 79-117.


[3]. Prussian kleindeutsch historians were suspicious of the "Ghibelline" enthusiasms of the pro-imperial medievalists, the latter being pejoratively identified with reactionary Catholic history writing. On this controversy, see Friedrich Schneider, ed., Universalstaat oder Nationalstaat. Macht und Ende des Ersten deutschen Reiches: Die Streitschriften von Heinrich v. Sybel und Julius Ficker zur deutschen Kaiserpolitik des Mittelalters, 2nd ed. (Innsbruck: Universitäts-Verlag Wagner, 1943). On the broader ideological dimensions of the Protestant-Catholic divide in the German historical profession, see Kevin Cramer, The Thirty Years' War and German Memory in the Nineteenth Century (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007).

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