

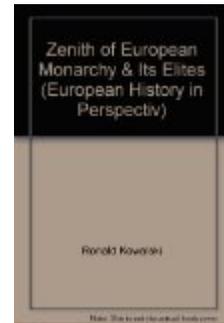
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Tim Kirk. *Nazi Germany*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. 278 pp. (cloth), ISBN 978-0-333-71694-6; (cloth), ISBN 978-0-333-69336-0.

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## An Eminently Useful Synthesis

The historiography of the Nazi period of German history is immensely vast and rich. Even a cursory survey of this material demonstrates that this scholarship is still increasing and branching into areas overlooked by earlier studies (such as the role of gender, Nazi policy in eastern territories, and countless others). Tim Kirk sets for himself a Herculean task in seeking to “provide as comprehensive an overview of Nazi Germany as is possible in such a limited space” (p. 8). It is to his great credit that he overwhelmingly succeeds. He also attempts to incorporate some of the more recent scholarship in German, which is often inaccessible to many students. Moreover, Kirk also provides a historiographical perspective where possible, presenting some of the ways that historians have sought to answer questions related to Nazi Germany.

The book begins with an introduction that carefully familiarizes the reader with the “peculiarities of German historiography” (p. 2). In the succinct and clear manner that characterizes his writing style throughout the book, Kirk explains the notion of the *Sonderweg* and its relationship to German history. Moreover, he introduces the functionalist concept of “cumulative radicalization,” arguing that Nazi policy developed not as decrees from above, but as the result of competing bureaucratic aims that sought to “work towards the Führer.” As this explanation is repeated throughout the book, its introduction here is extremely useful. Finally, Kirk treats the movement of historical inquiry into areas of *Alltagsgeschichte*, gender, society, and culture, the description of which is

also a central contribution of this synthesis.

The book is organized thematically, beginning with the origins and rise to power of the Nazi movement. With a focus on continuities in German history, Kirk situates the Nazi movement within the greater context of conservatism, *völkisch* movements, and the chaotic political climate of the Weimar period. Addressing the claim that the Nazi party was a *Mittelstandspartei*, Kirk argues that “the middle classes were even more heavily represented in the leadership than in the party as a whole” (p. 24). He is more circumspect on the hotly contested participation of the “working classes” in the Nazi party, rightly distinguishing between urban industrial workers, who he claims were “far more likely to be immune to the appeal of Nazism,” and other workers and laborers employed outside the manufacturing industry (p. 24).

Kirk then moves on to a discussion of the Nazi seizure of power and the nature of the Nazi dictatorship. He shows that the Nazi “national revolution” was one characterized by both legal and illegal actions. In a theme highlighted throughout the book—in that it professed itself a revolution that made all Germans equal—Nazism was in many ways a movement whose ideals and aims were thoroughly bourgeois. Here, Kirk also highlights Hans Mommsen’s concept of “cumulative radicalization” and supports recent scholarship that sees the Nazi state as one subject to “countless constraints ... generated by competition for influence and resources as much as by unforeseen events” (p. 49).

Kirk argues that Nazi economic policy—both in the industrial and agricultural spheres—was relatively ineffective. He highlights the care that policymakers took to not force hardships on the German consumer population. Kirk remarks upon the relative failure of the Nazi state to win favor among workers, a theme that also continues throughout the book. We find that workers were “coordinated” out of any real bargaining power or place in the German national community (*Volksgemeinschaft*), which is the subject of the next chapter.

Terming the “national community” a “myth,” Kirk shows the difficulties that the Nazis had in mobilizing workers, arguing that many were not particularly interested in politics. He examines the roles in the *Volksgemeinschaft* of consumers, professionals, young people, and the churches and dismisses Nazi claims of creating a new society, arguing that “much of the social change that is discernible is broadly compatible with long-term social and economic developments” (p. 112). He concludes the section with the insightful comment that “the clearest and most dramatic impact of Nazism on German society came not directly but as a consequence of war, defeat, and the division of Germany” (p. 112).

One of the more interesting aspects of the Nazi state was its intrusion in the spheres of culture and leisure. Kirk addresses Nazi attempts to regulate these areas and again stresses its relative inefficiency in doing so. He discusses art, film, radio, newspapers, and the “Strength Through Joy” program and addresses the attempts of policy makers to “coordinate” these areas of public and private life with the goals of the new Nazi state as well as their relative ineffectiveness. For example, he shows that while the Strength Through Joy program was the most successful of these programs, the majority of Germans were unable to take part in it.

Kirk argues that the relationship between the state and society was “far more complex and ambiguous” than was once thought. He begins with a clear and extensive description of the various elements of the state security apparatus (Gestapo, SD, SS, RSHA, concentration camps). The resistance section is shorter but contains an important discussion of the failures of the German communist and socialist parties in providing any real locus of opposition to the regime.

Kirk’s treatment of women, gender, and racial hygiene is especially important. He sees Nazi attitudes toward women as a continuation of pre-Nazi conservative thought. He further positions the “essentially biological vision of social well-being” (p. 150) as the central fac-

tor influencing the Nazi approach to gender and the family. In the second half of the chapter, he explains the implementation of racial hygiene and the T-4 euthanasia program in the larger context of Nazi family policy, arguing that “Nazi eugenics reiterated in extreme form the respectable values of cleanliness, order, and industry” (p. 172). One might note the absence of Claudia Koonz’s work (for example, *Mothers in the Fatherland* [1987]). Another point of criticism is the relative brevity in which Nazi concepts of masculinity are discussed.

Kirk begins his examination of the Holocaust somewhat awkwardly with the pivotal mutation of traditional forms of antisemitism into racial antisemitism and with the precursors to Nazi antisemitic policy in Wilhelmine Germany. One could certainly question the somewhat artificial segregation of antisemitism from the other chapters. Kirk explains the evolution of Nazi genocidal policy as “an incremental decision-making process [which] took place in the context of ever more radical initiatives from local Nazi functionaries in the East” (p. 190).

In discussing Nazi foreign policy and the conduct of the war, Kirk begins with Adolf Hitler’s first foreign policy decisions concerning rearmament and the creation of Greater Germany. He is particularly insightful in discussing the fundamentally different character of the war in the Soviet Union. However, Germany’s continuing relations with its satellite states and occupied territories receive little attention. For example, Romania, Italy, and Hungary played an important role in both German foreign policy and its implementation of the Holocaust, though perhaps a more detailed discussion is beyond the scope of the book.

In a work of this length (only 222 pages of text), any historian could identify areas that receive insufficient attention. However, in many ways, such criticisms overlook the great value in Kirk’s work. He has produced a clear, well-organized synthesis of an enormous amount of material. This book clearly deserves a place in any undergraduate course on Nazi Germany or the Holocaust. Its thematic organization would complement very effectively other readings and lectures. In addition, Kirk provides an outstanding introduction to some of the key historical methods of explaining various aspects of the Nazi state in a concise, yet academic manner that would also be useful as an introduction to the topic for graduate students not familiar with the subject. The supplementary material provided in this work is also quite useful. In addition to notes from the text itself, Kirk provides a five-

page glossary of important terms and abbreviations from the Nazi era. This section is followed by a very well organized and informative bibliographical section, divided thematically, which provides a useful starting point for students interested in further researching subjects in the

history of Nazi Germany. In sum, Kirk has created a detailed, yet wide-ranging study that should serve as an excellent introduction to the rich and complex history of Nazi Germany.

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