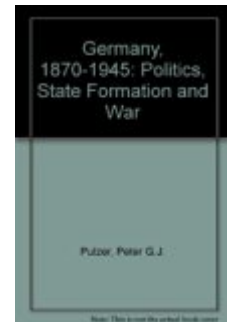


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Peter Pulzer. *Germany 1870-1945: Politics, State Formation, and War*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. xiii + 175 pp. \$58.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-878135-6; \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-878134-9.

Reviewed by Gene Mueller (Henderson State University)
Published on H-German (November, 1997)



This is perhaps one of the most concise texts written on modern Germany's tumultuous political history from 1870-1945. One finds here precise comments on the major issues of this period, such as Bismarck's critical role in creating the German state, the failure of the Revolution to produce a lasting democracy, why Weimar failed, and why the Nazis were successful in the 1930s. Peter Pulzer states his purpose in the introduction. First, the text is meant to be a companion to his earlier work *German Politics, 1945-1995*. His "aim" in these two volumes "is to emphasize both the continuities and the breaks in the German political experience of the last century and a half." In the volume under review, he intends to discuss "the national movement, state structures and participation, the economy, diplomacy, military planning and the conduct of war" (p. 2).

Clearly, the strengths of this work are his comments regarding political developments and a very good summary of the political parties in Germany. In the nineteenth century, Pulzer writes, three issues dominated German political thought: national identity, rivalries of the German dynastic states, and the "claims of popular self-government" (p. 3). The problem of defining what is German faced the dilemmas of not only *Klein- und Grossdeutschland*, but also of ethnicity and race. Furthermore, the movement to attain national identity had first to overcome provincial loyalty to local dynasties. These concerns certainly were expressed at the Frankfurt Parliament in 1848-49, and Pulzer gives an excellent summary (p. 8) of the important legacies of that failed political entity. His subsequent brief discussion of the unification process concludes that the most important event was the defeat of Austria, for it settled the question of dynastic rivalries by creating a Prussian-dominated German en-

tity. That left, consequently, two issues for the German state to resolve: the definition of "German," and the role of democracy.

The thirty-page section on Bismarck's Germany centers on the issue of defining a national state. All the issues are mentioned, such as the role of political parties, the *Kulturkampf*, the relationship between the Chancellor and Emperor, economic and foreign policy, and the failure of liberalism. By far, the greatest emphasis is placed upon an analysis of the political parties, and there is a brief explanation as to why parliamentary government failed to take hold during this period. The year 1879, Pulzer emphasizes, was critical for two reasons: the formation of the "special relationship" between Germany and Austria, and the tariff enacted that year which led "the most traditionalist and paternalist sections of Germany's economic leaders" to become and remain "the most influential" (p. 35) until 1918. Some thirty-three pages are devoted to the Wilhelmine Empire of 1890-1914. In the very first sentence, Pulzer sets the tone for the chapter by describing Germany as an "economic giant" that remained a "political dwarf" (p. 46). From Wilhelm II's mania for *Weltpolitik* to the numerous ideological organizations that sprung up during this time, Pulzer gives a good summary of the deep fissures in German politics and society. Likewise, the discussion on World War I and the revolution immediately thereafter is concise. While there are certainly many aspects and details of the war and revolution absent from these pages, the salient features of the time period are well summarized.

Interestingly, the longest chapter is devoted to the Weimar Republic. This is understandable, for it was now that the two remaining issues left unresolved in

1871–German identity and the nature of parliamentary democracy—reached a critical point. That Weimar would fail on both counts (and be attacked within and without on both counts) was not a foregone conclusion. However, the chasm between left and right in Germany, complicated by baggage inherited from the Second Reich, made it exceedingly difficult for parliamentary government to succeed, especially since it was further handicapped by the system of proportional representation. As with other recent scholarly works, Pulzer concludes Nazism was not inevitable and gives a cogent summary as to why it succeeded.

Chapters Six and Seven discuss the Third Reich at peace and at war. There is a succinct discussion of how Hitler amassed power, increased economic activity, and prepared for war. The basic campaigns of the war are mentioned, though here the comment that Germany took the initiative in 1940 by invading Denmark and Norway, which were “subjugated within a month,” does stretch reality. After all, Britain also launched an invasion of Norway at almost the same time, and it took more than a month for the Wehrmacht to “subjugate” Norway. Nonetheless, the chapter highlights the important military events, the war against Jews and other civilians, and the crisis of leadership that evolved during the war. Pulzer’s conclusion is most interesting and should

be a good catalyst for classroom discussion.

The question of German identity was not resolved during this time period (1870-1945). As with other issues, foreign policy and the results of it imposed an answer. The suggestion for further readings (all in English) highlight what many would consider “classics” of modern German historiography. This is clearly intended as a text on Germany, the purpose of which is to explain: (1) how the German state was built; (2) why it failed to answer the basic questions posed in the introduction; (3) why governmental structures collapsed, and (4) why the Nazis were able to rise to power. The only analysis that falls somewhat short is that of the military throughout this period, although most key events are highlighted. There is very little on the cultural and social aspects of Germany during this time period, and the discussion of economic issues only summarizes major developments or party positions. Still, if one is searching for a text that gives an accurate, concise, well-written summary of 1870-1945, particularly in reference to politics and governance, this is a good choice.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

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

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Gene Mueller. Review of Pulzer, Peter, *Germany 1870-1945: Politics, State Formation, and War*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. November, 1997.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1485>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.