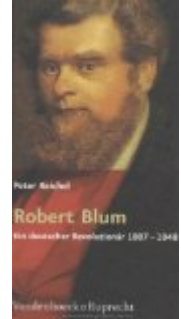


Peter Reichel. *Robert Blum: Ein deutscher Revolutionär 1807-1848.* Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007. 232 pp. cloth, ISBN 978-3-525-36136-8.



Reviewed by Jonathan Sperber

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Commissioned by Eve M. Duffy (University of North Carolina Chapel Hill)

The beginning of the twenty-first century brings with it the onset of bicentennial commemorations of nineteenth-century figures, institutions, and events. The two-hundredth anniversary of the birth of Robert Blum (1807-48) occurred in 2007, and this little book offers a brief life of the nineteenth-century German democrat, republican, revolutionary, and martyr. Based primarily on secondary literature, some contemporary printed primary sources, and occasional use of unpublished manuscripts, and fluidly and elegantly written for a broader public, this work by Peter Reichel evokes the events of Robert Blum's life but does not probe very deeply into their significance.

The book is primarily a narration of Blum's life story. A bright, intellectual child born into a poor artisan family in Cologne, Blum escaped his social milieu through a job as a theater secretary and administrator, first in Cologne and then in Leipzig. It was in Leipzig that he first became involved in politics, developing a reputation as one

of Germany's most prominent *Vormärz* oppositional orators and political organizers. His politics moved on a steady leftward trajectory, encouraged by his affiliation with the radical German-Catholic sect. Following the outbreak of the 1848 revolution, Blum became a member of the Frankfurt pre-parliament and its committee of 50. He was then elected to the German National Assembly, where he quickly became one of the leading figures on the Left, and a prominent parliamentary and extra-parliamentary orator. His commitment to both republican and democratic causes, as well as to parliamentary legality (a difficult enough course to follow) became increasingly problematic as a result of growing political polarization in the fall of 1848. On behalf of the members of his caucus in the Frankfurt Parliament, Blum journeyed to Vienna in October of that year, as the confrontation between the radicals in the city and the Habsburg troops of Generals Windischgrätz and Jelačić was reaching its high-point. Blum decided to stay in Vienna and fight with the insurgents against the Habsburg forces. Following

the revolutionaries' defeat, he was arrested, brought before a court-martial, and executed, his death making him the great martyr of the radical cause in the mid-nineteenth-century German revolution.

Reichel tells this story well, but has very little to say about the significance, broader features, or deeper meaning of any of the events he narrates. To take a few examples: one has to wonder how it was that Blum left the faith of his Catholic childhood—he was even an altar boy—to join the rationalist, anti-papal, schismatic German Catholics. How did he develop into a proponent of a republican form of government, definitely not a typical political choice in early nineteenth-century Germany? The author mentions Blum's involvement in a network of political activists during the 1840s, the so-called *Hallgarten Kreis*, but we do not learn much about its members, its activities, or its relationship to the events of the 1848 revolution itself. During 1848, Blum played an important role in linking parliamentary with extra-parliamentary political movements, yet another unexplored topic. Blum's relationship to the nascent labor movement, or the way he hoped to reconcile radical political goals with legal moderate means, two more important issues for the history of 1848, are also little explored.

Reichel's account of Blum's private life, including his relations with his wife and children, as well as his reputation as a great lover (a reflection of his powerful personality, since contemporaries frequently commented on just how ugly he was), is equally superficial, not going beyond comments that no one then expected men and women to be equal. The author does devote some space to the discussion of the many funeral services and commemorations for Blum held throughout central Europe following his execution, although there as well we do not learn much about these events' symbolism, their appeal, or their relationship to other forms of public political manifestations. Blum's reputation in the century between

his death and the revival of his reputation in the 1948 centenary of the revolution in the shadow of the nascent Cold War, remains unexplored.

All in all, the book seems to fit into a quite old-fashioned genre, the naïve and ahistorical attempt to evoke a democratic tradition in German history, rather in line with Veit Valentin's famous 1930 two-volume history of the 1848 revolution, which seems to be Reichel's favorite text, given how often he cites it. We get no sense of the similarities and, especially, the differences between the democratic and republican political ideals and practices of the mid-nineteenth century and those of more recent times, with Reichel making naïve comparisons between Blum's defense of free speech and rulings of the *Bundesverfassungsgericht*, or putting forth the odd suggestion that if Blum had lived, he could have been the Friedrich Ebert of nineteenth-century Germany.

The author might reply to these criticisms by suggesting that a book for a popular audience need not be written in a scholarly format. I would be the last person to suggest that academics should not write for a popular audience, or that Germans should not cultivate their democratic legacy; but, as the example of many historians demonstrates (and in the German-speaking world I would mention, almost at random, figures such as Lothar Gall, Thomas Nipperdey, or Heinrich August Winkler) bringing scholarly themes to the public and evoking the many differences, as well as similarities, between the past and the present is by no means an impossible task. Ralf Zerback's recent biography of Robert Blum, like Reichel's a product of the bicentenary of Blum's birth, seems to perform this task of popularizing scholarship for a broader public more successfully.[1]

Note

[1]. Ralf Zerback, *Robert Blum. Eine Biografie* (Leipzig: Mark Lemstedt, 2007).

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