

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



James R. Dow, Hannjost Lixfeld, eds. *The Nazification of an Academic Discipline: Folklore in the Third Reich*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994. xx + 354 pp. \$36.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-31821-3.

Hannjost Lixfeld. *Folklore and Fascism: The Reich Institute for German Volkskunde*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994. xxi + 308 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-33512-8.

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Recently the history of professions and professionalization has received wide scholarly attention. The knowledge of “experts” has been and can be used in a variety of cultural and political ways and “experts” often are viewed as prestigious bearers of “authority.” The problematic relationship between the scholarly community of German folklorists and National Socialism is the focus of the two books under review.

After the end of World War II, Germans tended to accept the notion of two *Volkskunden*. This interpretation suggested that one small group of academics readily succumbed to the embrace of the Nazis, especially since the National Socialists repeatedly proclaimed that their ideology rested on the concepts of race, nation, and folk. The “good” folklorists, on the other hand, legitimately pursued their academic profession by distancing themselves from the racist *Weltanschauungen* of their colleagues. In his study of the Reich Institute for German *Volkskunde*, Lixfeld unhesitatingly indicts the folklorists both before and during the Nazi period as racist apologists. He does not see an ideological divide between two *Volkskunden*, but views this interpretation as yet another instance of the postwar German refusal to come to terms with its past. He documents how folklorists before 1933 centered their research on the recovery of “Germanic customs, laws, culture, art,” and differentiated “authentic” German customs from “foreign” importations. He unequivocally states that “German *Volkskunde* of the Weimar period, based on its conservative-reactionary, national, and sociopolitical objectives, was highly disposed if not even predestined to be employed under fascist rule as a systemically stabilizing state science, and...to be misused”

(22).

During the war, Nazi interest in proving the Germanic roots of European culture and customs expanded with the military occupation of Poland, Norway, Denmark, the Low Countries, and France. This led to massive confiscations of libraries, church artifacts, art museum objects and archives throughout the conquered territories. Both Himmler and Rosenberg had considerable ideological interests in both acquiring these objects and using them to advance the study of folklore. Rosenberg wished to create an advanced institute, to be built in Bavaria after the war and lavishly equipped with the latest in media, such as television, film, a radio station, and “working centers for the reasearch on the history of the German folk and the party...” (137). While Hitler signed a decree ordering the Institute’s establishment in 1940, it was never built, though the Nazis created smaller research institutes at various German and Austrian universities. There were over one hundred party-approved researchers appointed to positions in folklore during the war.

Thus *Folklore and Fascism* tells of a profession whose proclivities towards racist ideology and conservative thought was present before the Nazi takeover and whose practitioners were only too pleased to participate in advancing Nazi notions of Germanic cultural superiority. The topic is incredibly important in understanding how the eighteenth century legacy of Herder became corrupted by twentieth century “professionals.” An appendix provides helpful documents from the SS Office of Ancestral Inheritance and the Rosenberg Bureau which shed additional light on the governmental plans for or-

ganizing folklore in the Reich.

While the topic is extremely important, the book is a translation and its readability suffers from awkward sentence construction and the overly-frequent naming of German bureaucratic organizations. It is unfortunate that the monograph is rather poorly written and difficult to follow. The author jumps from describing individuals and outlining their careers in folklore to discussing political infighting among various contending folkloric groups. Had the monograph been more clearly written, it would serve well as yet another reminder of the Third Reich's subversion of scholarship. It would also be more accessible to a wider readership than the academic audience for whom it is obviously intended.

The authors responsible for writing and translating *Folklore and Fascism* (Hannjost Lixfeld and James Dow, respectively) were also responsible for editing and translating a series of quite informative papers given at a 1986 Munich conference on folklore and National Socialism. Again, the theme of this work is, as its title proclaims, "the nazification of a discipline." Essays include "Nazi Conceptions of Culture and the Erasure of Jewish Folklore" (Christoph Daxelmüller) which describes the fate of several Jewish folklorists and the Nazi characterization of Jewish folk life as "alien" and disintegrative. Rolf Wilhelm Brednich's "The Weigel Symbol Archive and the Ideology of National Socialist Folklore," offers a fascinating look at the close connection between ideology and institutional practice. In it he describes the attempt by

an incompetent researcher, Karl Theodor Weigel, to create a scientific and scholarly gloss on runic and Germanic symbols, though even those working in Himmler's Ancestral Inheritance offices realized Weigel's scholar qualifications to be almost non-existent. Nonetheless, by 1943 he had collected over 55,000 photos and 10,000 citations, receiving state support and working out of an office in Goettingen. Other topics include discussions of prominent university folklorists and their activities during the Third Reich (essays by Peter Assion and Anka Oesterle) as well as the fate of folklore studies in the GDR (Wolfgang Jacobeit). The editors present an introduction and epilogue which suggest some historiographical similarities between the history and folklore professions. However, they implicate the latter profession as one whose basic ideology was compatible with the Nazis, and hence, little forceful ideological imposition from the outside was necessary. The authors themselves were under attack in the 1980s from conservative scholars for baldly stating such a view at various conferences in the United States and Germany. Thus, the essays convey both the state of present-day German folklore scholarship on the Third Reich as well as presenting the editors' defense of their critical view of the profession during the Nazi era together with its avoidance of mastering its past after 1945.

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