



Corinna Treitel. *Eating Nature in Modern Germany: Food, Agriculture and Environment, c.1870 to 2000.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 404 pp. \$34.99, paper, ISBN 978-1-316-63839-2.

Reviewed by Frank Uekoetter (University of Birmingham)

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Commissioned by Jasper Heinzen (Department of History, University of York)

The cacophony of nutrition advice is a constant irritant for everyone who tries to be a responsible consumer in the twenty-first century. An endless variety of official guidelines, stories, and food fads is in the ear of everyone who navigates the aisles of a supermarket nowadays, and one can never be sure whether the latest advice is based on anecdotal evidence, commercial interests, or solid research—assuming that one still has confidence in the advice of experts after so many servings of “according to a recent study.” Corinna Treitel’s impressive study roundly dispels any notion that nutrition expertise is becoming irrelevant. German experts have been telling the public how to eat natural foods for more than a century. So why should they stop now?

Treitel traces German discussions on what she calls natural eating from the mid-nineteenth century into the post-Second World War period. She identifies “a changing matrix of hunger and health” (p. 3): one point of reference was the health benefits of a natural diet (with all the ambiguities that health implies), another the collective anxieties of a German nation struggling to feed citizens from its own soil, at least until the agricultural revolution of the postwar years brought forth a cornucopia of food. There is a third implicit strand in Treitel’s book, which revolves around the dealings among a growing crowd of experts

with shades of scientific credentials. By and large, writing styles of contemporary experts conveyed a greater sense of cognitive certainty than underlying evidence, and Treitel shows that at least some authors were candid about the absence of scientific rigor.

Readers who expect a juicy treatise on “food, agriculture and environment” should be warned that her main interest is in discourse: the book is more concerned with conversations over foodstuff than about food itself. Treitel knows the literature inside out and shows it, and when the discussion moves beyond books and articles, it revolves around the issues that matter most to experts on a mission: networks and positions, outlets, institutional and political support, public acclaim. Treitel’s expertise extends into five appendices that run to almost fifty pages with information on periodicals, cookbooks, nutritional guides and other publications, institutions, and biographical information on key figures. The book will be a mandatory resource for anyone who considers a research project on Germany’s food history.

The Nazi era was a catalyst for debate, both in terms of sorting out and amalgamating opinions and the new significance of state authorities. However, this empirical finding tends to disappear behind numerous statements that focus on the moral condemnation of Nazi connections. The vegetari-

an predilections of Adolf Hitler greet the reader on the first page, though the answer as to why he became a vegetarian (leaving occasional servings of liver dumplings and sausage aside) is not very enlightening: as with many other converts to natural eating, Hitler's food habits were the mushy product of advice and personal experience. Treitel's narrative also has a few statements that evoke Nazi barbarism, which is little more than rhetorical bluster that suggests moral and political order where there was none. Treitel details collaborations but fails to explore underlying motives, and much points to yet another case where experts "worked towards the Führer" with little, if any, thought being given to ethical and professional red lines. Once more, we see professionals moving down a slippery slope, and we reach the bottom of the moral abyss with a physician conducting murderous nutrition experiments in the Mauthausen concentration camp late in the war.

The accommodation with the Nazis shows that ideas about natural eating had come a long way from its liberal nineteenth-century roots. Treitel provides an empirically rich account of the many ways in which more natural eating became acceptable, co-opted, and mainstreamed—if one wishes to use the word in a country whose love of meat endures in the twenty-first century. She studies debates among physicians and public health experts and the milieu of cultural critics, naturopaths, and animal rights activists; the food scarcity during the First World receives its due along with Friedrich Naumann, Richard Wagner, and the popular science journal *Kosmos*. To her credit, Treitel does not shy away from including odd opinions—from the Jewish activist who found vegetarianism a useful accompaniment to Zionism to the life reformer who celebrated Japan's 1905 victory over Russia as the triumph of the plant-eaters over the meat-eaters.

The introduction establishes the context of autarky regimes framed by two world wars, a German diet that became meat-heavy in the nine-

teenth century, and the epidemiological transition from infections to chronic diseases, but after that, the focus shifts to the supply side of nutrition advice. The narrative becomes vague when actual consumption patterns heave into view, and Treitel is reluctant to talk about commercial interests. Some of the crucial parameters of food choices—levels of affluence, foot outlets, agricultural producers (unless they went organic)—receive scant attention, and it does not seem that the author feels bad about neglecting these wider contexts in favor of the men who forged a new worldview. In true intellectual history style, Treitel argues that the vision of a natural diet "remained most compelling when it remained closest to its popular roots among life reformers and their quasi-religious faith in nature" (p. 305).

The introduction makes a strong case for a history of the life reform movement that supersedes the traditional movement-centered narratives. Life reform was a hodgepodge of ideas and practices that developed a life of its own, and the natural diet appealed to a motley crew of intellectuals, publishers, and state authorities, as well as many different households. Treitel outlines a "biopolitics of nature" that may cause digestive troubles among fans of Michel Foucault: it grew from below and had plenty of room for laypeople. It was also practically and intellectually liberating and in fact made people feel better. And yet it is rather ironic that, in trying to liberate the field from scholarly constraints, Treitel creates an orthodoxy of her own where the life reformers, their publications, and (less frequently) their daily work claim the lion's share of attention. Eating naturally was about more than having the right knowledge, but then, it might have remained an ephemeral vision without a body of knowledge that seeped into cookbooks, self-styled and state-sponsored guidelines, and a plethora of lectures and outreach articles. One does not need to be a vegetarian or a fan of Eduard Baltzer (according to this book, the man who started it all in the classic manner of a German academic—with a four-

volume book series) to come away thinking that than one had previously thought.
the natural diet was a much bigger phenomenon

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