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Review of Andreas Fahrmeir (ed.), *Deutschland: Globalgeschichte einer Nation*

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BOOK REVIEWS

ANDREAS FAHRMEIR (ed.), *Deutschland: Globalgeschichte einer Nation* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2020), 936 pp. ISBN 978 3 406 75619 1. €39.95

This is an impossible book to review. It consists of 177 short essays by 172 historians. It ranges from the prehistoric (*Homo heidelbergensis*, c.400,000 years ago) to 2020 (the Covid-19 pandemic and the new Berlin airport). Many subjects and types of historical writing are represented.

The book is divided into six chronologically ordered sections. Most essays are identified by a year and subject—for example, ‘1454’ is about Gutenberg and the European innovation of printing. This apparent precision can be misleading, as the year in question is often chosen to signify the start of a longer process. Thus the essay ‘789’, on the beginnings of German-language literature, refers to the dating of a list of German words probably used to help novices learn to read the Bible in Latin. The essay then goes on to consider German-language texts until well into the thirteenth century.

The first section—‘Avant la lettre’—contains seven essays from ‘400,000 BCE’ to ‘540 CE’. The medieval section (‘700’ to ‘1462’) has seventeen ‘year’ essays and four on regions (Poland, Bohemia, Italy, and Burgundy). The early modern section (‘1502’ to ‘1784’) consists of twenty-four essays, one of them on a region (Alsace). The long nineteenth century (‘1792’ to ‘1911’) comprises forty-one ‘year’ essays, plus one on Austria. The fifth section covers the era of the world wars (‘1913’ to ‘1949’) in forty essays. The final section (‘1950’ to ‘2020’) has forty-three essays. The editor writes a short introduction to each section. Apart from the usual notes on contributors and indexes of persons and facts, there is a useful list of place names, registering the point that these change over time.

Andreas Fahrmeir seeks thematic unity by asking each author to focus on the relationship between Germany and global history. This task is more precisely specified as considering how a German event

has a global impact, or how a global event has a German impact. In addition to such connected history, some authors focus on comparative history with Germany as one case. The closer we get to our globalized present, the greater the tendency to write transnational history which merges rather than distinguishes between the German and the global. These are not mutually exclusive approaches, but one or another shapes the individual essays. Fahrmeir disavows originality for this book, referring to some earlier publications as models. Especially relevant appears to be *Histoire mondiale de la France*, edited by Patrick Boucheron.¹

The intellectual challenges are considerable and change over time. For the first section, as the title 'Avant la lettre' makes clear, there is no contemporary meaning to the terms 'Germany' and 'world'. Certainly this is the case for prehistoric Heidelberg Man, skeletons of people who died violently around 5000 BCE in 'Swabia', and a bronze disc depicting the heavens found in Saxony-Anhalt and dated about 1700 BCE. One might question the relevance of the section title to the next essay on the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest of 9 CE. The Roman sources on this destruction of three legions use the words 'Germania' and 'Germani' to label where this battle took place and to name the victors. However, the inhabitants of that region would never have used these Latin terms themselves. Uwe Walther also questions the argument, sketched out about a century later by Tacitus, that this battle signalled the end of Roman imperial ambitions in 'Germany'. Tacitus' portrayal of the 'Germans' as a distinct society, culture, and ethnicity was invoked centuries later to support nationalist historical accounts of the event.

From the medieval period notions of German and Germany multiply and become more prominent, as shown by essays on subjects such as Charlemagne and the origins of German-language literature. Essays on the Crusades and embassies to and from Charlemagne relate Germany to the world beyond. However, while this section has four 'region' essays on Poland, Bohemia, Italy, and Burgundy, it does not have one on Germany.

¹ Patrick Boucheron (ed.), *Histoire mondiale de la France* (Paris, 2016), now available in English as Patrick Boucheron and Stéphane Gerson (eds.), *France in the World: A New Global History* (New York, 2019).

By the late medieval period there is an abundant discourse indicating distinctions and connections between Germany and the world—so much so that some essays do not see the need to make explicit the conceptual nature of such distinctions and connections. Albrecht Dürer ('1505') was a German artist who travelled widely and had a 'global' reputation. Johannes Gutenberg ('1454') was a German printer and his innovation quickly transformed communications across Europe. It would appear that all one needs to do is narrate the essentials of these particular biographies.

However, this can involve a problematic jump from individual Germans to Germany. To take a later example about which I know more, Claudia Schnurmann's fascinating essay ('1825') on three Hamburg merchant brothers, the Oppenheims, details how they made successful careers in South America and the Caribbean. The global aspect is clear: the brothers intermarried with Spanish-origin settler elites, moved into banking, plantation agriculture, and slave trading, and extended their dealings into the USA. Clearly they were German. However, German nationalists at the time criticized Hamburg as *ein Stück Englands*—a piece of England. The brothers looked 'out' to the world rather than 'in' to Germany. Their facility in English and Spanish was more important for their business careers than their native German. Still, the distinction between the national and the global becomes more explicit from the late eighteenth century, first and foremost in such cultural spheres as literature and education. The Oppenheims, though global political and economic actors, sent their children home for schooling—something improbable just a century earlier.

The subsequent growth of nationalism—framed also as political and economic ideologies—and then the formation of a German nation-state in 1871 fused different national notions in particular ways, equating Germany as one state and body of citizens with Germany as one society and one culture, then going on to show how Germans thus understood engaged in various relationships (conflict, co-operation, and exchange) with the world. As indicated with the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest, such notions were projected upon earlier times, marginalizing other meanings. The historiographical shifts involved are considered in various stimulating essays.

For example, Steffen Patzold on feudalism ('700') notes that this began as a temporal concept with Europe-wide application. Nineteenth-century historiography projected upon it a German meaning. Late twentieth-century historiography has subjected that national perspective to sustained criticism. Many other essays critique such projections of national(ist) historiography, as upon the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest or Luther and the 'German' Reformation. Contributors face the challenge of taking on board the changing nature of historical writing as well as presenting a particular account of a past event.

Taking up this challenge means that many of the essays on the pre-nationalist period seek to display the changing and different meanings of Germany and the world. The notion of the world becomes clearer from the late fifteenth century with the discovery of the 'new' world to set against the 'old' one. 'Germany', however, lacks stable and linked political, economic, and cultural meanings until much later. This has implications for how we understand individual 'Germans'. Johann Sebastian Bach in his own time was not regarded as a German composer; indeed, there was no notion of German music to set against those of Italian and French music. The essay by Barbara Beuys on Maria Merian ('1689'), who travelled to South America and published a major study on its caterpillars, is as much about Merian the Calvinist and the importance of her stay in Amsterdam before going out to the new Dutch territory of Surinam, as it is about Merian the German. How far the same point can be made for Germans treated as groups is interesting to consider. Early German emigration to North America, for example, might better be described as Protestant than German, with shared religion proving crucial for relationships with English, Scottish, Welsh, and Dutch settlers.

This starts to change as concepts of German and Germany are elaborated and set against those of the world. One perspective is to see the world as active and Germany as passive. This was obvious for the Thirty Years War as foreign armies (including that of the Habsburgs) devastated the German lands. This theme is reflected later in essays such as that by Michael Stolleis on the introduction of the French civil code – named after Napoleon – into German states. Some

Germans rejected this as a foreign imposition, but others welcomed the chance to emulate a more modern and rational world.

Increasingly such connections and their different valuations become central. By the mid nineteenth century Germany is presented more and more as the potential and then the actual active agent—one which takes what it wants from the world and improves upon it. By 1900 the Germany/world distinction is very clear and the accent is firmly on German agency. Many of the essays now deal with topics involving Germans moving beyond Germany and imposing themselves upon the world (mass emigration, colonial projects, German advances in Europe from 1914 to 1918, Nazism and German expansion and destruction). At other times the balance reverses as the world moves into Germany (post-1918 defeat, Allied occupation from 1945, Marshall Plan, the Cold War division of the world and of Germany).

After 1945, and especially after reunification in 1991, many essays tend to be about Germans or Germany as one aspect of a global process (world economic crises, World Cup football successes, Germany in the European Union, refugee crises, the current pandemic). Other essays compare how Germany and other countries deal with issues—for example, the differences between France and Germany on the appropriate economic and fiscal policies to pursue in the European Union. These transnational and comparative historical approaches are usually fascinating and informative but often lack the illuminating focus provided by the editor's guideline of connecting a German to a global moment, sometimes revising what has usually been told as a German story.

Thus the essay '1909' by Margit Szöllösi-Janze on Fritz Haber and his invention of synthetic ammonia cleverly unpacks the global dimensions of what is frequently presented as an achievement of German science and genius, showing how Haber shared more general concerns about feeding Europeans in the future and drew upon international science networks. Frank Uekötter ('2011') traces the connection between the nuclear accident at Fukushima and the specifically German way, both before and after that incident, of moving against and then away from nuclear energy generation.

In the space available I can mention only a handful of the essays. Furthermore, one can think of many other relevant topics. Indeed, so

vast are the possibilities that any set of contributions must appear as an arbitrary selection. As it is, Fahrmeir is to be congratulated on the quality and quantity of contributions commissioned.

I began by observing that my task is an impossible one. It is also an impossible book to read, if by that we mean starting at the beginning and proceeding on to the end. (Only a dutiful reviewer would do such a thing!) Rather it is a book into which one should dip. Readers might find most stimulating the essays on subjects about which they know the least, especially as authors must spend some of their scarce words on background information before providing a short riff on the Germany/global theme. I would also suggest reading together essays on different periods which explore similar kinds of history – political, economic, literary, or military. This would show how change over time transforms what we mean by ‘state’, ‘music’, or ‘travel’, as well as by ‘Germany’ and ‘world’. For example, it is salutary to compare Michael Stolleis on the imposition of the *Code Napoléon* with Dieter Grimm’s essay on the ways newly independent states have drawn inspiration from the current German constitution (‘Basic Law’) and constitutional court. Used in such ways, the book will provide the reader with endlessly stimulating information and perspectives.

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