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Review of David Blackbourn, *Germany in the World:  
A Global History, 1500–2000*

by Paul Nolte

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DAVID BLACKBOURN, *Germany in the World: A Global History, 1500–2000* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2024), xxv + 774 pp. ISBN 978 1 631 49183 2. £40.00

Making sense of German history has remained a challenge far into the twenty-first century, and is certainly not confined to parochial undertakings at German universities, but has become somewhat of a global enterprise in itself. Several decades ago, master historians of the post-war West German generation such as Thomas Nipperdey, Hans-Ulrich Wehler, and Heinrich August Winkler launched their multi-volume works on modern Germany, roughly since the late eighteenth century, and in many respects, those books have remained the gold standard in the field.<sup>1</sup> They share a combination of energetic writing, erudite knowledge of specialized research, and a guiding interpretation that, despite some differences between the three, may be broadly characterized as a modified reckoning with the German *Sonderweg*. Back then, when Nipperdey and Wehler were still conceiving and writing their first volumes, two young British historians self-confidently stepped up and challenged prevalent notions that Germany had diverged from a liberal-democratic trajectory of modernity in the nineteenth century with the ‘failure’ of the 1848 revolution, Bismarck’s authoritarian empire, and the ensuing Wilhelmine deformations that fed into the Third Reich. These are but ‘Mythen deutscher Geschichtsschreibung’, David Blackbourn und Geoff Eley lamented – historiographical myths about alleged ‘peculiarities of German history’, as their enormously influential treatise was titled in the expanded English edition of 1984.<sup>2</sup>

Fast-forward four decades, and both Blackbourn and Eley have long since moved to the United States and risen to the ranks of highest

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte 1800–1918*, 3 vols. (Munich, 1983–92), vol. i published in English as *Germany from Napoleon to Bismarck*, trans. Daniel Nolan (Princeton, 1996); Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte, 1700–1990*, 5 vols. (Munich, 1987–2008); Heinrich August Winkler, *Germany: The Long Road West*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 2006–7). See also: James J. Sheehan, *German History, 1770–1866* (Oxford, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *Mythen deutscher Geschichtsschreibung: Die gescheiterte Revolution von 1848* (Berlin, 1980); David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford, 1984).

eminence in the field of German and European history, although their academic ways have parted. While Eley has emerged as a rare flag-bearer of Marxist historiography, David Blackbourn has moved to the centre (or always stood there) and continued his challenging of established perspectives through much more sophisticated intellectual approaches, often taking up views from the margins: Württemberg rather than Prussia in his PhD on the Centre Party; ordinary Roman Catholic folk in a small town rather than the state bureaucracy otherwise hailed as modern and liberal in his study of apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Marpingen; and the transformation of German waterways in what still stands as a pioneering book on the history of landscapes in his *Conquest of Nature*.<sup>3</sup> With his most recent publication, *Germany in the World*, Blackbourn continues his quest to make sense of German history somewhat against the grain, albeit in a different way: not just with the synthetic scope of a book that presents an *histoire totale* of Central Europe across five centuries (a bold claim made quite explicitly in the introduction),<sup>4</sup> but by taking up a conceptual challenge that has now arrived in the mainstream of historiography and has been widely discussed for more than two decades—namely, global history and its impact on Germany, a nation long considered a mere continental player aside from the few decades of formal colonial rule between 1884 and 1918.

With this intellectual effort, Blackbourn addresses two admonitions to the profession, particularly in Germany, that he has consistently been making for a long time: the ‘lack of sense of space’ in much conventional writing (certainly in Nipperdey and Wehler), and the shrinking of the time span of German history—in particular, the neglect of the nineteenth century (unimaginable in the good old times of the *Sonderweg*!) in favour of the twentieth, or what German historians often call *Zeitgeschichte*. While the publisher’s claim on the dust

<sup>3</sup> Cf. David Blackbourn, *Class, Religion and Local Politics in Wilhelmine Germany: The Centre Party in Württemberg before 1914* (New Haven, 1980); David Blackbourn, *Marpingen: Apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Bismarckian Germany* (Oxford, 1993); David Blackbourn, *The Conquest of Nature: Water, Landscape, and the Making of Modern Germany* (New York, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> ‘I have cast my net wide. Politics, war and peace, economics, culture, gender, education, science, the environment, race, religion—all have a place’ (p. xxv).

cover that the history of Germany ‘has often been told as if it began in 1871’ is grossly overblown, taking the Reformation as a starting point is a remarkable endeavour, also vis-à-vis the aforementioned grand viziers’ storytelling, which started only with the decomposition of the Holy Roman Empire or even, in Nipperdey’s famous first sentence, with Napoleon. Perhaps it represents a trend born in Nashville, Tennessee, as Blackbourn’s colleague at Vanderbilt, Helmut Walser Smith, opted for a similarly wide chronology in his own account, which centred on the nation rather than the global.<sup>5</sup> Still, only about one third of the roughly 650 pages of text is devoted to the three ‘early modern’ centuries, including some material in part II that covers the transformative period 1780–1820. The story becomes more expansive towards the present, with the nineteenth century unfolding over 160 pages and, finally, the twentieth century (from 1914) over 280.

The meaning of global in this book is wide rather than narrow, reaching far beyond specific schools or approaches, and its author is certainly not in the post-colonial camp. He includes Germany’s European interconnectedness, with a lot of attention paid to the classic theme of German–French exchanges and entanglements. Indeed, the notions of transnational and entangled history seem to describe this approach best, its truly global reach notwithstanding. Driven by genuine intellectual curiosity and an astounding ability to digest tons of specialized literature, Blackbourn tells fascinating stories about Germans out there in the world, beyond the borders of the German lands in Central Europe. He explores the influences not just of German military power and violence abroad, but the enormous soft power of German culture, be it in ideas and institutions of education (the university, yes, but also the kindergarten!) or in realms of ‘high culture’ such as classical music or ‘world literature’, the claim to which may be traced back to Goethe. Indeed, Germans themselves would blush in the light of so much praise being heaped on their country, especially in the chapters on the long nineteenth century, from Weimar classicism to the cultural and scientific advancements of the *Kaiserreich*. The book is also about the other direction – about ‘the world in Germany’,

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<sup>5</sup> Helmut Walser Smith, *Germany: A Nation in Its Time. Before, During, and After Nationalism, 1500–2000* (New York, 2020).

to invert its title – with regard to Germany taking in French or American influences, or other nationals, as in the waves of migration that have increasingly shaped the country since the late 1950s.

Yet what does David Blackbourn tell us, and how does he do it? The book starts out as an impressive panorama of vignette biographies of Germans who ventured abroad in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Readers will encounter sailors, merchants, and soldiers, often commissioned by non-German enterprises or armed forces, as individuals or in larger constellations, forming German-speaking colonies in Portugal, Latin America, and just about anywhere in the populated world and on its margins. Indeed, the first third of the book, roughly, is a testament to a major trend in German history (and beyond) over the last two or three decades: the attention to the lives of individuals and their experiences of the world. This focus on subjectivities has transformed early modern history (for example, with its attention to egodocuments), as well as our understanding of the twentieth century with the massive impact of *Zeitzeugen* (witnesses of the past), especially in the history of the Holocaust and its aftermath. Beyond its interest in the global, Blackbourn's account may be seen as a major attempt to bring this microhistorical approach to fruition in a larger synthesis. The result is compelling and captivating, and yet offers clear proof of what this kind of narrative cannot achieve. There is little effort to account for institutions such as the Holy Roman Empire, or the estates of late feudal society, and a near absence of structural explanations. Sometimes Blackbourn appears to turn in this direction, only to come up with yet another biographical story in the next sentence.

The fabric of the book changes significantly, however, as the story progresses into the nineteenth century. Individual actors retreat, a different kind of storytelling is woven into the larger narrative, and the author increasingly includes a more systematic kind of consideration. By the time we reach the twentieth century, this mode of writing has become all but dominant. In the chapters on the Third Reich and the Holocaust, readers will encounter the type of research-based factor analysis they may be familiar with from Nipperdey or Wehler. The Holocaust chapter starts with a brief reference to Victor Klemperer's diaries, but quickly shifts to four main characteristics, or 'four things

on which most historians agree' (p. 498) in systematically assessing the Shoah. Readers now are provided with the orientation in the research landscape that was absent from the early modern chapters, while individual voices, or exemplary stories of lives of ordinary people, rarely come up, including Jewish lives in the years of persecution and mass murder. Overall, the narrative of the book in its second half turns more towards the well-established, both in the way the story is crafted as well as in its content and subject matter. Compared to Michael Wildt's recent history of Weimar and Nazi Germany, with its 'postmodern' view from the margins of the empire and through the eyes of marginalized people,<sup>6</sup> Blackbourn's twentieth-century account is much more 'centred', mainstream, and sometimes even conventional.

In a still different sense, what kind of German history is it that David Blackbourn maps out in this impressive tour de force? True to his beginnings as an anti-*Sonderweg* historian, he does not see Germany as having taken a different course from other European nations over the many centuries. The myriad global Germans in the early modern era and into the nineteenth century are testimony to an entangled nation, much as the British and Portuguese are well known to have been. Then again, it is more complicated, as we are often reminded that Germans abroad mostly stood in service of other countries, and therefore the notion of Germany as a latecomer to global aspirations, and colonial ones in particular, is not off the table. When did it all start to go wrong, if not with German isolation, or the failed revolution in 1848? Blackbourn goes along with current mainstream research in pointing to some radicalization in the late Wilhelmine period (albeit with less emphasis on radicalized, and racialized, science), and otherwise looks to the First World War and the ensuing peace settlement. With regard to colonialism, the litmus test is the connection between colonial violence, especially in the genocidal campaigns against the Herero and Nama in Southwest Africa (1904–7), and the Holocaust. Blackbourn remains cautious, and sometimes vague, when he attributes 'colonial levels of violence' to the conduct of the Wehrmacht (p. 490), and turns a question of causation into an issue of memory when he finds that violence in

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Wildt, *Zerborstene Zeit: Deutsche Geschichte 1918–1945* (Munich, 2022).

Eastern Europe during the Second World War ‘recalls what had been done to Nama and Herero’ (p. 482).

The final chapter on post-1949 Germany, divided and reunited, even comes with a classic redemptive storyline, reminiscent of Heinrich August Winkler’s *Long Road West*, as its title reads ‘The German Question Answered’. The issue of reconciling liberal democracy with a nation-state may well have been answered for good. But so many other German questions remain open, and not least questions about Germany in the world, and the world coming to Germany. Will the German empire of global industrial and trade domination soon collapse? Will ethnic Germans and immigrants alike finally manage to strike a balance between acknowledging diversity and constructing collective identities and communal spirits that go beyond ethnic origin? In the meantime, David Blackbourn’s global history of Germany is indispensable reading for anyone seriously interested in the history of that country – a history that in post-*Sonderweg* times still holds a firm place in general discourses on the trajectories and predicaments of modernity.

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