

**Martin Kitchen, *A History of Modern Germany 1800-2000*,**

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Two centuries of German history, from the wars of Napoleon to the time of the Schröder government, are captured capably for a general audience in Martin Kitchen's most recent work, *A History of Modern Germany*. Intended as a textbook for undergraduate level students, the work is nevertheless useful for historians of all persuasions who are keen to obtain a grasp not only of the major events of the period, but also of the major historiographical debates which have dominated the writing of German history over the last half-century or more. In the course of its 400+ pages, the great events of the past two hundred years – from the 1848 Revolutions (pp.71-89) to the fall of the Berlin Wall (pp.381-395) and beyond – appear almost seamlessly alongside more thematic discussions including the role of women in Nazi Germany (pp.288-290) and the emergence of a vibrant gay and lesbian culture in the Federal Republic (p.367). Kitchen also weighs subtly into the current debates over what 'History' is, and what it should aspire to be as a discipline, thus challenging even the most established of historical practitioners to at least reconsider their position in relation to current (and past) practice in their various fields.

Structured deliberately as a narrative history – for which Kitchen rightly 'makes no apologies' (p.8) – the text begins with an introduction of marvellous simplicity, which touches both on the broadest possible introductory framework for understanding German history, as well as devoting appropriate space to the way in which the history of Germany 'is also the story of German historians' (p.6). The great nationalists – Ranke and Treitschke – as well as the ubiquitous Fischer and Wehler are introduced to the reader, who will again encounter these names throughout the main body of the text, whetting the appetite of the curious scholar for the discussion to follow. The introductory section also demonstrates the admirable humility of Kitchen in undertaking his

vast project, the author admitting to being 'all too aware' of the oversimplifications into which he sometimes lapses throughout the volume, while at the same time unashamedly asserting his view of history as 'essentially about telling a story' of cause and effect (p.8).

It does need to be pointed out however, that rare though they may be, there are occasions when the aforementioned oversimplifications detract somewhat from the overall historiographical argument of the work. For instance, in a section entitled 'Hitler in Full Command' (beginning, p.270), Kitchen follows the current historiography in arguing for the polycratic nature of the Nazi state, in which the party elite and countless 'little Führers' attempted to interpret Hitler's will in pursuing their irresponsible programmes of national efficiency and the like. This is followed almost unthinkingly by a passage in which Kitchen attributes to Hitler alone the undertaking of 'systematically laying the groundwork for the realization of his schemes of conquest, expansion and racial purification' (p.272). This seemingly contradictory claim for 'strong dictatorship' occurs in the context of a discussion on the false picture of Germany in the 1934-1938 period as one of 'tranquillity and peace', and it is therefore Kitchen's intention to contrast this outward appearance with one in which the Nazi state was very actively engaged in readying itself for war. This said, his attribution of precise and premeditated aims to the Adolf Hitler he otherwise characterises (correctly) as an ad-hoc gambler is confusing to the reader.

In other areas, Kitchen's presentation of the key questions of German historiography is much more well-defined. For instance, the brief but informative discussion on the debates surrounding the role of Wilhelm II in German government after 1890 is well-balanced and coherent (beginning p.175). It is interesting that while both the Wehler-inspired 'structuralists' and followers of the Röhl school of thought would find common ground in accusing Kitchen of sitting on the fence over a comment such as 'the answer lies somewhere in the middle' (p.177), I find his refusal to be drawn on the issue of the importance of the Kaiser immensely refreshing. It is a sure indicator of an open and well-tuned historical mind to be able to acknowledge both the

empty bombast as well as the political substance of the thoughts and actions of the last of the Hohenzollern rulers.

In addition to the factors mentioned above, a contributing factor to the success of *Modern Germany* as an instructive textbook and narrative history is undoubtedly Kitchen's masterful command of the English language. Even the most barren of historical narrative assumes a new freshness through his prose, as he moves almost effortlessly from questions of Napoleonic administrative wisdom to the changing structure and role of the family in the first seventy years of the nineteenth century (especially pp.30-35). Editorially, Kitchen might have been better served by the suggestion to scale down his use of the word 'myrmidons' (it is his preferred noun when describing not only the courtiers of Wilhelm II and the upper echelons of the Nazi leadership, but also the officials and functionaries of Honecker's GDR), and there are occasions when the interchangeability of 'Solidarity', '*Solidarnosc*' and *Solidarnosc* [sic] becomes somewhat awkward, but these are extremely minor details which really do nothing to detract from the book's considerable merit as a lucid and well thought out piece of prose.

In addition to being a work of history, Kitchen's text also factors in serious questions about the future of Germany as a national state within the supra-national European Union. Though welcome on many levels, this discussion is perhaps less effective than it could have been, as in the concluding pages, Kitchen offers his own programme of what amounts to 'radical, some would say revolutionary reform' (p.411). Nevertheless, his implied intention – to demonstrate the continued openness of the 'German question' into the twenty-first century – is well served by a glance forward into uncharted territory. Indeed, at the time of writing, Gerhard Schröder's SPD had not yet been replaced by the Angela Merkel-led Grand Coalition (CDU-CSU-SPD) in government, thus Kitchen's assessment of Merkel as 'a woman of exceptional intelligence, with an admirable strength of character and an uncluttered mind' (p.408) is of even greater interest for the student of the future course of the *History of Modern Germany*.

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