
Review: From Hitler to Bismarck: 'Third Reich' and Kaiserreich in Recent Historiography.
Part I

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Source: *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Jun., 1983), pp. 485-497

Published by: [Cambridge University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2638779>

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FROM HITLER TO BISMARCK: 'THIRD REICH' AND KAISERREICH IN RECENT HISTORIOGRAPHY.

PART I

Kaiser Wilhelm II: New Interpretations. Edited by John C. G. Röhl and Nicolaus Sombart. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982. Pp. xiii + 319. £19.50.

The Entourage of Kaiser Wilhelm II, 1888-1918. By Isabel V. Hull. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982. Pp. xii + 412. £27.50.

In the Eye of the Storm. By Wayne C. Thompson. Iowa: Iowa University Press, 1980. Pp. xi + 301. \$17.95.

Windthorst: A Political Biography. By Margaret Lavinia Anderson. Oxford: Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press, 1981. Pp. xii + 522. £25.

The Nazi Question: An Essay on the Interpretations of National Socialism, 1922-1975. By Pierre Ayçoberry. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981. Pp. xiv + 257. £12.50.

The 'Führer State': Myth and Reality. Studies on the Structure and Politics of the Third Reich. Edited by Gerhard Hirschfeld and Lothar Kettenacker, with an introduction by Wolfgang J. Mommsen. Stuttgart: Klett-Kotta, 1981. Pp. 465. DM 86.

Hitler: An Introduction. By Norman Stone. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1981. Pp. 224. £6.50.

The Hitler State: The Foundation and Development of the Internal Structure of the Third Reich. By Martin Broszat. Translated by John W. Hiden. London: Longmans, 1981. Pp. xvii + 378. £9.95.

The score or so books reviewed in the two parts of this review article have all appeared within the last three years; they represent only a fraction of the vast outpouring of work from university and commercial publishing houses of publications on German history in the period 1871-1945. Research on modern German history is conducted on an international scale, with significant contributions to the scholarly literature being produced in Britain, France and the United States as well as in Germany itself. The sheer volume of publications and the bewildering variety of approaches and interpretations makes any kind of general statement about current trends extremely hazardous. Yet it seems clear that many of the significant interpretations, the major controversies, the serious research orientations in the historiography of the 'Third Reich' have their parallels in the historiography of the Kaiserreich. It is impossible to say with any certainty whether historians of both periods are responding in common to broader trends, or whether ideas and hypotheses first worked out with reference to Hitler's Germany are being imported back into the study of the Germany of Bismark and Wilhelm II; probably, I would guess, there is something to be said for both views. Both the timing of the debates in both fields, and the nature of the theses advanced, leads one to suspect that there is at least some element of importation from the historiography of the Nazi period

back into the historiography of the Empire. That is why I have entitled this review 'From Hitler to Bismarck'; for, whatever the reasons behind them, the parallels between recent work on the two periods are too striking to ignore.

To some extent, this remarkable feature of current scholarship on modern Germany is a reflexion of the wide acceptance gained by the idea of continuity in German history (in its broadest sense) over the last two decades, since the publication of Fritz Fischer's work on Germany's aims in the First World War.¹ If it has become generally accepted that there were at least some similarities between Hitler's Germany and Bismarck's or Wilhelm II's, then a consequence of this acceptance has been that similar theories and methods have been applied with increasing frequency to the study of both. Yet matters are not quite so simple as this; for even those historians who continue to insist on the uniqueness of Nazism, on its lack of historical roots, may find their methodological premises shared by many who would violently object to such a view. Thus to emphasize the role of Hitler as sole dictator and arbiter of the 'Third Reich' is only a denial of continuity in German history in so far as it is accompanied by a refusal to accept that any similar figures existed in the German past. Those who seek to portray Bismarck or Wilhelm II as dictators in their own time may share with the biographers of Hitler a common belief in the overwhelming importance of Great Men (though even this is not necessarily the case), but they are also – by implication – saying that, for whatever reason, Germany in the era 1871–1945 had an uncomfortably persistent tendency to throw them up and submit to their rule.

In the present review article, I have chosen to explore some of these parallels by dividing up the books under discussion according to the theoretical and methodological premises on which they rest, rather than according to the periods or subjects with which they deal. The books are listed at the heads of the two parts of the article in the order in which they are to be discussed. In the first section, I examine a series of biographical studies, by John Röhl and Nicolaus Sombart, Wayne Thompson and Margaret Anderson. Two of these books are of major importance, and that edited by Röhl and Sombart in particular reproduces for the Wilhelmine period arguments already familiar from the Nazi era about the role and personality of the country's ruler; while Anderson's study illustrates the contribution that a broadly-conceived political biography can make to historical understanding in a wider sense. In the second section, I go on to examine in more detail the controversy about Hitler's role in the 'Third Reich', on the basis of the works by Pierre Ayçoberry, Gerhard Hirschfeld and Lothar Kettenacker, Norman Stone, and Martin Broszat. Opposed to the biographical emphasis is what I term a 'structuralist' approach, which lays stress on political and administrative structures and decision-making processes and their autonomous role in bringing about major decisions, above all in the field of foreign policy. In the third section of the article, which will appear in the following issue of this journal, I turn to attempts to apply this 'structuralist' model to the Kaiserreich. Two varieties can be distinguished: a radical-liberal, partly Weberian version, which concentrates on the role of 'traditional elites' (as in recent work by Volker Berghahn and Martin Kitchen, and by Paul Kennedy), and a Gramscian or Neo-Marxian version, which emphasizes the shifting structures and alignments of the 'hegemonic bloc' (as in a contribution by Geoff Eley, which is paralleled by the work of David Abraham on the collapse of the Weimar Republic). In a fourth and final section, I turn to the contribution of social and economic history, and

¹ Fritz Fischer, *Germany's aims in the First World War* (London, 1967).

suggest ways in which a locally based social history, as in the *Institut für Zeitgeschichte* project on Bavaria in the Nazi period, or the study of Bochum by David Crew, is beginning to undermine many of the conclusions reached by the biographical and 'structuralist' approaches and is leading gradually to a redrawing of the map of modern German history at least as radical as that achieved in the wake of the Fischer controversy twenty years ago.

I

German historians have frequently and justifiably complained of the lack of a real tradition of political biography in their country. There have been plenty of studies of Hitler, for example, but the majority of these have been by non-Germans. So it is too with Wilhelm II, who, Professor John Röhl complains, has become something of an 'unpersön' in recent scholarship on the Kaiserreich. For a number of years Röhl has been seeking to rehabilitate the idea, once advanced by the liberal scholar Erich Eyck, that Wilhelm II was the dominant figure in German politics before 1914, the real arbiter of Germany's destinies, a dictator in his own time. The basis of this view has been provided by the papers of Wilhelm's friend Philipp Eulenburg, which Röhl has been engaged in editing, with superb and meticulous scholarship, for some years.² Röhl's latest contribution is as joint editor with Nicolaus Sombart of a collection of essays on Wilhelm II by various hands. They are the product of a conference on the monarch which, in a faintly ridiculous act of self-indulgence entirely appropriate to its subject, the contributors arranged in 1979 in the bedroom of the Kaiser's villa on the island of Corfu. In his two introductory papers to this well-produced and handsomely-illustrated collection, Röhl seeks to rehabilitate Wilhelm II as the maker of German policy in his own time. Röhl is supported by his collaborator Thomas Kohut, who sees Wilhelm as having exerted 'a lasting and decisive influence' (p. 64) on German policy towards England. Kathy Lerman, too, in an essay on the Kaiser's most effective Chancellor, Bernhard von Bülow, asserts that Bülow's 'whole system' depended on his relationship with the Kaiser, whom he only 'seemingly manipulated' and whose will was only constrained by Bülow in relation to minor issues (p. 242). Röhl seeks to show that Germany before 1914 was personally ruled by the Kaiser, acting through an 'inner circle of some fifty men in control of the destiny of this mighty state in the heart of Europe' (p. 17). In this circle, which owed its existence almost entirely to the patronage of the Kaiser, social foibles and scandals could play a vital role in political advancement. The political history of Imperial Germany must in the first place, therefore, be researched by the 'traditional skills of the historian – of tracking down elusive documents and evaluating them with subtlety and sensitivity' (p. 10).

At the heart of this approach, then, is a conviction that all the theoretical and methodological advances made by historical scholarship since Ranke can contribute nothing to the elucidation of the major questions of political history. His prodigious archival labours have nurtured in Röhl a documentary fetishism which is given free rein in his contributions to this volume. The historian, he remarks, in a revealing aside, 'surveys the scene with the naked eye' (p. 11). If the eye is penetrating enough,

² J. C. G. Röhl, *Germany without Bismarck. The crisis of government in the Second Reich, 1890–1900* (London, 1967) and J. C. G. Röhl (ed.), *Philipp Eulenburgs politische Korrespondenz* (3 vols., Boppard am Rhein, 1976–83).

perhaps it will eventually see the past as it really was. But Ranke and his followers taught historians to look at documents not with a naked eye, but with a critical, sceptical gaze. Röhl and some of his collaborators have evidently spent so many years immersed in court records that they have lost the ability to read them critically. As we know from the British experience of the last few years, monarchs are liable to attract rapid and gushing adulation in limitless quantities, especially in an age of national uncertainty. This indeed is a phenomenon of some interest, and its political functions in the wider sense are not negligible. But it has nothing to do with the real function of the monarch in the process of political decision-making. Moreover, as Röhl's 'naked eye' lights upon the monarch's vastly inflated estimation of his own importance, it is deceived into accepting Wilhelm's ludicrous pretences of autocracy as simple reflexions of the truth.

Much of this volume is devoted to uncovering the hidden life of Wilhelm and his courtiers, as if this were the determining influence in the making of German domestic and foreign policy in this period. New archival discoveries, however trivial, are given pride of place; and the documents most eagerly cited are those which previous historians, usually for reasons of propriety, have attempted to suppress. Petty court intrigues and family squabbles are recounted at vast length. Much is made of the homosexual tone of Wilhelm's immediate circle of friends. To such trivia great things are attributed. 'It is fascinating', writes Röhl for example, 'to speculate what course German history might have taken if Bülow's and Eulenburg's infatuation with Wilhelm II had faded sooner (or for that matter if the Vienna bath-house keeper who started to blackmail Eulenburg for homosexuality in early 1876 had divulged his secrets there and then).' This is history as the butler saw it. But does the keyhole really afford the best perspective on the past? Contributions in the book written from this angle of vision suggest that it does not. For example, Thomas Kohut's essay on Wilhelm II's attitude to England makes no attempt to demonstrate the Kaiser's influence on policy-making but simply assumes it, and on this basis attributes the rise of Anglo-German antagonism up to 1914 to Wilhelm's desire to avenge his German father's subservience to his dominating English mother and to reconcile the 'English' and 'German' elements in himself. Throughout his essay, Kohut employs the flimsy inferential procedures so familiar in psychohistory. To begin with, one cannot help feeling that his definition of psychological normality is arbitrary; for instance Wilhelm's mother is described as 'possessive' on very thin grounds. Wilhelm is said to have been brought up by his mother in an attempt to make him an Englishman; at the same time, the ideal which she held out to him was evidently Prince Albert, her father, who was, of course, German (indeed the whole English royal family was widely regarded in England as 'German'). Wilhelm's education by the dominant figure of his childhood, his ferocious tutor Hinzpeter, is even described by Kohut as 'English' because Hinzpeter (a German) believed in constitutional monarchy!! This is all very feeble stuff. Bismarck, after all, regarded the life of an English gentleman as ideal, and once remarked 'all my habits and tastes are English'; but this did not affect his political judgement any more than Edward VII's German connexions did his.³

A more sensitive level of analysis is provided by Isabel Hull's contribution on the Kaiser's homosexual friends in the 'Liebenberg Circle', but she is unable to show that any of them apart from Eulenburg had any real political influence over Wilhelm (a fact already well known), and even this was only exercised in the area of

³ Paul Kennedy, *The rise of the Anglo-German antagonism, 1860-1914* (London, 1980), p. 9.

appointments. Hull's summary of Eulenburg's political beliefs is a catalogue of policies that were never implemented; indeed, most of his views were not even shared by his royal master (certainly not Eulenburg's opposition to imperialism and his distrust of an adventurous foreign policy) (p. 210). The major responsibility of the Liebenberg circle, she concludes, was that it 'did not stop the monarchy from destroying itself' (p. 216). This does not really amount to very much. Nor does Hull's recent book on the Kaiser's entourage, part of which her article summarizes, add a great deal; apart from the Liebenberg circle, which (she argues) lost much of its (alleged) importance after the turn of the century, the book discusses an odd mixture of individuals, including Krupp and Ballin, and is reduced in the end to naming the younger Moltke as the only really significant figure in the 'military entourage', where arguably his importance lay more in his representation of the army's interests than in his closeness to the Kaiser. In the end the 'entourage', as a collectivity, seems to have had virtually no real influence in Wilhelmine politics.⁴ Even more inconsequential is Lamar Cecil's gossipy account of squabbles within the Anglo-German royal cousinhood, who certainly seem to have been a quarrelsome lot. At the end of it all, Cecil concludes disarmingly that none of his material is of any great importance (pp. 109-10). His assessment of the Kaiser, indeed, makes a nonsense of the wild claims for his importance advanced by Röhl and Kohut. 'The Kaiser himself', he remarks, 'was too easily manipulated and too spasmodic in effort to have capitalised on his autocratic prerogatives and thereby dictated German diplomacy'. He was 'lazy, capricious, prejudiced and indiscreet'. There were many forces, Cecil concludes, making for Anglo-German hostility, 'and even a more purposeful ruler than Wilhelm II would have had difficulty in controlling them' (p. 110).

More cold water is poured on by Paul Kennedy, in a characteristically common-sensical essay on foreign policy. Wilhelm II was widely held to be responsible for German foreign policy, he points out, but this was no more true than the general belief that Edward VII was the architect of the Anglo-French entente. The general direction of German foreign policy was set by more impersonal interests; by Germany's rapid economic growth, by the ideology of Germany's ruling elite, by the structural problems of Germany's domestic politics. Yet Kennedy spoils his case by trying to reconcile it with the notion that Wilhelm's personality and decisions *were* of crucial importance. Thus he asserts, for example, that the Kaiser's role in the formulation and adoption of operational war-plans was undoubtedly an important one (pp. 162-3). What was this role? Kennedy says that the generals showed Wilhelm all their plans and he never objected to any of them, however outrageous they were. In other words, he had no role at all in the formulation and adoption of operational war plans. This is evidence of his unimportance, not of his importance. The same could be said of Kennedy's claim (p. 164) that Wilhelm was unable to choose between different and often mutually contradictory policies. Here again, vacillation and inaction seem to have been his contribution, rather than consistency and firmness of purpose.

The most persuasive contribution in the volume is that of Wilhelm Deist on the Kaiser's military entourage. Deist begins by noting that the Reichstag defeated or strongly modified most of Wilhelm II's pet political schemes in the 1890s. The Kaiser railed against the legislature in unbridled terms, but like so much of his talk it was empty and should not be taken seriously by historians. Wilhelm II jealously preserved his powers as supreme military commander (the *Kommandogewalt*); but he

⁴ I have discussed Hull's book at greater length in a forthcoming review in *History*.

used it not on major matters of policy but rather on the trivia which so used to excite him – uniforms, titles, ceremonies, matters of honour and the like. Wilhelm's views on naval tactics and strategy were described by the head of his Naval Cabinet as 'amateurish nonsense'. Deist remarks that 'it cannot be said that Wilhelm II ever introduced any new leadership ideas, or influenced the development of military principles at all'. He was only concerned with the formal attributes of power, not with its substance – 'more interested in matters of decoration than in concrete realities', as Deist puts it (p. 185). Indeed he failed in his main duty as Supreme Commander – that of coordinating the strategic and operational plans of the two branches of the armed forces in the event of war. He surrounded himself with a military entourage selected by him for their personal compatibility and retained for long periods in office. Many of them were unqualified and incompetent. This gradually alienated the Kaiser from the real army and navy, of which these men were increasingly unrepresentative. On the outbreak of war, Wilhelm was quickly robbed of any military role at all; the recognition that his claim to be Germany's sole ruler had long been a hollow one now spread very quickly. 'The fact is', as General von Einem remarked in 1915, 'we haven't had a working head of state for the last twenty-five years' (quoted on p. 187).

Kathy Lerman also notes in her well-documented contribution that Wilhelm's only sustained intervention was in the realm of appointments, and here too his main concern was to appoint people he liked. In 1901, for example, he offered the finance ministry successively to Siemens, a pronounced Liberal, and Henckel von Donnersmarck, a staunch agrarian! Chancellor von Bülow often had to contend with such interventions, but as Lerman shows, his position was so strong that he could easily manipulate or dominate whoever was appointed. Moreover, 'when Bülow had a political reason for wanting to effect a personnel change, he generally seems to have been able to do so' (p. 234). Bülow also frequently asserted that he could contradict the Kaiser on matters of policy, or get him to change his mind, without difficulty, provided he did it carefully, and this indeed should not be surprising, given Wilhelm's known tendency to adopt the views of the last person he spoke to. Bülow worked hard to thwart Wilhelm's wilder demands, and on the whole, he did this with success; the Kaiser himself confessed that he mainly left the business of government to his chancellor. Almost every piece of evidence cited by Lerman demonstrates the strong hold that Bülow had over the Kaiser, and it is with some astonishment that one reads her conclusion, wholly unwarranted by the text, that Bülow only 'seemingly' manipulated him, and was only able to prevail in relation to 'minor issues' (p. 242). Nor does Lerman carry conviction in her assertion that Bülow's 'whole system' depended on his relationship with the Kaiser. The assessment provided by Terry Cole in his account of Bülow's role in the *Daily Telegraph* affair is much more realistic; and Cole, rose-tinted spectacles firmly in place, adds another thoroughly-documented contribution to his attempted rehabilitation of Bülow as an independent, far-sighted and resourceful politician.⁵ His estrangement from the Kaiser, as Cole shows, went back as far as 1903, but it was only with the collapse of Bülow's majority 'Block' in the Reichstag in 1909 that Wilhelm was able to get rid of him.

What all this adds up to is a restatement of the well-known fact that the Kaiser was not a dictator. Far from being the moving cog at the centre of the German

⁵ See Terry Cole, 'Kaiser versus chancellor: the crisis of Bülow's chancellorship 1905–06', in Richard J. Evans (ed.), *Society and politics in Wilhelmine Germany* (London, 1978).

governmental machine, Wilhelm II was merely a spanner in the works. The sources of Germany's foreign and domestic policies before 1914 have to be sought elsewhere (though not, I had better add, in the mishmash of pseudo-psychoanalytical banalities provided by Nicolaus Sombart in the final contribution to the volume). None of this means, of course, that I would wish to deny biography its proper place, though the state of the art is not advanced a great deal by attempts such as Wayne C. Thompson's life of Kurt Riezler, a conservative journalist, whose main claim to fame was a period served as an aide to Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg. Riezler's voluminous diaries dealing with the events of July–August 1914 are a major source for the chancellor's thinking during this period.⁶ To use them as a source for *Riezler's* thinking, as Thompson does, seems perverse. The rest of Riezler's career was something of an anticlimax; he played a minor role in German policy towards Russia, continued to serve as a government official in the early years of the Weimar Republic, and then became a university administrator in Frankfurt. Ousted from his position in 1933, he emigrated to New York in 1938 and died in Munich in 1955. Thompson's totally uncritical attitude to Riezler ('Riezler's service in Frankfurt was distinguished in every way') prevents him from using his subject as a means of exploring some of the problems and dilemmas of conservative journalists, officials and university professors in this period, and his attempts to emphasize Riezler's importance at every juncture do not carry conviction. This is a biography, therefore, that tells us little of interest or importance that was not already known.

A model of what a political biography *can* achieve is provided by Margaret Lavinia Anderson's substantial new study of the Catholic Centre Party leader, Ludwig Windthorst (1812–81), the first biography since 1907 and the first to make use of the full range of printed and manuscript sources, some of which have only recently become available. This is not a biography after the English manner; there is not much attempt to plumb Windthorst's inner motives or gain any psychological insight into his character; he remains as personally impenetrable to the reader as he evidently was to contemporaries, an enigmatically imperturbable figure who gained his prominence through a mixture of tact, very hard work, a ready tongue and a mastery of parliamentary tactics. Anderson is concerned to use her study of his life to advance a series of important propositions about German politics in the period 1866–90, the years of Windthorst's national prominence, and she is not afraid of departing from the actual details of his life in order to do so. First, she uses his essentially parliamentary career to argue that the Reichstag was more important in this period than many historians have assumed. Anderson perhaps exaggerates Windthorst's dominance of that body, for this was surely the age of the great parliamentary debates and clashes between a number of dominant, oratorically gifted and charismatic political leaders, including not only Bismarck and Windthorst, but also Bebel and Richter, to be succeeded gradually by a more bureaucratic, more highly organized style of mass politics during the 1890s. One could also put forward the *caveat* that anyone who researches for years on the career of a Reichstag politician is liable to come away with the impression that the Reichstag was at the centre of things, just as anyone who is buried for decades in the private papers of the court camarilla is likely to come to the opposite conclusion.

Yet Anderson's book amounts, *inter alia*, to a sustained plea for historians to take the Reichstag seriously, not only for the 1870s but also for the 1880s. The

⁶ Karl Dietrich Erdmann (ed.), *Kurt Riezler: Tagebücher, Aufsätze, Dokumente* (Göttingen, 1972).

Kulturkampf, she argues, was above all a struggle for civil liberties, in which the Centre Party filled the classical role of a liberal – indeed libertarian – opposition which had been so abjectly vacated by the National Liberals. As this book makes abundantly clear, the *Kulturkampf* did not abruptly cease in 1878, but was only gradually ended in a series of bitterly-fought reforms in the succeeding decade. ‘In the 1880s, the legislature was still the voice of the people, the focus of the national drama, the scene of Germany’s great expectations. . . . By the 1890s, national attention had turned from legislation to *Weltpolitik*’ (p. 406). The Centre Party, held artificially on a libertarian course by Windthorst, veered sharply towards the line taken by the government, while ambitious younger politicians increasingly sought to make their careers outside the parliament, above all in the new pressure-groups that sprang up everywhere during the nineties.

Perhaps these arguments, once more, are overdone by Anderson, for among other things her study makes clear the close nature of the ties between the Centre Party and the Catholic Church, something that has been rather underplayed in recent studies. When Windthorst threatened to quit, it was after all to the pope that he intended to send his letter of resignation; and his involvement in clerical appointments was close and continuing. This surely was the Achilles’ heel of the *Zentrum*. Windthorst’s attempt to achieve a liberal solution of the *Kulturkampf* was undermined by Pope Leo XIII’s negotiations with Bismarck in 1887; the effect on the *Zentrum* of Windthorst’s betrayal by the pope in that year is compared by Anderson to that of Bismarck’s indemnity bill of 1866 on the liberals. But this was not the only time that its clericalism led the *Zentrum* to abandon its commitment to civil liberties; indeed, the events of 1887 occurred again at the end of the Weimar Republic, when the pope’s desire for a *Concordat* with Hitler led him to persuade the Centre Party to vote for the Enabling law and subsequently played an important part in bringing about the *Zentrum*’s dissolution. To a degree, also, the *Zentrum* only functioned as the representative of a particular sector of the community. Anderson comments, for example, on its self-absorption and on the narrowness of its political focus; it rarely concerned itself with questions of foreign policy, for instance (p. 297). Moreover, Anderson’s claims are further undermined by her admission that *Zentrum*’s Reichstag deputies were noticeable throughout this period for their persistent absenteeism.

Yet on the whole, Anderson’s plea for a more positive assessment of the Reichstag in the 1880s, and of the Centre Party’s role in its affairs, is persuasively made. It is all the more important because it involves a conscious downgrading of the significance of the policy changes of 1878–9. Anderson argues that the anti-socialist law of 1878 was a less important infringement of constitutional liberties than was the *Kulturkampf* because it involved a far smaller sector of the community. The tariffs of 1879 may have affected the National Liberals and encouraged them to move closer to the Conservatives. But ‘to see 1878–9 as a “radical transformation of German politics”, and a “conservative reconstitution of the Reich” is to underestimate the Liberal–Conservative cooperation of the seventies; to overestimate the enthusiasm of Prussia’s agrarian elite for Bismarck’s new economic package; and erroneously to include the *Zentrum* in the “new political alignment” of Germany’s anti-socialist, anti-parliamentary, plebiscitarian future’ (pp. 234–5). Once more, therefore, Anderson lends weight to the argument that the 1890s rather than the late 1870s were the decisive years in the political history of the Empire; and in her use of Windthorst’s career to advance these – and other – important theses, Anderson thus provides an outstanding example of what a political biography, if carefully handled,

can achieve. Well written, spiced with waspish and combative footnotes from which scarcely a single historian of the period emerges unscathed, Anderson's study is not for the beginner, for it does assume a general conversance with the political history of the period.⁷ But it is a weighty and substantial study, a major contribution to our knowledge and understanding not only of political Catholicism in nineteenth-century Germany, but also of the structure and development of German politics in the Bismarckian period as a whole. What it exemplifies above all is the elementary but nonetheless vital point that – to cite Marx – 'Men do make their own history, but they do not make it as they please, under conditions of their own choosing, but rather under circumstances which they find before them, under given and imposed conditions'.⁸ Too often, biographers and those who would have us return to the days when history was all about Great Men, have ignored this dictum. But as the inadequacies of Röhl and Sombart's collection make clear, they have ignored it at their peril.

II

The attempt to show that Wilhelm II was a dictator is not only implausible in itself; it also arguably rests on a misunderstanding of the very nature of modern dictatorship. For, ironically, the view that Hitler himself was an all-powerful autocrat whose ideas and intentions are the key to an understanding of the 'Third Reich' has for some years now been seriously questioned by a number of German historians. True, Hitler's dominance and total control of the 'Third Reich' was for many decades treated as a generally accepted fact, as Pierre Ayçoberry's new account of the development of historical interpretations of Nazism usefully demonstrates. Faced with the necessity of accepting the evidence of Nazi barbarism after 1945, conservative historians in Germany, led by Gerhard Ritter, tried to argue that the evils of Nazism were all imported from abroad: Darwinism from England, extreme nationalism from France, racism from Austria, and so on. The central place in this interpretation was occupied by Hitler, the Nazi dictator, whose genius took advantage of the age of democracy that had arrived with the Weimar Republic and mobilized the atomized masses in a movement that destroyed all independent institutions in Germany and reconstituted them into the totalitarian dictatorship of the 'Third Reich'. This was also essentially the view of the totalitarianism theories of the 1950s. These placed the dictator in wider context which did nothing to diminish his central importance to the interpretation. Totalitarianism theory emphasized Nazism's modernity, its dependence on the 'age of the masses' and its abolition of previously existing social forces. It stressed the total control exercised by the regime over its citizens – the all-embracing police powers, the destruction of all possibility of resistance, save at the very top, the standardization of society, the ubiquity of indoctrination, the monopolization of political power by a single party. But it also stressed the concentration of all these powers in the hands of a single

⁷ Nor is it entirely free from misprints and errors. There are some oddities in the German on page 481, for instance; Samoa is misspelt on page 285; the paragraphing has gone awry on page 244; on page 260 the author appears to believe that Windthorst freed the Centre Party from the bugbear of anti-semitism for all time; and a gremlin seems to have got into the printing press when it came to setting dates (e.g. pages 164, 203).

⁸ *Marx-Engels selected works* (Moscow, 1950), p. 225, quoted both in Paul Kennedy's contribution to *Kaiser Wilhelm II* (p. 143) and by Tim Mason in *The 'Führer State'*, p. 37.

individual and emphasized the key role played by the charismatic dictator. Both political science and traditional historical scholarship could thus agree on the centrality of the dictator to the phenomenon of Nazism. So the task of historical scholarship was to deduce Hitler's intentions from his writings, statements and actions, and to uncover the mechanisms by which he was able to put them into effect.

Aycoberry's book deals with general interpretations of Nazism and the Third Reich; it does not, with few exceptions, go into detail on specific questions. By placing these interpretations in a chronological framework (the first eight chapters take us from 1922 to 1960 in short, self-contained periods), Aycoberry is able to relate the interpretations intelligently to their political background. The coverage is broad, paying attention to Marxist views, East as well as West German scholarship, French as well as English and American historians. The interpretations discussed are also subjected to some acute criticism, which will be a boon to undergraduates seeking material for essays. But the book gets into a fearful muddle in the last four chapters, when it leaves the chronological path and opts instead for a part-thematic, part-methodological discussion. The problem here is that while the study of Nazism and its origins developed along relatively clear lines until the end of the 1950s, since that date, with the massive expansion of universities everywhere, with the student movement of the 1960s, and with the development of new techniques and new ideas, there has been a veritable explosion of research, and it is no longer really possible for a single commentator either to keep track of every line of enquiry that has been developed, or to impose a coherent pattern of exposition on the bewildering variety of views that have been advanced. Thus the last four chapters of Aycoberry's book jump from psychohistory to prosopography, from linguistics to phenomenology, from biographies and diplomatic histories to sociological theories that linked Marxism to the broader question of the peculiarities of Germany's overall historical development; but there is no connecting thread visible, unless it is perhaps a rather naive belief in the benefits of quantification.⁹

One possible way through the maze is provided by Tim Mason's contribution to *The 'Führer State'*, a useful new collection of essays from the German Historical Institute in London, which under its Director, Professor Wolfgang J. Mommsen, has become an indispensable centre for the exchange of views between British and German historians. Mason launches a strong attack on what he calls 'intentionalist' historians of the 'Third Reich', represented in this book by Klaus Hildebrand. Historians such as Hildebrand or Karl Dietrich Bracher, he remarks, 'formulate the question: why did the Third Reich launch a murderous war of genocide and the destruction of human life on a hitherto unprecedented scale? They come in the end to the conclusion that the leaders of the Third Reich, above all Hitler, did this because they wanted to do it. This can be demonstrated by studying early manifestations of their *Weltanschauung*, which are wholly compatible with the worst atrocities which actually occurred in the years 1938-45'.

Thus the goal of Nazism was genocide; and the 'Third Reich' appears as a unique phenomenon, revolutionary and utopian, without real roots. Indeed, Klaus Hildebrand has even suggested that we should refer to 'Hitlerism' rather than 'National Socialism'. Hildebrand elaborates on this view in his contribution to the present

⁹ There are also a few oddities in the translation (on page 188 the *Freikorps* appear as 'commandos'), a handful of solecisms ('it's' for 'its' on page 201, for example), some misprints in the German (the printer has been too free with umlauts, e.g. on page 118, where we encounter an author called Goëthe), and even a small number of errors (as on page 60, where M. Aycoberry evidently thinks Otto Bauer was a German Social Democrat).

volume, basing himself mainly on arguments first put forward by Karl Dietrich Bracher. He concedes that – as has long been known – the ‘Third Reich’ was a chaos of competing institutions, but he suggests that this very competition only served to enhance the ‘Führer’s authority. He insists that the mass murder of the Jews was above all the result of Hitler’s pathological ideology. To say otherwise, he remarks, is to sidestep the question of moral responsibility. The logical consequence of Hildebrand’s argument would seem to be that we should all start writing biographies of Hitler. If Norman Stone’s recent contribution to this overworked *genre* is anything to go by, however, this is clearly bad advice. Stone can offer little more than a trivial potboiler. He does not address the question of Hitler’s relation to the German past at all, but his presentation of the dictator’s life underlines Hildebrand’s dictum that ‘to stress the crucial role played by the German dictator is to emphasize the historical autonomy and uniqueness of National Socialism’ (p. 97).

More recently, however, scholars such as Hans Mommsen and Martin Broszat have been engaged on a wholesale revision of this view. The effect of their work has been twofold; to downgrade the importance of Hitler, and to reconnect Nazism to the German past by upgrading the role of ‘traditional elites’ in the establishment and running of the ‘Third Reich’. In their contributions to the German Historical Institute’s volume on *The ‘Führer State’*, Tim Mason and Hans Mommsen argue that it is to the structural context of political decision-making that historians should turn their attention. ‘The traits of systematization, regularity, calculability inherent in the construction of a comprehensive administrative base for the dictatorship, were perceived, particularly by Hitler, Himmler and Goebbels, as limiting factors, as constraints, actual or potential, on their power as they understood it.’ (p. 25) Thus the regime increasingly substituted propaganda for administration and evasions for policies. More and more it effected unprepared and drastic decisions which disrupted existing plans. To deal with special problems, it set up ad hoc institutions which quickly became permanent. Decision-making became fragmented, competences overlapped, conflict within the regime became sharper and more all-pervasive. Each separate decision carried with it unforeseen consequences which demanded further, often more far-reaching decisions. This process enhanced Hitler’s power, but it did not take place as a result of any conscious decision on his part; indeed he was to a degree a prisoner of it, for his need to preserve his own popularity meant that he tended more and more to avoid associating himself with specific decisions, while at the same time encouraging the ‘most national socialist’ (i.e. the most radical) policies advocated by his subordinates, however much these clashed with one another. Thus the effect of increasingly uncoordinated, unprepared, arbitrary and ad hoc decisions was to make the processes of policy-making ‘cumulatively more arbitrary in their character, more violent and radical in their implementation, more conducive to competitive struggle among the executive organs of the régime’ (p. 27). This process became self-generating and ultimately self-destructive. Once fully under way, it progressively narrowed Hitler’s freedom of choice and circumscribed his field of action. Thus Hitler, in Hans Mommsen’s controversial phrase, was a ‘weak dictator’.

The internal chaos of the Nazi regime has long been a familiar theme of historians; what is new about this ‘structuralist’ view¹⁰ is that it denies the ability of the leadership to keep this chaos in check. The first major attempt at a general exposition

¹⁰ I use this term to indicate that what these historians emphasize is the self-generating radicalism of political and administrative *structures*, independent of the intentions of those operating within them or of socio-economic forces acting upon them from outside.

of this structuralist interpretation was Martin Broszat's *Der Staat Hitlers*, first published in 1969.¹¹ Broszat's book followed the unfolding of the radicalizing and disintegrative processes of Nazi rule from beginning to end in considerable detail. The initial defeat of the revolutionary forces in 1934 was succeeded by a period of 'authoritarian rule' which was gradually undermined by the uncontrollable dynamism of the movement. Coordinating institutions such as the cabinet ceased to exist; the party gradually founded new institutions which by 1938 had effectively removed power from the parallel organs of the state. The arbitrarily-created personal empires of the Nazi satraps proliferated, and the destructive elements in the system became paramount (thus in the conquest of the East, millions of Slavs were murdered, but very few German peasant settlements were founded). Crucial to this whole process, finally, as Broszat and Hans Mommsen argue with great force, was the collaboration and patronage of the 'traditional elites' from the 1920s up to 1938. Their final rebellion in the July Plot of 1944 appears in this version as no more than an attempt to restore the status quo of the 'authoritarian years' before 1938. Hitler, in this view, was certainly not at the mercy of events; but he was not wholly in control of them either.

Broszat's brilliant synthesis has now been made available to an English-speaking audience in a translation by John W. Hiden. Unfortunately Hiden's enterprise in persuading the Longman Group to publish *The Hitler State* is seriously undermined by his shortcomings as a translator. For the English version is so unreadable that the book is virtually useless for teaching purposes. The convoluted syntax of the original academic German is rendered into an even more indigestible English. Complex sentences work well enough in German, but they have to be radically restructured and broken up into smaller units if they are to work in English. Hiden seems to lack the boldness or skill to accomplish this task. Page 57 of *The Hitler State* for instance contains just six sentences, with an average length of over fifty words apiece. Another page taken at random, page 136, contains eight sentences with an average length not far short of sixty words apiece. On page 145 there is a sentence containing well over a hundred words. Similar examples can be found on many other pages; they are remarkable for the faithfulness with which they reproduce the rambling adjectival phrases and proliferating subordinate clauses of the original.

Where Hiden is misguidedly strict in his rendering of Broszat's style, however, he is even more misguidedly loose in his translation of Broszat's vocabulary. In the first four pages, for example, *Stabilisierung* is translated as 'stability' instead of 'stabilization', *Stützpunkte* as 'support' instead of 'centres of support', *Staatskrise* as 'national crisis' instead of 'state crisis', *als honorig geltender Exponenten* as 'worthy members' instead of 'exponents who counted as worthy', *überzeugend* as 'with conviction' instead of 'convincingly', and *destruktiv* as 'disruptive' instead of 'destructive'. These inaccuracies are compounded by the frequent omission of words altogether. Thus *tonangebend* is not translated on page 2; *revolutionäre Machtergreifung* is simply rendered as 'seizure of power' on page 3; *Bedenken gegen Hitlers Privatarmee* turns into 'suspicions of Hitler' on page 4. This carelessness, when repeated over 361 pages, adds up to a considerable distortion of the original. It really does matter to our understanding of Nazism whether we translate *Grossindustrie* as 'heavy industry', as Hiden does on page 156, or give it its proper meaning of 'large-scale industry'. Hiden's persistent translation of *Mittelstand* as 'middle class' leads to all kinds of distortions and

¹¹ Martin Broszat, *Der Staat Hitlers. Grundlagen und Entwicklung seiner inneren Verfassung* (dtv Weltgeschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts, vol. 9, Munich, 1969).

misunderstandings. English students who read on page 151 about the 'commercial middle class' will surely be puzzled unless they know that this refers to the *gewerblicher Mittelstand*; and what are they to make of the assertion on the same page that 'middle-class ideologies and claims formed the original nucleus of the National Socialist movement'? These and many other inadequacies make it very difficult to recommend this book for student use; but the book's crucial importance for the interpretation of the 'Third Reich' makes it equally difficult to avoid recommending it.

Just as the biographical approach has been applied both to the 'Third Reich' and to the Kaiserreich, so too has the 'structuralist' approach; and in the third section of this review article I shall go on to examine how it has been applied to Wilhelm II's Germany, above all in recent books by Paul Kennedy and Geoff Eley. The article will conclude with an assessment of the recent contribution of social and economic history to the interpretation of German history from 1870 to 1945, particularly through the medium of local studies such as David Crew's work on Bochum and the Munich Institute for Contemporary History's collective work on Bavaria in the Nazi period.

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