

*Were the Nazis an
inevitable legacy to the
Kaiser's Germany?
Paul Preston discusses
historians' latest views.*

The Peculiarities of German History, by David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley. viii + 300 pp. (Oxford University Press, £19.50 hardback; £7.50 paperback); **The German Empire 1871-1918**, by Hans-Ulrich Wehler. 293 pp. (Berg Publishers, £18.95 hardback; £6.95 paperback)

In the fortieth anniversary of the defeat of Hitler, the problem of why the land of Goethe and Beethoven should have unleashed such destruction and degeneration is once again on the agenda. As Ralf Dahrendorf once phrased it, why was Germany not England? An answer of seductive simplicity had been proffered after the Second World War by A.J.P. Taylor, who wrote that Germany had reached the turning point of 1848 and failed to turn. Even earlier, in 1915, Thorstein Veblen had remarked on the tensions emanating from a country which had undergone capitalist modernisation but was still ruled by a feudal political structure. It was not only Marxists who came to see the key to subsequent developments in Germany's apparent lack of a bourgeois revolution such as that assumed to have occurred in Britain and France. Yet the idea that there was a long-term structural explanation for Nazism did not prosper among the German conservatives who dominated the universities of the Federal Republic after 1945.

They preferred to hold firm to the view that Hitler and the Second World War, like the July crisis of 1914 before them, had been unfortunate accidents. A massive and convincing challenge to their hegemony was mounted in 1961 by Fritz Fischer in his book *Griff nach der Weltmacht* (translated into English as *Germany's Aims in the First World War*, Chatto and Windus, 1967). His pioneering efforts postulated a continuity between the foreign policies and domestic economic power structures of Wilhelmine and Hitlerian Germany. Subsequently, Fischer's successors, Hans-Ulrich Wehler, Volke Berghahn, Hans-Jürgen Puhle and others, have collectively elaborated a view of modern German history's *Sonderweg*, or special way, which distinguished it negatively from other developed and democratic countries. To do so, they had to fight fierce battles with the entrenched establishment and, in the process, they acquired something of a crusading mentality.

The trend of their work, perhaps most trenchantly summed up in 1973 in Hans-Ulrich Wehler's *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich*, has been to provide an immensely coherent and persuasive model. Broadly speaking, it runs as follows. The failure of the German bourgeoisie to seize power by

blood and heroism in 1848 and the subsequent unification of Germany from above by Prussian military might dictated the political development of the country until 1945. 1848 and 1871 enabled the entrenched and anachronistic power of the Prussian landed classes to be shielded from the consequences of modernisation by opening the way to a defensive alliance with heavy industry based on a mutually attractive programme of protective tariffs, military spending and anti-socialism. The lower classes were diverted, or negatively integrated, by a manipulative propaganda machinery based on the Navy League, the Pan-German League and other nationalist pressure groups, which harped on Germany's need for a powerful fleet and an aggressive world policy in the face of the mortal threat of Perfidious Albion.

The stimulus that the 'Fischer-school' provided to both teaching and research is difficult to exaggerate. It is impossible to imagine teaching undergraduates the period 1890-1914 without the works of Fischer or Berghahn's classic summary *Germany and the Approach of War in 1914* (Macmillan, 1973). Nevertheless, of late, the *Sonderweg*-view has come under attack from several young British scholars. Their collective voice was first heard in Richard J. Evan's stimulating edited collection *Society and Politics in Wilhelmine Germany* (Croom Helm, 1978). Invaluable essays on the roles played by Catholics, Socialists, nationalist pressure groups, peasants and others added essential nuance to German works whose occasionally categorical tone had presented a picture of a Satanically manipulative *Kaiserreich*. That was perhaps the inevitable legacy of the polemical atmosphere in which they had been written. Nonetheless, being involved in what they saw as a fight for academic survival, the 'Fischerite' historians could only be nonplussed to see themselves treated as if they constituted a consecrated orthodoxy.

Among the outstanding authors in Professor Evan's collection, two, David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, were soon to establish themselves as historians of the highest order. Blackbourn's *Class, Religion and Local Politics in Wilhelmine Germany* (Yale University Press, 1980) took issue with the standard view that the Catholic Centre Party had been part of the manipulative structure, supporting the establishment in return for political benefits for the Church. With great elegance and sensitivity, Blackbourn depicted a more paradoxical process whereby the once persecuted Catholic mass party came to line up with the traditional agrarian right largely because its constituency of peasants and the urban lower middle classes were victims of economic progress. Similarly, Geoff Eley's *Reshaping the German Right: Radical Nationalism and Political Change After Bismarck* (Yale University Press, 1980) rejected the 'orthodox', or at least what we might call 'Wehlerite', view that the radical nationalist pressure groups were the docile creatures of the Prussian ruling classes. Instead, he argued with great passion that the pressure groups were

channels for lower-middle-class resentment of the closed patrician world of *Honoratiorenpolitik* or establishment politics. Thus, he demonstrated a weakness of the ruling élite's hegemonic capacity. His portrait was not one of accomplished political manipulation but of a reckless upper-class alliance with the new populist groups in the hope of finding new methods of containing the working-class challenge.

In 1980, Blackbourn and Eley went further. Moving from the detailed to the general, they mounted a sustained attack on some of the central premisses of the 'Wehlerite' school. Their ideas were published in Frankfurt in a short book on the myths of German historical writing. The historians thus criticised, having in their own time had to struggle hard against a reactionary intellectual establishment, were outraged. They were especially resentful at the implied slur that they were myth-makers. The introduction to the present expanded English version takes into account the issues raised by the febrile debate which followed in a variety of German periodicals. Even so, much of it will not be familiar to English readers any more than will the original targets of the book. It is therefore remarkable that the most characteristic work of the group under scrutiny, Hans-Ulrich Wehler's *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich* should be made available in England within weeks of the appearance of *The Peculiarities*. As one has come to expect of Berg Publishers, this is a superbly produced book. Kim Traynor has made a splendid job of translating a knotty text without entirely eradicating all signs of its Teutonic origins. For its uncompromising statement of the model outlined above, it should be in every university library and be required reading for all history undergraduates. Wehler's book provides the essential foil for Blackbourn and Eley.

The central point made in *The Peculiarities* against the 'Wehlerites' is that the kind of bourgeois revolution which was supposed to have happened, but didn't, in Germany in 1848 never really happened anywhere. Instead, Blackbourn presents a picture of a 'silent' bourgeois revolution, devoid of heroics but still achieving the liberalisation of property relations, of economic organizations and of public association. Eley reminds us of the limitations of nineteenth-century bourgeois democracy in Britain and points out that the reactionary nature of German industrialists can be explained by the logic of monopoly capitalism more easily than by feudal influences. Together, they show that the embourgeoisement of the Junkers was at least as important as the feudalisation of the bourgeoisie.

As was the case with their earlier work, what Blackbourn and Eley are saying is assimilable to the 'Wehlerite' model. Indeed, in response to the gleeful efforts of German conservatives to use them as a hammer with which to smash the model, they are at pains to present themselves, in the English version at least, as ultimately in the same camp as Wehler. The debate

provoked by the German edition of this book has obscured the fact that, in postulating a less abject and star-struck bourgeoisie than do the 'Wehlerites', the authors are adding nuance and subtlety to the model rather than destroying it. In doing so, they are helping to ensure that the Wehlerite model does not give Germany's past a 'morbid mystique' of the kind previously associated with exclusively cultural studies of the 'German mind'.

Despite, rather than because of their polemical tone, they have given us one of the most exciting and fertile works of modern European history to be published in a long time. Nevertheless, to suggest, as they do, that what happened in Germany was only a heightened version of what happened elsewhere is dangerously to play down some of the uniquely illiberal features of Germany between 1890 and 1933. Critics have already pointed out that their argument is often advanced by means of examples drawn from areas other than Prussia. Thus, if Prussia is given the weight it must have, Wehler and others remain fundamentally correct in believing that the legal position of labour, the impotence of the Reichstag

and the ready resort to savage repression significantly differentiated Wilhelmine Germany from Victorian Britain.

Comparisons with Japan, Spain and Italy, countries which also had 'silent' bourgeois revolutions, would suggest an intrinsic structural difference between Britain and France on the one hand and the countries which had Fascist experiences on the other. The rigid political structures of those countries left them incapable of assimilating working-class challenges without recourse to extraordinary political devices of a more or less Fascist kind. That explains a lot but it does not explain why Hitler and the Nazis were so much more awful than Mussolini or even Franco. It is hardly surprising that Blackburn and Eley cannot provide a total explanation of the unique human degeneration of the Third Reich. Significantly, there are only four passing references to Hitler in *The Peculiarities of German History*. Fine-tuning is not the same as building a new engine. Nonetheless, the achievement of Blackburn and Eley is to have produced a substantial, virtuoso exhibition of critical scholarship. Their masterpiece may be noticeably flawed, but it is still a masterpiece.

early seventeenth-century Europe. If at times she over-estimated the impact of hermeticism, she nevertheless popularised the subject in the best sense of the word.

The breadth of her interests is fully revealed in the three volumes of her collected essays, the last of which is devoted to the Renaissance in northern Europe. The thirty-five pieces printed here include some autobiographical fragments and a bibliography of her works. The great majority (twenty-seven) are book reviews, many of them long essays from *The New York Review of Books*. Among the articles are two on her earliest subject of research, the French theatre of the early seventeenth century, and the very interesting study of the strange allegorical portrait of the Edwardian soldier Sir John Lutterell. Although her training was primarily literary, one of the most striking characteristics of much of her best work — as seen in the essay on the Lutterell portrait, for example, or in *The Valois Tapestries* — was her sensitivity to the contemporary political context of works of art. Few people have combined the study of literature, the fine arts and history with such skill, erudition and flair.

Peter French's book on the Elizabethan magus and mathematician John Dee is very much in the Yates mould. One could legitimately call it a product of her school. His debt to her is generously acknowledged in his preface, her review of the book is reprinted in *Ideas and Ideals*. John Dee was first published in 1972: this is a paperback edition, unfortunately unrevised owing to Dr French's death in 1976. It is less a biography than a survey of the scope of Dee's activities and interests, and an attempt to show how hermetic magic

Book Reviews

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