

available to readers of English. There is nothing simple about Ukrainian history, and this monograph is yet another proof of that fact.

JOHN-PAUL HIMKA

*University of Alberta*

**German Social Democracy through British Eyes: A Documentary History, 1870–1914.**

By *James Retallack*.

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022. Pp. xxii+392. \$95.00 (cloth); \$37.95 (paper); \$27.95 (e-book).

It is tempting to see this outstanding collection of archival documents as a compendium volume to *Red Saxony*, James Retallack's pioneering study of the *Kaiserreich's* electoral politics published in 2017. As it was then, the focus here is on Saxony, Imperial Germany's third largest state, the birthplace of German social democracy as much as a hotbed of reaction and authoritarianism. Retallack has assembled a rich selection of reports written by British diplomats, most of whom were posted to Dresden, the Saxon capital. The bulk of them are from George Strachey, Britain's envoy to Saxony from October 1873 to July 1897. Impressive in quality and range, they make for fascinating reading.

Inevitably perhaps, given Strachey's background, his reports reflect a bias toward Britain: he tended to measure Germany's development against what he saw as the superior British model. But Strachey showed remarkable insight, spurred by a keen interest in explaining to his superiors in London the domestic challenges facing Imperial Germany. The most acute of them was the struggle between authoritarianism and social democracy. Strachey and his colleagues reported in detail on elections in Saxony and the Reich, similarly on the measures taken by the authorities to suppress the Social Democratic Party (SPD). However, the reports—introduced and annotated in exemplary fashion by Retallack—go well beyond the focus on the rise of social democracy. The diplomats posted to Dresden, Strachey in particular, showed a broad interest in their host country. They wrote not only about elections, constitutions, parties, and Germany's contradictory voting system, but also the rise of antisemitism, economic competition, labor conditions, public health, and housing.

It is worth reading this treasure trove of sources against some of the key questions that have been debated in the historiography on Imperial Germany. Three in particular merit attention. First, the history of the SPD. Its rise from an underground band of political exiles to the largest socialist party in the world appears complex and contradictory in these reports. Industrialization and urbanization provided the potential for the SPD's success. Its leaders, August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht in particular, had the skill to integrate diverging interests while mobilizing increasingly large numbers of voters. But it was the heavy-handed way in which the Bismarckian state reacted to the perceived threat of socialism that transformed the party. As Strachey observed, the authoritarian approach taken by Bismarck (encapsulated in the Anti-Socialist Laws, the first of which was passed in 1878) backfired both in Saxony and the Reich. The demonization of the SPD had a galvanizing effect on the party and its supporters. By the turn of the century the SPD had the largest number of seats in the Reichstag, a feat Britain's Labour Party could only dream of. The SPD's success was such that many of its member felt they had more to lose than to win when the First World War forced the party into its historic compromise with the Kaiser's government.

Second, the broader debate about the character of the system set up under Bismarck and its evolution until the war. Did his hybrid, contradictory constitution cement political conflict, blocking Germany from achieving the kind of parliamentary system the SPD and

many liberals wanted? Or was Imperial Germany well on its way to reform and more modern than its critics have allowed for? Reading the reports assembled by Retallack, one is reminded of the paradoxes of the *Kaiserreich*, highly dynamic in some areas, deeply illiberal and authoritarian in others. Strachey and his colleagues were continuously critical of the way in which the state clamped down on protest and opposition. They also left little doubt that this authoritarian approach was supported by many in the middle classes. Yes, there was potential for change, especially in the decade or so before the war, but it existed within tight limits.

Third, the rise of Germany's antisemitic radical right. Strachey was aghast at the ways in which preexisting prejudice against Jews was turned into a pernicious political tool. He observed worrying signs of this politicization as early as 1879 and thought of the new forms of anti-Jewish agitation as vulgar and absurd. By June 1893 he concluded that the radical, antisemitic pressure groups were "now a power with which politicians have to count" (242). The success of a radical fringe in attracting popular attention by peddling the most vitriolic hatred and establishing that hatred as a mobilizing force was, Strachey's reports suggest, part of the multifaceted modernity of Imperial Germany and its political culture.

It is one of the many qualities of this compelling collection that it raises the question of continuity again, if in a refracted perspective. Wilhelmine antisemitism, illiberalism, and authoritarianism did not lead directly to Hitler, but they are clearly not unrelated to his rise either. The recent tendency to emphasize the successes of reform in Imperial Germany thus finds a useful corrective here. The reports edited by Retallack paint the picture of a contradictory and conflict-ridden political system that changed considerably, especially from the 1890s onward—in ways that escape easy "either-or" categorization. Where it mattered in a constitutional sense, the *Kaiserreich's* potential for reform was checked by a conservative elite which, supported by a powerful part of the middle classes, was prepared to use all levers of government to continue its grip on power. Historians would do well to examine how these contradictory dynamics related to one another, rather than focus on either the "success" or "failure" of Imperial Germany.

JAN RÜGER

*Birkbeck, University of London*

**12 Tage und ein halbes Jahrhundert: Eine Geschichte des Deutschen Kaiserreiches, 1871–1928.** By *Christoph Nonn*.

Munich: C. H. Beck, 2021. Pp. 688. €34.00 (cloth); €26.99 (e-book).

In a commemoration-obsessed central European historical culture, the sesquicentenary of the founding of the German Empire in 1871 has been noticeably less observed than many historical anniversaries of the last twenty-five years. Perhaps the anniversary was overshadowed by the COVID pandemic, or maybe the very large and influential works of a past generation of historians, including Hans Ulrich Wehler, Thomas Nipperdey, Volker Ulrich, or Heinrich August Winkler, have left relatively little to say. It could also be that the empire itself, which has drawn historical judgments ranging from ambivalent to negative, is less well suited for commemoration. Christoph Nonn's excellently written book, designed for a general, educated audience, offering the perspective of a younger generation of historians, not just reiterating previous opinions, but developing the author's own, and in doing so drawing on historical scholarship of the twenty-first century, offers an interesting and generally convincing picture of the first German nation-state. It stands out among the sesquicentenary contributions.