



# ***Germany's Second Reich: Portraits and Pathways***

**James Retallack**

**Opinion**

James Retallack, one of the most profound scholars of Imperial Germany writing in either English or German, has written a timely set of essays on Germany's Second Reich. It is timely because its center of gravity concerns the grey zone between conservatism and right-wing mass politics in a rapidly modernizing society ruled by an authoritarian government. The present-day echo is hard to overlook, as the question of the viability of genuinely conservative politics, shorn of radical visions of nationalist dystopias and emotional appeals to intergroup enmity, animated reflective politicians then as it does now. ...

Retallack's collection of essays is marked by sharp and thoughtful analytical distinction, judicious and critical reflections on the work of colleagues in the field, and beautiful, clear writing. ... [S]cholars will read these essays with considerable profit, especially if they glimpse how Imperial German paradoxes appear more and more like distant mirrors of our political predicaments today.

Helmut Walser Smith, Martha Rivers Ingram Chair of History, Vanderbilt University, in *Central European History* 51, no. 2 (June 2018): 314-5

James Retallack is one of the foremost historians of imperial Germany. He has written important studies on the Kaiserreich, regional history of Saxony, elections, and political conservatism. In this essay collection, Retallack sets out to “rethink real or alleged discontinuities” in Germany's modern history (xi). He finds that many recent histories are “off-kilter, skewed toward a more positive appraisal of the Second Reich than the historical evidence warrants” (xiv). ... This volume is a sprightly, critical introduction to the recent historiography of imperial Germany's domestic politics. ...

Retallack's essays are a convincing rejoinder to the rosy revisionism of recent historiography—convincing not just because of Retallack's erudition, his sources, and his many examples but because he is neither a drummer for the

Sonderweg thesis nor an opponent of cultural, transnational, or other types of historiographical approaches—indeed, such approaches are quite in evidence in this essay volume. But he knows the politics of the Kaiserreich too well to overlook its baleful legacies for politics, governance, and society

Isabel V. Hull, John Stambaugh Professor of History, Cornell University, in *German Studies Review* 40, no. 1 (February 2017): 204-6

In these essays Retallack displays a growing sense that ‘the pendulum of historical interpretation’s arc is off-kilter, skewed towards a more positive appraisal of the Second Reich than the historical evidence warrants’ (p. xiv). He cautions against those—such as Konrad Jarausch and Michael Geyer in *Shattered Past: Reconstructing German Histories* (2003)—who dismiss the notion of the ‘authoritarian’ Second Empire as an ‘empty cliché’ and agrees with Hartwin Spenkuch that Prussian particularities have often been ignored by critics of the *Sonderweg*. ... Retallack’s self-confessed ‘ambivalence’ about how best to consider Germany’s political modernization following the *Sonderweg*’s fall from favour allows him to straddle historiographical camps, to pose awkward questions and to challenge easy assumptions. It also means, however, that he is unable to offer ‘a full-throated resolution of Imperial Germany’s historical contradictions and historiographical debates’. As he acknowledges in the Preface, such ‘a resolution, if it is possible at all, would require a book quite unlike what I offer here ... A large synthesis written by a single author—not me—seems more likely to give the interpretive wheel the next turn it needs’ (p. xv). Many, myself included, will be disappointed that Retallack appears to rule out this possibility, since few historians know the Kaiserreich as well as he does and even fewer write with such style and wit. A single example shall suffice here: ‘Good history is like a Swiss Army knife’, he suggests, ‘it offers different tools for different situations rather than only the sharp edge of a blade’ (p. 240).

Matthew Jefferies, University of Manchester, in *German History* 34, no. 2 (June 2016): 331-2

Rather than a monograph devoted to a single object of study, James Retallack’s latest contribution might best be described as a series of miniatures. Divided into three sections, it traverses a number of varying themes, ranging from digital history, the role of Saxony in the Second Reich, through to the vexed question of how best to characterize the political system of Imperial Germany. ...

Taken as a whole, Retallack's miscellany offers a series of case studies that reiterate the arguments that have long been central to his project of constructing a post-Sonderweg understanding of late Imperial Germany's authoritarian aspects. Paying particular attention to the "Third German" Saxon state and keeping an eye on how Germany looked from without as well as from within, Retallack attacks the problems of German parliamentarization, democracy, sovereignty, and the historiography of all of these with characteristic vigor and nuance. Historians, this author included, will undoubtedly continue to view Kaiserreich society and politics as more responsive, parliamentary, and less authoritarian than Retallack is willing to concede. To do so, however, they will have to confront carefully the arguments offered here.

Matthew P. Fitzpatrick, Flinders University, in *The Journal of Modern History* 89, no. 1 (2017): 228-9

This sparkling collection of essays focuses on the acute political and social tensions that wracked Germany from 1866 to 1918. In a period of extraordinary change, Left and Right struggled to implement—or prevent—the growth of democracy. Retallack (Toronto) shows how the separate states (particularly Saxony) followed different trajectories. Was democracy bound to fail, as it finally did in 1933? No proponent of inexorability, Retallack argues that the matter was open-ended or was until defeat came in 1918. German politics had been polarized enough by the policies of Bismarck and Wilhelm II; the demagogic leaders who followed them did the rest. It should be added that though he offers this judgment, Retallack presents the differing views of other German historians in a fair and open-minded way. This is a work in which a leading scholar brings fresh analytical insights to bear on the age of Bismarck and Wilhelm. It has the additional merit of providing an insider's account of the development in recent years of the website on *German History in Documents and Images*.... Summing Up: Highly recommended. Upper-division undergraduates and above.

Stephen Bailey, Knox College, in *CHOICE* 53, no. 6 (February 2016)

Retallack's kaleidoscopic view of the "Second Reich" is a delightful reading experience and a vital example of modern historiography which brings together political commentators from the nineteenth century and critical historians from the twenty-first century.

Kristof Niese, University of Bonn, in *University of Toronto Quarterly* 86, no. 3 (2017): 279-80

One of the profession's leading experts on the Second Reich, James Retallack writes with a grace and clarity that showcases his broad knowledge, judicious reading, and generosity of spirit. Both newcomers and experts alike will benefit from these essays.

James M. Brophy, Francis H. Squire Professor of History, University of Delaware

This lively and very wide-ranging essay collection makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of Imperial Germany and its place in the trajectory of modern German history. James Retallack deals as confidently with authoritarianism as he does with popular politics, both of them very evident in the Germany of Bismarck and the Kaiser, and his book has the virtue of including views of Germany by British and American observers.

David Blackbourn, Cornelius Vanderbilt Distinguished Professor of History,  
Vanderbilt University

When one of the world's foremost experts on the German *Kaiserreich* plays the devil's advocate and proposes a re-evaluation of the *Sonderweg* thesis, scholars should sit up and take notice. Have historians been too quick to abandon the idea that Germany was on an undemocratic path before 1918? Retallack makes us think twice. In these chapters he invites readers to revisit the nature of Germany's journey into modernity. Retallack's pioneering archival research, his deep knowledge of the field, and his imaginative skepticism complement each other once again in this lively new book.

Ute Planert, Professor of Modern History, University of Cologne