

Imperial Germany 1871-1918

Short Oxford History of Germany

James Retallack, Editor

Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008

Opinion

Modern, confident to the point of arrogance, divided by class, and graceless in its tragic demise—this is how contemporaries described the Titanic as it sank to the ocean floor on the night of April 14, 1912. It is also James Retallack's metaphor for Imperial Germany, which he sees as a dynamic society and a powerful state riven by dissension, plagued by contradiction, as creative as it was crass and heedless, utterly intent on proving itself to the world, and monumentally unlucky ...

The second volume of the *Short Oxford History of Germany* ... is an immensely useful compendium intended for university students. The authors of the individual essays are top-shelf historians, mainly from a mid-career cohort of scholars of German history, especially as represented in Great Britain and North America. Smartly conceived and well penned, the essays reflect the latest state of the field and thus contribute a helpful introduction to a range of themes. Short bibliographical essays tilted toward English-language contributions augment the book's usefulness. There is also a timeline that attempts to integrate the various layers of Imperial German history—social and cultural life, religion and gender, politics and the state ... Each chapter begins with an anecdote, or literary reference, or a story from the archives, that draws the reader in. There is pleasingly little in the way of polemic. Whether in the editor's introduction and conclusion, or in the individual chapters, Retallack's *Kaiserreich* is free from the tone of indignation that once marked the history of Imperial Germany. It is also bereft of strained apologetics. Instead, we have a no-nonsense history that gives far more room to such topics as religion, bourgeois reform, and gender than was the case twenty-five years ago. It is also a *Kaiserreich* liberated from the shadows of the Third Reich ...

The volume serves as a fine introduction to the period, and its framing is challenging and incisive ... Perhaps what makes this compendium so helpful—for teachers and researchers of German history—is that it allows us to see what we have accomplished and what remains to be done.

— Helmut Walser Smith, Vanderbilt University,
Central European History 42, no. 3 (2009): 558-60.

The Library of Congress online catalog shows 39 books whose titles begin with “Imperial Germany” and 418 books with those words in their titles. These numbers illustrate the popularity of Germany from 1871 to 1918 as a subject of historical research and suggest the likelihood of a variety of interpretations. Retallack (Toronto) and his colleagues provide an outstanding contribution to the topic by their book’s content, organization, and authorship. Aside from Retallack’s introduction and afterword, there are 11 thematic essays by relatively verging-on-middle-age scholars and teachers based in Canada, the US, UK, and Germany. Among the essays are “Gendered Germany” and “Transnational Germany,” neither of which would likely have been found in new books even 10 years ago. Each essay begins with a vignette to introduce its topic, and each focuses on what Retallack calls “key themes”: “social and economic change,” “middle class and the state,” “conflict,” and “authoritarian or modern.” In the process, the texts and endnotes engage with contemporary historiography, which is also exemplified by a 22-page-plus bibliography, “Further Reading.” Aside from the “key themes,” an 11-page “Chronology,” five maps, and an index help to integrate the history of imperial Germany, especially for an undergraduate readership. Summing Up: Essential.

— CHOICE

A combination of well-established historians and the leading scholars of a new generation have written a series of lively contributions, each of which is opened by a short anecdote illustrating some of the central issues identified in the excellent introduction by James Retallack. These issues have been at the heart of research since the 1960s, but in this volume they are reworked in important ways ...

If the volume is a marker for the state of the current debates on imperial Germany, Retallack also offers some sage advice about future research directions ... By summarizing the complexities of the current debate and setting out fresh research agendas, Retallack’s volume will offer an invaluable guide to both experts and students.

— William Mulligan, University College Dublin,
University of Toronto Quarterly 79, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 377-379.

Does Imperial Germany resemble the *Titanic*? ... Retallack uses the comparison ... to open the final essay in this edited volume, which is well worth reading ... The argument of the book is that the sharpening of internal conflicts which ended in dilemmas giving rise to unforeseeable paradoxes was specific to Imperial Germany. As visibility deteriorated on the bridge, discussion increased: about the course, who should take the helm, and the telescope ...

Retallack’s co-authors do not make it easy for their editor ... While they observe the guidelines laid down in the introduction ..., the quality of most of the essays is so high that the editor has to work hard to sum up their findings in the conclusion.

... This book is useful, informative, and entertaining in equal measure. It provides an introduction to the history of Imperial Germany and presents it in all its complexity without trying to sum it up conclusively ... The *Titanic* surprisingly sank on its maiden voyage. Imperial Germany, too, had only one chance, and it ended violently in world war and revolution.

— Ewald Frie, *German Historical Institute London Bulletin* 33, no. 1 (2011): 128-131.

This book was required reading for my class in Modern Germany, taught by Professor [Pieter] Judson at Swarthmore College. The text, a compilation of several essays written by established scholars of German history, is an excellent overview of the political, social, and intellectual history of Germany from its unification under Bismarck in 1871 to its defeat in the First World War in 1918. The authors of the text write in a clear and organized manner ... The book is not meant to be a comprehensive history of German history—it is appropriately called a ‘Short History,’ and my professor incorporated many supplementary readings into the course readings ... Each chapter covers a different aspect of German history, each written by a different scholar with his/her own point of view. Some chapters include very fascinating tidbits, like the outburst of clubs and associations founded near the end of the 19th century. The book also stresses certain themes of German history, including Germany’s policies towards its neighbors, the problems of organizing people who came from so many different regions and lumping them all into ‘Germany,’ and the conflicts of Germany’s political parties. For the undergraduate enrolled in a course on German history from 1871-1918, the text should be valuable.

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