



PROJECT MUSE®

After Hitler: Recivilizing Germans, 1945-1995 (review)

Daniel Friel

Enterprise & Society, Volume 9, Number 3, September 2008, pp.
546-547 (Review)

Published by Cambridge University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/249031>

Konrad H. Jarausch. *After Hitler: Recivilizing Germans, 1945–1995*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. xiii + 379 pp. ISBN 0-19-512779-X, \$35.00.

Konrad Jarausch has undertaken the ambitious project of describing the transformation of Germany from a nationalistic society capable of horrific crimes to a civilized society that respects human rights. The author contends that Germany changed over decades through a collective learning process initially spearheaded by a minority of anti-Fascist Germans as well as by the United States and the Soviet Union. By analyzing the development of public discourse and individual experiences since World War II, the book seeks to show how events and structural transformations influenced the behavior and beliefs of ordinary Germans. Compared to the demilitarization of the country's political structure and the reform of the German economy, the necessary changes in German consciousness are seen as a more protracted process that has made incredible advances, even if the project of "civilizing" German society is still incomplete.

This book is divided into an introduction, three sections (with three chapters each), and a conclusion. In the introduction, Jarausch argues that studies of the transformation of German society should focus on the reemergence of civil society rather than on the concept of the special German path (*Sonderweg*) as the latter concept has moved toward a conception of Westernization that does not show how German society was actually transformed. In the first section, he traces how, with the help of the allied powers, Germans began to recognize themselves as perpetrators of horrendous crimes rather than viewing themselves as victims. In the second section, Jarausch contends that the advent of a consumerist society combined with an outbreak of a variety of forms of protest in the 1960s led to a deepening of participatory democratic values and the creation of a more tolerant society, at least in the western part of Germany. The third section of the book addresses German reunification, emphasizing the role that public demonstrations and civic organizations in the East played in bringing down the communist government, while also showing how Germany, despite the rise of xenophobic crimes in the early 1990s, was beginning to come to terms with its aging population and the presence of an increasing number of immigrants.

Although the book should indeed be praised for attempting to capture the manner in which a new democratic culture emerged in Germany, many of its shortcomings are related to the author's contention that the transformation of German society should be viewed as a collective learning process. It is extremely difficult to show that such a process occurred without relying on teleological arguments. The

general argument of the book is further weakened by the author's reliance on broad generalizations rather than conceptual clarity and specific evidence. He uses terms such as human rights when, in reality, he wishes to discuss democracy. He focuses on society when the real topic is political culture.

The difficulty of proving the thesis developed by the author in the introduction is evident by the fact that his narrative often falls back on a relatively standard historical account of post-war developments in Germany without linking it directly to the thesis at hand. The problem is particularly prevalent in the second and third parts of the book. Although Jarausch claims that he wants to demonstrate how the beliefs and behavior of the average individual German were transformed by political developments and public discourse guided by intellectuals, the last two sections in particular only serve to recount intellectual debates and general political developments. He does not reveal the mechanisms whereby these debates effectively altered social consciousness even though he does muster some statistical evidence to document the emergence of a more democratic culture in Germany. However, such evidence combined with his account of historical and intellectual developments is not enough to show the process by which German culture actually changed, nor how the consciousness of the average German evolved. The last two sections would have been better served by ethnographic accounts of average citizens rather than a retelling of a history with which most German scholars are familiar. Regretfully, the power of Jarausch's argument is further undermined by his unnecessary reliance on pejorative terms when discussing developments in East Germany and his lauding of all Western influences.

By focusing primarily on how German society learned to become civilized, rather than on the interplay between German citizens and concrete measures undertaken by the Allies and the German government to actively transform this country's culture, Jarausch fails to capture the actual struggle that occurred to bring about this change. The absence of this tension within the narrative causes the work to rely too often on tautological statements rather than concrete evidence. This criticism is particularly true for his accounts of what happened in East Germany.

Despite the shortcomings outlined above, this book has indeed laid the basic foundation for further work to probe in greater detail how German culture actually evolved after the fall of the Nazi regime.

Daniel Friel
Universidad de San Andrés
Buenos Aires, Argentina

doi:10.1093/es/khn066

Advance Access publication July 22, 2008