

Aufklärung and Aftermath

The Genesis of German Conservatism, by Klaus Epstein, *Princeton: The Princeton University Press, 1966. xiii + 733 pp. \$17.50.*

IT SHOULD BE emphasized, first of all, that this is *not* a work of revision. The dottering cliché that the German lands were first roused out of a prolonged stupor by the events of 1789 was finally laid to rest in 1951 by the publication of Fritz Valjavec's imaginative *Die Entstehung der politischen Strömungen in Deutschland 1770-1815*. In fact, Valjavec probably displayed too much imagination in contending that Germany's political reawakening actually predated

the French Revolution since, as Klaus Epstein demonstrates in this admirable example of the historian's craft, "there is obviously a core of truth in the traditional view, for the French Revolution did have a great impact upon German political development." It is significant that this statement appears not at the outset, but midway through the first of two volumes which Epstein intends to devote to the origins of German Conservatism. The prose and the argument of the present volume are vigorous and persuasive, but free of the stylistic excesses of most "revisionist" historiography.

It would be impossible to summarize adequately even a small number of the subjects which Epstein explores in his ample account of Germany from about 1770 to the extinction of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806. Before describing the impact of Revolutionary and Napoleonic France, he surveys in detail the religious, social, and political controversies of eighteenth-century Germany. The treatment is, in a word, encyclopedic. At the mention of a given subject, even when tangential to his theme, Epstein promptly supplies several pages of careful explanation along with judicious annotations concerning the relevant bibliography ("The main secondary works on the Rosicrucians are. . ."). If the total effect is slightly overwhelming, Epstein does perform the important and increasingly urgent assignment of consolidating thousands of man-hours of scholarship into one book. He has consequently laid a new basis for research. Any student of German history who undertakes hereafter an investigation of the period in question will find Epstein's work a reliable and indeed indispensable guide.

The Baedeker quality of the book is to be explained by the author's commendable attempt "to analyze German Conservatism not just as an intellectual movement, but also to correlate it with political and social forces." The subject is thus given the broadest possible definition; and the result could be most appropriately described as

a general history of Germany with particular reference to the Conservative tradition. This follows, as well, from Epstein's conception of Conservatism as an increasingly self-conscious response to the challenge of the French Enlightenment and the German *Aufklärung*—and, in due course, to their Progressive and Radical offsprings. To achieve a balanced account, therefore, he must present the challenge as convincingly as the response. Despite cutting a few corners (to cite one example: Kant, Herder, and Lessing are conveniently excused from extended analysis since they can be credited with attempting to transcend the *Aufklärung*, which "never found a truly great leader"), Epstein succeeds remarkably well. Although the opponents of German Conservatism are naturally treated somewhat summarily, they are not left as a menagerie of paper tigers.

The general chapters, such as those tracing the history of the Prussian and Habsburg monarchies from Frederick the Great and Maria Theresa to the Napoleonic conquests, illustrate Epstein's extraordinary command of secondary literature and his ability as a narrator. But equally impressive is his reading of contemporary pamphlets and political tracts which has permitted the author to resurrect a number of unfortunately neglected personalities and incidents. The two most original chapters (for which special critical bibliographies are appended) are those dealing with "the conspiracy theory of the Revolution" and with the Hannoverian political analyst August Wilhelm Rehberg. The comparison suggested between Rehberg's parochial but genuinely reformist outlook and the more brilliant but also more reactionary views of Friedrich von Gentz, already at Metternich's ear, characterizes the dilemma of German Conservatism. It probably also gives a clue as to Epstein's own feelings as he prepares the second volume of his study, since he clearly regrets the failure of the Hannoverian School to have a greater impact on international statesmen and public opinion.

The shortcomings of Epstein's massive volume must be apparent from this enumeration of its virtues. The author writes concisely, but he is rarely brief (because his conception of the subject does not permit brevity). He is never dull, but he prefers to instruct rather than to entertain. The reader must be patient and must agree to listen to much which is either very familiar or very obscure to him—since Epstein's self-appointed task is to put everything in a broad and proper perspective. While he gains this objective, he is likely to lose many of his potential readers. He states that "the book is intended for the general reader interested in modern history as much as for colleagues in the field of German history." From his colleagues Epstein should gain, as he certainly merits, the warmest praise. But from his "general reader" he is more likely to receive a yawn. This is a familiar dilemma, and, in my judgment, Epstein has not been successful in resolving it. He might have written a more cogent and perhaps a more exciting book, but only at the sacrifice of other qualities which he understandably considers more important.

A second reservation should be registered in regard to the conceptual apparatus of the book. In his introduction Epstein attempts a tripartite classification: "the three types, which will be labeled Defenders of the Status Quo, Reform Conservatives, and Reactionaries, constitute three different responses to this common challenge." To this statement two objections may be offered.

1. Capital letters abound in the book. Yet in practice the abstract categories are only moderately useful since, as Epstein himself insists, it is exceedingly rare that individuals obligingly conform to them—and it is not clear what would be gained if they did. More importantly, the initial deployment of ideal types is apparently contradicted by Epstein's own unstinting defense and use of historical method. He is much too concerned to demonstrate the complexity of Conservatism (his favorite

adjective is "variegated") to be bothered unduly with stereotypes. And the distinction between type and stereotype is never firmly established. They are crude rules of thumb, nothing more. If anything, the book tends to demonstrate the limitations of such categorization rather than to show the usefulness of it. The historian Epstein easily outpoints the sociologist Epstein.

2. The second part of the proposition cited—concerning "this common challenge" to traditional values—is still less defensible. Epstein's assumption that the terms Radical, Progressive, and Party of Movement may be used interchangeably and that Liberals, Democrats, and Socialists "may be considered successive radicalizations of a single Party of Movement" can only be described as a convenient fiction. Since he sees Conservatism primarily as "a defensive movement," Epstein cannot allow the challenge to be more complex than the response. If a Party of Movement did not exist, he would have to create one.

It is no perfunctory duty to end on a positive note. By any standard Epstein has written an important work of synthesis, surely one of the most distinguished accomplishments by any American student of German history. His book both summarizes and supercedes previous efforts and thereby sets a new standard, it is safe to predict, for decades to come.

Reviewed by ALLAN MITCHELL

A Clear Voice in Babylon

The Unmaking of a Mayor, by William F. Buckley, Jr., *New York: The Viking Press, 1966. 335 pp. \$6.95.*

IF ANYONE ever wrote a whole book about his election as mayor of a city, the precedent has escaped this reviewer's attention. *A fortiori*, he knows of no one who ever