

Kißenner, Michael: *Das Dritte Reich*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 2005. ISBN: 3-534-14726-X; 136 S.

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In order to remain up to date with developments in the literature on National Socialist Germany, which has led to ‚einer wahren Bücherflut‘ (p. 1) and shows no sign of drying up, it is desirable that an historian on occasion assumes the task of attempting to summarize the most important evolutions in order to demonstrate where the historiography stands, in which direction it is tending and, crucially, what issues it still needs to address. In this context, one thinks in particular of the now standard works from Ian Kershaw and Wolfgang Wippermann.¹

Unlike Kershaw and Wippermann before him, Michael Kißenner limits himself here to a surprisingly small number of topic areas, namely six. Conspicuous by its absence from Kißenner’s work and certainly worthy of inclusion is an examination of controversies regarding Nazi foreign policy. Kißenner, however, merely comments that its absence is ‚wegen des Blicks auf das „innere Gefüge“ des Dritten Reiches‘ (p. 18), recommends the relevant chapters from Kershaw and Klaus Hildebrand², whose portrayal Kißenner considers to be unsurpassed, and only fleetingly returns to the question of foreign policy during the course of the book. Both the title of Kißenner’s study and the breakdown of its chapters with helpful headings alongside the text are reminiscent of Hildebrand’s excellent work, for which Kißenner makes no secret of his admiration. The brevity of Kißenner’s study in comparison with the others mentioned is to be explained in that his book is written above all for students and, as the series editors point out in their foreword to the volume, aims ‚nicht auf eine erschöpfende Darstellung historischer Prozesse, Strukturen und Ereignisse, sondern auf eine ausgewogene Diskussion wichtiger Forschungsprobleme‘ (p. vii).

Whilst parts one and two of the book constitute an introduction and an overview, respectively, the third part forms the backbone of the

work and is broken down into six chapters. The first (pp. 19-28) devotes its attention to the role and significance of Adolf Hitler, more specifically to the question as to whether he was a ‚starker oder schwacher Diktator‘. This is perhaps the most skilfully constructed and fluidly elucidated of the various topics and Kißenner leaves us under no illusions as to the importance of the issue, which, in his view, ‚durchzieht [...] fast alle anderen Kontroversen um den NS-Staat und taucht in unterschiedlichen Gewändern immer wieder auf‘ (p. 28). This argument is aptly demonstrated in chapter two (pp. 28-43), which focuses on the Holocaust. Given the importance here of Hitler’s own role in the decision-making process, it is surprising that there is no mention of Peter Longerich’s recent monograph, which is devoted explicitly to this matter.³ Another recent study which may have benefited Kißenner’s discussion of what the German people knew about the annihilation of the Jews (pp. 42-43) is the work of American historian Eric A. Johnson and German psychologist Karl-Heinz Reuband, which is based on written surveys completed by more than three thousand German Jews and non-Jewish Germans who lived at the time. The authors reach the plausible conclusion that between a third and one half of all Germans knew something about the Holocaust before the war’s end.⁴

Chapter three (pp. 43-76), entitled ‚Der NS-Staat. Streit um Eliten, Ereignisse und Institutionen‘, constitutes by far the longest of the six chapters and is itself divided into eight shorter sections. These wide-ranging sub-chapters focus on groups as diverse as the elites, the Gestapo, the churches and women. In his discussion in section (e) of the extent to which the Wehrmacht managed to remain ‚sauber‘ (p. 94) during the years of Nazi

¹ Kershaw, Ian, *The Nazi Dictatorship. Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation*, London 2000; Wippermann, Wolfgang, *Umstrittene Vergangenheit. Fakten und Kontroversen zum Nationalsozialismus*, Berlin 1998.

² Hildebrand, Klaus, *Das Dritte Reich*, Munich 2003.

³ Longerich, Peter, *Der ungeschriebene Befehl. Hitler und der Weg zur „Endlösung“*, Munich 2001.

⁴ Johnson, Eric A.; Reuband, Karl-Heinz, *What We Knew. Terror, Mass Murder, and Everyday Life in Nazi Germany*, New York 2005, p. 393.

hegemony, Kißener concedes ‚wie schwierig es ist, zu beurteilen, in welchem Maße Millionen deutscher Soldaten in die Verbrechen der Wehrmacht als Institution involviert waren‘ (p. 59). Kißener’s reference here to the ‚zahlreichen Fehler und Fotofälschungen‘ (p. 59, see also p. 38) contained in the exhibition ‚Vernichtungskrieg. Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941 bis 1944‘ produced by the Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung goes too far, however, in spite of the clear necessity for an overhaul of the exhibition. As the commission set up to assess the exhibition verified, of the 1433 photos used, less than 20 did not belong in an exhibition on the Wehrmacht.⁵

In the fourth chapter (pp. 76-82), Kißener deals – surprisingly briefly – with the topic of war and the development and refutation of what he terms ‚Legenden‘ (p. 76). Addressing the ‚Präventivkriegsthese‘ (pp. 80-82), Kißener makes it clear that the alleged Soviet threat did not play any role whatsoever in German plans to invade the Soviet Union in 1941. Furthermore, he importantly points out the consequences of this absurd thesis gaining ground, namely to call into question the whole idea of a ‚Vernichtungs- und Weltanschauungskrieg‘ on the part of Nazi Germany and to portray the German aggression in a much milder light (p. 81). Suitably enough, Kißener follows his chapter on war with a much more fleshed out one on resistance against National Socialism (pp. 82-101). The ‚jüngste und wohl auch noch einige Zeit wirksame Tendenz kritischer Nachfragen‘ (p. 93) regarding the resisters of 20. July 1944 relates to their simultaneous involvement in crimes during the Soviet campaign. A recent article on the subject from Hermann Graml testifies to the ongoing debate over this phenomenon, which nevertheless remains a desideratum in the literature.⁶ In the sixth and final chapter of part three (pp. 101-111), Kißener turns his attention to the very important issue of the extent to which the German population has dealt since 1945 with the impact and implications of their recent past and the forms this has taken.

Early on in his study, Kißener notes that, in view of the extent of Nazi crimes, ‚fällt es wohl jedem Historiker schwer, der nation-alsozialistischen Herrschaft gegenüber

jene Objektivität [...] zu entwickeln, die eine wesentliche Voraussetzung wissenschaftlichen Arbeitens ist‘ (p. 2). Hence, the controversies recounted here by Kißener and the passionate and, not infrequently, polemical way in which they have been and continue to be debated, both among academic historians and – in some cases – in the public eye, should come as no surprise. Throughout his book, Kißener rightly identifies the growth in regional studies as a trend in recent historiography and their importance (pp. 5, 37, 51, 73, 88 and 113). In the fourth and final part of the book, termed ‚Ausblick‘ (pp. 112-115), Kißener turns his attention to what the scholarship has yet to address and achieve. He identifies the ‚Integration des Nationalsozialismus in die Geschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts‘ as ‚die Hauptaufgabe künftiger Forschung‘ (p. 113). Among ‚erhebliche Forschungsdefizite‘ highlighted by Kißener, the question ‚Was wussten die Deutschen?‘ is one which still awaits a satisfactory answer ‚auf wissenschaftlicher Grundlage‘ (p. 114).

Michael Kißener undeniably demonstrates an assured grasp of a massive amount of literature and numerous historiographical debates, which he presents in a well-structured, accessible and predominantly balanced manner. Although it is unlikely to obtain the status of the works mentioned at the beginning of this review, above all due to its comparative brevity, the book may for this very reason become a favourite with students and those seeking an accessible introduction to the myriad controversies, and is a welcome addition to the literature.

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⁵Bartov, Omer, et al, Bericht der Kommission zur Überprüfung der Ausstellung ‚Vernichtungskrieg. Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941 bis 1944‘, November 2000, <<http://www.his-online.de/download/Kommissionsbericht.pdf>>, p. 85.

⁶Graml, Hermann, Massenmord und Militäropposition. Zur jüngsten Diskussion über den Widerstand im Stab der Heeresgruppe Mitte, in: Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte 54 (2006), pp. 1-24.