

*Why the Germans Do It Better. Notes from a Grown-Up Country*, John Kampfner, Atlantic Books, 2020, 312 pp., £16.99

Possibly an academic historian is not best-placed to review a polemic by a journalist, but it is instructive to read what has been published to considerable praise, and also reassuring to be reminded that, despite being largely absent in this book, there are values attached to historical virtues such as contextualisation and source-criticism. Indeed, Kampfner, who appears to believe that British commentators have a woeful sense of superiority, might be pleased to note that Ranke, the most distinguished German historian, greatly influenced British historical methodology. Typically, Kampfner does not cite Ranke, which is a pity as Ranke wrote about both British and German history, and like many German and British commentators in the past, a list including Karl Marx who again escapes Kampfner's notice, did so without the simplistic note struck as follows:

‘As much of the contemporary world succumbs to authoritarianism, as democracy is undermined from its heart by an out-of-control American President, a powerful China and a vengeful Russia, one country – Germany – stands as a bulwark for decency and stability.

This is the other Germany. This is the story I wish to tell.’

Well, he is certainly *parti pris*, and on both Germany and Britain. But is the history any good, and, from the point of view of both history and journalism, which do have some common values, is he able to see more than one point of view?

Unfortunately not. Kampfner rushes to judgment on complex matters, for example the idea of a *Sonderweg* or the *Historikerstreit*, and is only too happy to cite or offer simplistic views. These can be found throughout the book, but to give a couple of examples:

‘...the nation depends entirely for its identity, stability and self-worth on the liberal democratic post-war settlement, on the rule of law.’

Really? Entirely? Try discussing that view in Bavaria, where identity is multiple and more complex. Or:

‘Kohl steered reunification with determination and dexterity.’

Well that is one view. What about adding the use of East German assets to help Mitterrand, Kohl's more general implication in improper funding, or the very debate, about which Kampfner is fully aware, concerning the manner of unification and its consequences in East Germany. These points can be discussed, but Kampfner is into assertion, not discussion. Incidentally, if he read the ‘Press Release,’ apparently Germany emerged from a collection of disparate city states 150 years ago’ (rubbish) and ‘no other country has had as turbulent a history as Germany.’ China heads a series of states we could discuss under this head, not least because civil wars are far more traumatic than

foreign ones. So also for Congo or Zaire, indeed for many other states. In Europe, I would suggest that Kampfner, both in such comments and in his praise of Germany post 1945, underrates the experience of Poland or Serbia. We might debate whether Spain has had a worse time than Germany, but Kampfner does not go in for debate.

For example, he extensively praises Angela Merkel. She certainly faced a whole series of challenges, notably the global financial crisis and European debt crisis of 2008, the subsequent Eurozone crises, the European migrant crisis of 2015, and the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020-1. There is much to be said in favour of Merkel's sound stewardship of Germany, her support for 'markt-konforme Demokratie' (democracy conforming to the market), her crucial leadership role in the European Union, not least in climate change, political conciliation and fiscal stability, the management of transfer payments, and her influence on the world stage

However, criticisms can be made. In part, these criticisms exaggerate what any Chancellor could have been expected to achieve, not least given the role of other players such as the Federal Constitutional Court, but they relate to issues during her period in office, ranging from failures to reform the EU, to the rise of political extremism in Germany, and the difficulty of achieving a defence buildup sufficient to confront Russian aggressiveness. Delaying decisions is also not always the best way to move forward. There has also been a failure to manage the succession, in part because Merkel has looked for politicians completely in line with herself.

More generally, the rollercoaster ride of modern German politics and constitutional and geopolitical changes really began in 1792, with the advance of revolutionary French troops into the Rhineland, but even if we start in 1866, when Prussia won dominance (Kampfner's 1871 was simply a sequel), the rollercoaster was in part a jostling for solutions, with force, or its failure, the context, causes, conjunctures, course and consequences. Ultimately, external forces did determine the outcome, both in 1945, when they brought down the Third Reich, and in 1989-90 when, by not intervening, they permitted a unification and, moreover, one that was peaceful.

Since then, Germany has, by global standards and those of its past, known prosperity and peace. It is the key state in a European Union that, despite its directing partnership with France, it does not dominate in an old-fashioned power-system. The centres of world instability are at a distance, and Germany plays a very modest role in the resulting confrontations. Within Germany, this helps the attempt to define an acceptable, coherent and attractive civic nationalism that can regard Nazism as an aberration that is surmountable.

And for the future? One thing that history suggests, is the unpredictability of developments and events. The past does not set a pattern for the future, but nor should it be swept aside. Most Germans are well aware of this quandary and most respond with maturity to the weight of the past and the hope of the future.

As in other societies, the experience, indeed management, of diversity has been a key experience over the last half-millennium, with the Reformation, and the resulting solutions and compromises, opening up a situation in which there were differences over fundamental issues within communities, including that of Germanness. In part, the ideological challenges of the last century can be seen in the same pattern.

Aside from these differences, there are those of locality, life, experience and assumptions. The German 'condition' or 'path' has very varied contents and meanings, and it is best to end on this mature understanding, rather than on the immaturity of clear patterns, obvious lessons, and apparent *zeitgeists*, still less facile contrasts with other states.

Jeremy Black's books include *Rethinking World War Two*.