

*Time and Power. Visions of History in German Politics, from the Thirty Years' War to the Third Reich*

Christopher Clark

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The present as a moment in time between past and future drives forward political imaginations, strategies and languages based on this relationship. In a set of lectures given at Princeton in 2015 and first published in hardback in 2019, Sir Christopher Clark, Regius Professor of History at Cambridge, uses this in order to understand German history in terms of 'the specific temporal textures of each regime,' those taken for consideration being, Frederick William, the 'Great Elector' of Brandenburg (r. 1640-88), Frederick II 'the Great' (r. 1740-86), Otto von Bismarck, and the Nazis' 'millennial timescape.' The idea is a good one, and the method is fruitful. Clark draws on an impressively wide range of reading, in both original sources and subsequent literature, and it begins well: 'As gravity bends light, so power bends time. This book is about what happens when temporal awareness is lensed through a structure of power.'

But I cannot recommend it. A short review can only provide so much space for criticism, and this therefore is only a starter. Three main points at the outset. First, the writing is often obscure, and Clark's love of words and phrases does not help with meaning. Secondly, the coverage is curious and incomplete. Thirdly, enough of the detail is problematic to make me question the veracity of argument for material where I am less familiar.

The style can be gauged from the following, and it is one of the easier passages:

'The commonalities between the "hybrid" temporalities of National Socialism and Italian Fascism are undeniable, but the difference is equally important, namely, that whereas the fascist regime projected these chronopolitical manipulations onto a temporality whose logic remained essentially historical, linear, and modernist, the German regime adorned itself with modern attributes but articulated its ultimate and defining claims in terms of an ahistorical, racial continuum.'

Or

'Instead of a linear advance towards modernity, we see something more oscillatory; changes in the intellectual climate fuse with a process of trans-generational reflection in which prior forms of regime historicity are rejected, emulated, or modified.'

And so on. The entire book should have been rewritten for clarity. Both author and publisher are grievously at fault.

Secondly, a study of visions of history in German politics needs to address the most famous German to confront those, Martin Luther, and, linked to this, the impact of the Reformation on the

First Reich. Clark unfortunately underplays religion, as well as much else including the vitality of local and regional history, pro-Nazi ideas of the *volk*, and the impacts of historical geography and geopolitics. He also misrepresents the nature of historical understanding in most of German (and world) history, with his absurd throwaway comment on ‘a pre-modern, *untemporalised* sense of time and with it the lack of what we would call historical consciousness.’ As far as specifics are concerned, Clark’s discussion of the Great Elector is somewhat innocent of several decades’ work re-evaluating ‘Absolutism,’ while the painting of Frederick II’s reign is problematic. For example, ‘faced no imminent geopolitical threats ... Frederick’s reign opened with one of the most unexpected and shocking initiatives of modern European diplomatic history – the unprovoked Prussian invasion of the Habsburg province of Silesia.’ Not so. The Austro-Russian alignment from 1726 posed a serious geopolitical threat, and had obliged Frederick’s father, Frederick William I, to leave the Alliance of Hanover in 1726 and remain neutral in the War of the Polish Succession (1733-5). Russian forces had already moved into Germany in 1716 and 1735. That Britain-Hanover had settled its differences with Austria (1731) and Russia (1734) accentuated the geopolitical bind. Even worse, the Austrian succession in 1740 threw open the possibility that Saxony and Bavaria, both backed by France, would gain from the new situation. Frederick was in a weak position and his pre-emptive strike was a gamble predicated on the short-term vulnerability of Austria and Russia. Far from being unprecedented, the strike was part of a familiar sequence of such attacks, including the attempt to destroy the Swedish empire in 1700. And so on.

The nature of the Nazi historical imagination and, as it were, prospectus is scarcely uncharted territory, and is made far more complex, as Clark correctly notes by the cross-currents of the far from systemic Nazi world. In the space available, Clark does not give sufficient weight to this variety. For example, he could have moved from what he does assess to consider the somewhat different emphases offered by the historical blockbusters of the period or the historical atlases or the geopolitical literature, each category of which in turn could be atomised in order to note variety. There were also German institutions that went on offering their own histories, notably, and specialists are apt to underrate this element, the army. The Nazis proved adept at articulating their toxic noise, but there were limits to their sway, and this was not simply due to their inconsistencies, divisions and short period in control.

Alongside the racial themes that provided one element of ‘temporality’ and the strong millenarianism provided by their attempt to excise Jewry, there was also a focus on earlier periods of national power and glory. Thus, the Nazis were presented as the natural heirs to past German greatness and its necessary, indeed inevitable, realisation. In doing so, the Nazis sought to consolidate the unification of Germany under Hohenzollern Prussia, the basis of the Second Reich, and to cut short the possibility of a revival of regional historical narratives, for example those of Bavaria, Saxony and Hanover. The reference instead was on Germans, but, despite the efforts to link the two, the agenda of national strength inherently answered to a different historical consciousness and set of references to

that arising from racial issues. Much, moreover, did not begin with the Nazis, a classic instance being the use of history to give force to long-term myths about Germany's role in Eastern Europe. There is also a need to discuss the engagement with history by German occupying powers. This was very varied. When the Germans conquered Yugoslavia in 1941 they took down the memorial to Gavriel Princip erected in Sarajevo in 1930 and it was presented to Hitler as a birthday present. In 1942, the statue at Luneville to the Abbé Gregoire who had pressed for equality for Jews was destroyed by the Germans. There is also a need to engage with the purging of academics and teachers, as well as the willingness of so many to serve Nazi goals. Many of these historians remained influential in postwar West Germany. Clark would have benefited from dropping his illustrations in order to consider these and other points.

A good topic that deserves attention, but Clark's book does not rise to the challenge.

Jeremy Black's books include *Clio's Battles: Historiography in Practice, Contesting History* and *Charting the Past*.