

History

GERMANY FROM NAPOLEON TO BISMARCK, 1800–1866.

By Thomas Nipperdey. Trans. by Daniel Nolan. Princeton Univ. Press. 760 pp. \$69.95

In the study of German history, revisionism is especially sharp edged. Over such matters as the significance of Luther or Bismarck, the causes of World War I, or (especially) the sources of Hitler's National Socialism, fierce interpretive rivalries rage.

Amid such *Sturm und Drang*, the work of Thomas Nipperdey, a professor of history at the University of Munich until his death in 1992, shines as a beacon. Nipperdey's interests ranged widely, from the Reformation to political parties in Imperial Germany. But his crowning achievement was his three-volume history of Germany in the 19th century, of which the present volume is the first to appear in English.

When the German original, *Deutsche Geschichte 1800-1866, Bürgerwelt und starker Staat*, was published in 1983, it was widely praised (even by Nipperdey's rivals) as a masterwork, and it has since become the standard academic prelude to Gordon Craig's *German History 1866–1945*. Perhaps more surprising, it was also a best-seller in Germany. These successes are due in part to Nipperdey's engaging style but also to the way he cut against the prevailing trends in German historiography.

He did so by writing *narrative* history. Nipperdey makes no reference to scholarly debates and feels no compulsion to document sources. (The German edition contains a relatively modest bibliography.) His book has neither preface nor introduction, and the epilogue fills barely a page. What Nipperdey does do is tell a story, thickly detailed but also spirited. "In the beginning was Napoleon," he opens. Then he sets off at a gallop for the finish line, some 700 pages ahead. There he closes with a succinct account of Prussia's victory over Austria and the creation of an enlarged Prussian state in

the north. Like Craig, he sees 1866, not 1871 (when Bismarck's Reich was established), as the turning point. Yet Nipperdey spurns the deterministic hindsight of many of his colleagues. In his view, the future in 1866 was still "open."

While the great historians of the last century, such as Franz Schnabel, focused on the history of ideas, Nipperdey gives equal atten-

tion to how institutional and cultural changes affected family life, the status of women, the conditions of labor, and the hopes and fears of different classes. And while the so-called critical historians (a group of theory-oriented academics led by Hans-Ulrich Wehle in the 1970s) have found clear continuities in German history leading up to Hitler, Nipperdey sees instead "infinite shades of gray," contradictions, and incongruities.

Yes, Nipperdey finds "a deeply ingrained tendency towards the doctrinaire" in the infant parliamentarianism of the 1840s. Yes, he concedes that "each pre-1933 epoch is indirectly related to Hitler." But each period was also "immediate to itself," he contends. Through sustained comparisons with contemporary developments in other European societies, he resists the idea of a German *Sonderweg*, or special path.

Nipperdey also raises tough questions about how much our understanding of one period can help us make sense of a later epoch. Whether we are searching for clues about today's reunified Germany or coping with post-Cold War disunity and fragmentation elsewhere, these are questions worth pondering anew.

—Jeffrey Gedmin

A TALE OF TWO UTOPIAS: *The Political Journey of the Generation of the 1900s.*

By Paul Berman. Norton. 300 pp. \$24

What is utopia but the worship of perfection at the expense of the good? Thomas More understood this when he contrasted his neologism *utopia*, meaning "no place,"

