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Review Of "Provinz Posen, Ostmark, Wielkopolska: Eine Grenzregion Zwischen Deutschen Und Polen, 1848-1914" By T. Serrier

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Review

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driven by the working class and by the weakness of intellectual dissent seems to discount the international context—the obvious attraction the West German model had for all GDR citizens of whatever class, as well as the uncertainty and risk regarding Soviet preferences and actions. In my view, the pull of the West German model on East Germans' political and partisan preferences is also crucial to understanding the speed with which the populace dumped both the SED and the civic leaders around New Forum.

Two weaknesses stand out. First, some of the rich trove of primary SED/secret police documents now available would have enriched the analysis and given greater support for the author's assertions regarding the SED's motives and responses. Second, certain developments, particularly regarding the key role of the Protestant church, call for more depth or more nuanced treatment. For example, the 1977 riots in Berlin were largely national in nature ("Russen 'raus"), not economic as Dale claims. The politics of summitry between Erich Honecker and Helmut Kohl goes unanalyzed in the discussion of the peace movement in the early 1980s. Regarding the church, pastors were not members of the SED with the exception of a few holdovers from the Social Democratic Party (SPD) who were purged in the late 1940s. "Married to the regime" (104) does not accurately describe the mutual ambivalence in the church-state relationship in the GDR; if they should be seen as "married," the author misses the regime's threatened "divorce" in 1988.

Yet despite these quibbles, the autodidactic potential of Dale's participant-observer method is nowhere more obvious than in his charmingly self-deprecating comment, buried in the footnotes. Reflecting on his own speech in Potsdam during the revolution and reinforcing his underlying conclusion regarding the gap between the civic movement's leaders and the populace in 1989, he wryly notes that "the communication skills acquired in academia may, in spite (or because) of their sophistication, be a handicap when addressing audiences outside this narrow milieu" (218). In this monograph Dale has certainly targeted his audience very effectively.

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Provinz Posen, Ostmark, Wielkopolska: Eine Grenzregion zwischen Deutschen und Polen, 1848–1914. By Thomas Serrier. Materialien und Studien zur Ostmitteleuropaforschung. Marburg: Verlag Herder-Institut, 2005. x, 309 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Paper.

The subject of this volume is an administrative border region within nineteenth-century Prussia that originally lay outside the borders of the German Confederation, a region first known as the Grand Duchy of Posen. Later, in post-1871 Germany, the region became known officially as the province of Posen. The territory in question had only become linked to Prussia as a result of the second partition of Poland in 1793. Unlike their neighbors in Silesia, Pomerania, Danzig, or West Prussia, however, the inhabitants of this newly invented province, especially those who called themselves Germans, had no readily available and shared history on which to found a useable regional or national identity. Polish nationalist inhabitants of the region, along with some German speakers in turn, often referred to this area as part of Greater Poland or *Wielkopolska*. Some of them saw its history in terms of the trajectory of a once and future Poland. Still others, a small but vocal group of radical German nationalists, came to define the region's identity as a border region—the *Ostmark*—a German bulwark against the Slavic peoples to the east. Thomas Serrier's study traces in considerable detail the diverse attempts by academics, nationalists, civil servants, and teachers in the second half of the nineteenth century to create for Posen a useable past, one that retrospectively cast the newly minted province as a coherent entity in its recent and ancient past, in order to anchor it more firmly in the German national world.

This is neither a study of competing nationalisms, German and Polish, nor of competing nations. Taking a subtly different tack from the historians of Germany who write about the region these days, Serrier uses the territory's recently acquired border status

to show how different nationalist movements constituted national identities within the context of the constraints imposed by changing Prussian governmental structures. There was little popular sense of a German nation in this region, nor was there much more of a developed sense of a Polish nation either; most people in the region were neither Polish nor German nationalists. Serrier does not set out to tell us the story of nation building “from both sides,” as if there were two discrete stories to tell (the trap most well-meaning German and Polish historians fall into these days). Rather, Serrier analyzes attempts by a range of cultural organizations to give the history of the region a useable coherence in the service of a broadly national outcome. He documents the ways that several local organizations developed cultural agendas and projects over time, partly in tension with the changing policies and demands of administrators in Berlin, partly in tension with each other, and often in tension with the concerns and interests of the local inhabitants.

This is a messy story, and there is no clear national outcome. Local intellectuals who struggled to create a national history of the region, one embedded in its architecture, patterns of farming, trade, or archeology, told a range of stories that offered very different visions of nationness, even within the context of a new German national history. Should German historians, for example, play up the importance of the region to the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth, understanding the history of local Germans within a positive framework of that heroic polity’s earlier achievements? Or should the region’s history be framed in terms of alleged Polish mismanagement, crass Jewish opportunism, and the struggle to nurture an allegedly more advanced German culture against the backdrop of so-called Polish backwardness? Local radical nationalists in the German *Ostmarkverein* preferred the latter story to the former. Prussian administrators had different agendas in this regard as well. Serrier concentrates most of his analysis, however, on the more interesting and creative activism of the intellectuals, teachers, archivists, and amateurs who belonged to the Historical Society for the Province Posen. Although German nationalist in commitment, organization members often conceived of their nation’s membership in inclusive ways, imagining their relationship to historical Poland—and to their own Polish intellectual counterparts—in ways that frustrated their more radical nationalist contemporaries.

Serrier traces literary depictions as well as organizational histories to illustrate how certain conceptualizations of German national identity and history became hegemonic in the region by 1914. He offers highly insightful readings of a broad range of literary and historical texts produced locally and regionally, all of which worked to legitimize the national project, if often in contradictory ways. In the process, the reader gains a compelling and complex view of attitudes among local educated society and of how they changed over time from 1848 through World War I. In a fascinating discourse on the history of ideological stereotypes popularized by radical German nationalists, for example, Serrier analyzes the evolution of the local meanings associated with the familiar and derogatory German term *polnische Wirtschaft* (literally “Polish economy”). Originally meant to characterize political anarchy among Poland’s nobility in the years leading up to the Third Partition, by the twentieth century the phrase had come to describe alleged Polish cultural backwardness in contrast to German cultural superiority.

To some extent Serrier treats the population of Posen/*Wielkopolska* in ways that contradict the subtle insights to be gained from his broader analysis. Occasionally, for example, he resorts to formulations such as “national awakening of the local Germans,” writing as if two nations did in fact already exist in the region. Yet the focus of Serrier’s analysis remains the changing self-understanding of the role of Germans in this border landscape rather than the degree to which their activism actually succeeded in nationalizing the local population during this period. Ultimately, his story owes more to Larry Wolff’s intellectual history than to Gary Cohen’s or Jeremy King’s social analyses. Perhaps Serrier’s insightful analysis of nationalist activism might usefully be applied to a study of the nationalization of populations. Clearly his work suggests the limits of that nationalization, even as it occasionally and offhandedly confirms a belief in the success of the project.

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