

Featured Review

German Agricultural History Revisited

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Grundzüge der Agrargeschichte, Volume 1: Vom Spätmittelalter bis zum Dreißigjährigen Krieg (1350–1650). By Rolf Kießling, Frank Konersmann, Werner Troßbach. Cologne: Böhlau, 2016. 329 pp., hardback, ISBN 978-3-4122-2226-0.

Grundzüge der Agrargeschichte, Volume 2: Vom Dreißigjährigen Krieg bis zum Beginn der Moderne (1650–1880). By Reiner Prass. Cologne: Böhlau, 2016. 256 pp., hardback, ISBN 978-3-4122-2227-7.

Grundzüge der Agrargeschichte, Volume 3: Die Moderne (1880–2010). By Gunter Mahlerwein. Cologne: Böhlau, 2016. 248 pp., hardback, ISBN 978-3-4122-2228-4.

GERMAN HISTORIANS RECENTLY COMPLETED A THREE-VOLUME compendium surveying the country's agricultural history since the Middle Ages. It grew out of a collaborative project more than a decade in the making. The institutional hub was the Arbeitskreis Agrargeschichte, a circle of German scholars that merged into the Society for Agricultural History (Gesellschaft für Agrargeschichte) while this project was underway. These volumes deserve discussion not only for those who are interested in Central European agriculture, but also for agricultural historians generally. As the volume and thematic breadth of studies in our field is growing, it is more important than ever to understand how it all fits together.

Collaborative efforts tend to have a complicated and somewhat opaque *tabula personae*, and this project is no exception. The undertaking has four general editors: Stefan Brakensiek, Rolf Kießling, Werner Troßbach, and Clemens Zimmermann. The first volume has four authors (Rolf Kießling, Frank Konersmann, Werner Troßbach, and Dorothee Rippmann) who wrote the seven chapters in different configurations. Reiner Prass and Gunter Mahlerwein wrote Volumes Two and Three, although the former volume also has a segment by Jürgen Schlumbohm. They all came together

in a work that promises *Grundzüge* of agricultural history, a word that roughly translates to “basic outlines.” Considering that the volumes run between 230 pages and 329 pages, that title is perhaps more modest than necessary, yet it reflects Germanic academic instincts, which view any written treatise less than 400 pages as inevitably shallow. Indeed, the project was originally conceived as a larger one that faltered due to lack of funding.

Multi-volume syntheses have a tradition in German agricultural history. In the 1960s, Werner Abel, Günther Franz, and Friedrich Lütge conceived a *Deutsche Agrargeschichte* that ultimately ran to six volumes, and this project defined the image of German agricultural history for at least a generation. Friedrich-Wilhelm Henning and Walter Achilles produced syntheses more recently, and a four-volume project on “Rural Economy and Society in North-Western Europe, 500–2000” looked at Northwest Germany along with Britain, Northern France, the Low Countries, and Scandinavia. The volumes under review here do not explicitly situate themselves in this tradition. In fact, they are rather short on programmatic remarks. Critical comments on earlier research are interspersed through the narrative, particularly in the first two volumes. For a long time, the twentieth century was a backwater of German agricultural history, which may have deprived the author of the third volume of fodder for criticism. Be that as it may, the authors are notably disinterested in elaborating on scholarly debates; even when they criticize scholarly perspectives, they typically focus on pointing to more convincing narratives.

In other words, this is an eminently results-oriented volume: it is about how German agricultural history should be written, not about how it came to be written. Those who are interested in the path that German agricultural history has taken will need to look elsewhere, and those who want to know more about the background of past and present readings fare little better. The authors might have spared the reader lamentations about the field’s marginalization among German academics: characteristically, Mark Finlay’s upbeat assessment of German agricultural history did not make it into any of the three bibliographies.¹ However, the effect is that the endeavor lacks a clear concept. There is no master narrative in these volumes, let alone an overarching theoretical framework, and a sense of fragmentation runs through the volumes. It is quite possible, if not inevitable, that this work will be read and used as a set of individual chapters and observa-

¹ Mark R. Finlay, “New Sources, New Theses, and New Organizations in the New Germany. Recent Research on the History of German Agriculture,” *Agricultural History* 75 (Summer 2001): 279–307.

tions rather than as a unified whole.

A concurrent theme is the agency and dynamism of the agricultural population. State policies, religious strife, and the power of the Enlightenment come up in these volumes, and yet the authors are wary of top-down interpretations. Even in the age of feudalism, the men and women in the countryside made their own choices about who they married, how they cultivated the land, and where they sold their produce. In fact, we see differentiation and specialization in German agriculture as early as the fifteenth and sixteenth century, as different regions favored products that grew particularly well in their own realms and traded them over considerable distance. Market orientation was a key feature of German agricultural history before the agrarian reforms of the early 1800s sought to catapult the farming world into capitalist modernity. In any case, the agrarian reforms come across as a prolonged process that spanned several decades in the second volume, clearer in the ultimate results than in the individual steps.

Thus, these volumes present the rural population in their full diversity. We see estate owners and peasants, landless and migrant workers, Jewish traders, and clergymen who preached about better farming practices from the pulpit. The authors also keep an eye on the different experiences of men and women through the narrative—though, alas, it fell to the only woman in the team to write the sub-chapter about gender relations in the first volume. Nevertheless, earlier generations of scholars have focused mostly on male peasants and the operators of the large estates, and these volumes go to great lengths in exorcising those ghosts.

The authors are also open-minded about the boundaries of agricultural history. The volumes conceive crop and stock production as the core of agricultural history, yet they make numerous forays into rural life: they cover religion and marriage patterns, buildings and dresses, and even the use of exotic commodities such as coffee on the farm. Thus, the volumes occupy a somewhat unspecified place between agricultural and rural history, with individual volumes making different choices about topics and the degree of attention that they receive. Unfortunately, the books do not have a subject index that would provide easy access to this abundance of issues.

The volumes also make a point of including the natural environment. The Little Ice Age left its mark on German agricultural history, and soil erosion was an issue in pre-modern as well as modern times. When Guntner Mahlerwein talks about the growing weight of farm machinery, he is

keenly aware of the perils of soil compaction. He also presents a nuanced discussion of the growing use of technology. Some farms stopped the use of threshing machines in the late nineteenth century because they had sufficient labor at hand. Mahlerwein points to the first factory farming methods in the early 1900s—typically located near the coast due to their reliance on feed imports—and yet for all the expansion of factory farming methods in the postwar years, the share of large animals in small, old barns still stood at 80 percent in the early 1980s. The GDR practiced irrigation agriculture on a fifth of its land by the late 1980s, which fits into an east-west comparison that is more ambiguous than most appraisals of the two Germanys. Of course, land reform and collectivization receive their due, but gains in productivity were dramatic on both sides of the Iron Curtain. It is no coincidence that agriculture was the only commercial field where GDR elites remained in business after 1990.

A diversity of actors and issues inevitably leads to a complex and multilayered presentation, and yet there is one dimension of complexity that is particularly dear to the heart of the authors: regional diversity. Germany is a large nation with a range of different soils, landscapes, and distances to urban markets, and that makes for a broad range of farming styles. The author of the second volume, Reiner Prass, devotes an entire sub-chapter to sketches of individual regions. Regional diversity is more of a running theme in the other volumes, yet the authors are reluctant to aggregate regions into clusters: the penchant for regionalism is more about embracing diversity than about the general spatial patterns that emerge. The only reference to Thünen's model of regional land use is negative. Characteristically, the volumes do have an index of places and regions.

The geographic diversity of Germany opens opportunities for comparisons. Export-oriented agriculture on the North Sea coast, estates in Eastern Europe, alpine agriculture—Germany shares these and other features with its neighbors. Other issues, such as mineral fertilizer, pesticides, and tractors, transcend national boundaries by their very nature. The authors of these volumes do not generally ignore these international perspectives, and yet they are notably shy about them. To the extent that they come up, it is usually about the circulation of goods and artifacts. The third volume even has a chapter on “global interconnections” that lasts a grand total of two pages. Comparing German trends with those in other countries is not something that the authors are particularly interested in. Germany is not an island, but you would not know that from reading these volumes.

Two of the three volumes do not have a conclusion, and it is tempting to see this absence as a mirror of what this compendium has to offer. A multitude of authors and editors have produced three books rich in topics and perspectives, and they represent a boom of agricultural history in Germany that bears recognition. Yet the works leave readers adrift as they grapple with the abundance of information. Moreover, we see an agricultural history that is mostly talking to itself: reaching out to scholars from other countries or to historians with other disciplinary backgrounds was not high on the agenda for the makers of these volumes. We are left more clueless than necessary as to where research may go in the future. But then, maybe raising these concerns means asking too much of three volumes that sought to sketch the broad outlines of some seven centuries of agricultural history in a large and diverse country, and actually achieved that task in remarkable fashion. Those who want to know the state of German agricultural history or reflect on the future of this field will have to read this compendium.