

Contemporary Germany. A Handbook

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Reviewed by Peter Barker, London

This introduction to Germany, which is aimed at A level students of German and first and second year undergraduates, provides a basic reference source for English-speakers. It concentrates on the period after World War II and includes the following chapters: the political development of West Germany; the geography of Germany; unification and its aftermath; political structures and federalism; economic structures; social structures; structures of education; the media; social issues; environmental issues; language issues; and a final chapter on Berlin. The intention is clearly to provide a starting point for students embarking on a project or essay on a German-related contemporary topic, or simply looking for basic information. Each chapter provides a basic set of information and analysis, which is supplemented by suggestions for further reading at the end of each chapter and an extensive bibliography at the end. As such it provides a useful addition to the range of books on offer.

I do, however, have some reservations about the usefulness of the book. My main reservations concern its accuracy. It is essential that a book of this kind should be reliable as far as the factual information is concerned. There are a number of the inevitable typographical errors, but I am more concerned about serious errors of detail. I have looked in detail at one chapter (Chapter 3), that on unification and its aftermath, a topic which is likely to be high on the agenda of students at this level, and have found a series of errors. There are a number of small errors of spelling, e.g. *nomenklatura* spelled with a 'c' on p. 67, *Zentralkomitee* spelled with only one final 'e' on p. 67 and *Politbüro* rendered as 'Pultbüro' five times on pages 66/7, although it is spelled correctly elsewhere. Throughout

the chapter there is also rather loose usage of 'Russian' when 'Soviet' would be more appropriate, e.g. pages 63/4.

The following are examples of factual errors or rather misleading presentations of detail:

- On page 62 the German Communist Party (KPD), which merged with the SPD in April 1946 in the Soviet Zone to form the SED, is referred to as the DKP. The DKP only came into existence in 1968 as the successor party to the KPD in West Germany, which had been banned in 1956.
- On page 64 the author states that East German troops entered Prague, which was not the case. Only Soviet troops went into Prague, the small contingents from Poland, the GDR, Hungary and Bulgaria stayed in areas away from the capital.
- On page 68 it is stated that one of the citizens' groups, *Demokratischer Aufbruch* joined the electoral alliance, Alliance 90, presumably for the forthcoming *Volkskammer* elections. It is true that *Demokratischer Aufbruch* did initially join an election pact with other citizens' groups on 3 January 1990, which also included the Social Democrats, but they quickly changed sides because they now believed in rapid unification and joined the conservative 'Alliance for Germany' in February 1990 to fight the *Volkskammer* elections.
- On page 71 the timetable for unification is presented in a rather simplified manner. The CDU had originally favoured unification after the first all-German elections on December 2, but then wanted to bring it forward, together with the all-German elections, to October 14 to coincide with the Land elections. After much argument it was confirmed in both parliaments on 23 August that the date for unification should be brought forward to 3 October and the national elections were to remain on 2 December. So the statement 'the agreed timetable for unification was maintained' is strictly true, but rather misleading since it slides over too easily what was a very turbulent period in the unification process.
- The section on page 78 on the Stasi files is misleading. It implies that the files are not open to academics and historians, whereas they were from an early stage in the 1990s. It is true that access for researchers has been blocked by Kohl's successful appeal against the decision to release tapes of his telephone conversations. But this only happened in March 2002, i.e. after the publication of this book.

My reading of the rest of the book confirms that there is much useful material, and it does undoubtedly offer a useful informational tool for students. But I have also come across other errors, such as 'Niedersachsen' spelled 'Nidersachsen' on page 22, and the spelling of the name of the leader of the PDS, Gabriele (NOT Gabrielle) Zimmer on page 116. It is to be hoped that a future edition will remove these and other errors.