

Gewalt und Gelächter. “Deutschsein” 1914–1945

**By Martina Kessel. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2019. Pp. 296.
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Martina Kessel’s interdisciplinary book positions itself in the dialogue between cultural and emotional history and explores the relationship of identity construction through laughter. For Kessel, humor played a central role in the construction of a “German nation” from World War I to 1945 and after. The construction of “Germanness,” so the theologian’s quintessential argument goes, was a permanent dialogue of the “Ernstes” (serious) and the “Heitere” (cheerful) that allowed violence to become laughter. Accordingly, the author explicates the different varieties of humor and the forms that “Deutschsein” versus “Nicht-Deutschsein” had.

The book is chronologically organized into five chapters. The story begins by examining the function humor had in World War I when, according to Kessel, humor enabled (self-)mobilization. In the military community, Kessel attests that humor was a status guarantor for those soldiers who knew how to counter the fear of death with jokes. In doing so, they became seen as “German,” and “German” then became separated from “Jewish” by sharp boundaries. Whether in field postcards, wartime newspapers, or field journals, widely recognized stereotypes, such as those of the “Jewish Drückeberger” (shirker) and the “non-combatant,” were juxtaposed with the “German Michelfigur” (a far-reaching personification of “the German”) (32, 92). Accordingly, Jews were excluded from the collective. In the ongoing dynamic of inclusion and exclusion, all enemies of the Germans were affiliated as “Jewish” rather than belonging to any nation. In the humorous war mission, all negative attributes were given to Jews, while human traits were affiliated with Germans, despite the Germans’ barbaric belligerence, for example, by referencing to Germans’ love of animals to demonstrate their humanity.

In the Weimar Republic, the humor of the war continued and complemented “raumfremde” (foreign) antisemitic stereotypes of the “non-man” that were draped around the “democrat” accompanied by homophobic attributes (100). In doing so, in jest, an entire canon of antimodernist values could be shackled to political and national opponents. Hitler, too, recognized the potential of rhetorical success using this kind of antimodernist, antisemitic humor as early as 1920. When exploring the role that Hitler’s speechwriter, the theologian Georg Schott, played, the author demonstrates Hitler’s development of himself as the ultimate “Künstler-Soldat” (artist-soldier) (128, 207).

Knowing that humor in National Socialism and World War II has been widely researched, Kessel succeeds in elaborating on new insights about antisemitic National Socialist humor. In the balancing act of marking the enemy and the opponent and valorizing the “German” in humor, ritualism and amusements at Nazi celebrations functioned just as well as the propaganda press in World War II. On the one hand, the book demonstrates how humor functioned by reversing the perpetrator–victim roles in the war of extermination. On the other hand, it shows that jokes and laughter were also generated in a shared knowledge about dehumanization (“to shear the pate bald for 50 marks bald . . . a haircut, as one finds it only in certain categories of people [translation S.K.]”) and genocide of the Jewish population (209). After 1945, laughter was directed at Hitler and the Nazi leadership elite and completely marginalized the victims as laughter could address the period of National Socialism with no need to talk about victims. It was an instrument of self-protection and prevented reflection. It continued in this way, according to Kessel, in “the opposition of ‘Germans’ and ‘Jews’” (251).

As with all studies of such scope and ambition, questions remain. The richness of the material Kessel discusses in her monograph often makes a deeper analysis of the jokes,

anecdotes, and caricatures impossible. How do these perform, through what are the contrarities designed, and how do they unfold? How did they include and exclude in order to constitute community? Evident throughout the chapters is an assumed opposition of “humor” and “Jewishness.” The author examines examples of Jewish artists in the interwar period only, referencing, for example, the well-known German and Austrian humorists Fritz Grünbaum and Karl Farkas, who addressed the difficulties of the construction of a German nation. Humor thus remains illuminated from the point of view mostly of the anti-semites. Once the author succeeds in showing the “in-between” (17), Kessel uses the collection of anecdotes by Julius Bab to show where there were overlaps despite the dichotomy of “German” and “Jewish” (30).

On the whole, this is a meticulously researched book that deserves a wide readership. Kessel’s insight into humor helps us understand why laughter has held such an important role through different wars and political systems in the twentieth century. Rich in detail and innovative in its approach, *Gewalt und Gelächter* will undoubtedly provoke new research into many areas of cultural studies for years to come.

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German-Balkan Entangled Histories in the Twentieth Century

Edited by Mirna Zakić and Christopher A. Molnar. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020. Pp. 381. Paper \$35.00 ISBN 978-0822966753.

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Over the past several decades, historians of Germany have examined country’s relationship with eastern Europe in the modern era from social, cultural, and political perspectives. In this edited volume, Mirna Zakić and Christopher A. Molnar have assembled an international group of experts to approach this issue from a different geographical perspective and, the editors claim, a new focus on entangled histories. The new geographical focus centers on Germany and southeastern Europe, which, as the editors point out, is a region often ignored in the literature, given the greater concern in German historiography with the relationship between Germany, Poland, and the western territories of the Tsarist Empire, and later, the Soviet Union. Instead of examining the relationship between Germany and southeastern Europe through the frame of “perceptions of the East,” which, the editors rightly claim, can have the effect of reifying the categories of Germany and the East, the editors have deployed the concept of “entanglement” as the central frame for this edited volume. In this sense, they follow broader trends from outside central and eastern European history, which have examined “entanglements” around topics as wide-ranging as empire, the slave trade, and global capital, just to name a few. The timeframe of the essays in the volume is largely confined to the period from the First World War forward, with a few brief glimpses backward into the late nineteenth century. In a series of sharp and impressively researched contributions, the contributors explore subjects that range from the economic relationship between Imperial Germany and Romania during World War I; to the image of Prince Eugene among the Banat Germans during World War II and the occupation; to the global