

The Past, Present, and Future of Book Reviews in *Central European History*

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As a genre, book reviews date back to at least the eighteenth century. Although there were earlier precursors, reviews emerged during the Enlightenment and then flourished with the expansion of print culture in the nineteenth century.¹ They often provided readers who could not aspire to owning or even gaining access to valuable books an introduction to their content. Today, reviews remain a “meta-genre” that reflects the changing place of books not only in specific scholarly fields but also in written culture more generally.² As *Central European History* (CEH) celebrates its fiftieth year of publication, it therefore makes sense to spend some time contemplating CEH’s book reviews—past, present, and future.

Book reviews have not always been a part of CEH. In the first issue, editor Douglas Unfug expressed the new journal’s intention not to review every one of the “flood” of new books each year, but to “publish reflective, critical reviews or review articles dealing with works of central importance.”³ Although that first issue included no reviews, the second contained three. It is fitting that one of them offered an analysis of a book that had recently been printed in both German and English versions: Ralf Dahrendorf’s *Gesellschaft und Demokratie in Deutschland* (1965), which appeared two years later as *Society and Democracy in Germany*.⁴ The review judged Dahrendorf’s study to be a book of “many strengths” though “uneven in quality,” notably criticizing its tendency to contrast “modern” Britain with “unmodern” Germany—a dichotomy familiar to CEH readers today as one of the problematic pillars of the *Sonderweg* thesis.⁵

For ten years, reviews continued to appear in small numbers, never more than three in a single issue, sometimes just one or two—or none for several issues running. Reflecting the state of the field at that time, they primarily covered books in nineteenth- and twentieth-century political, diplomatic, intellectual, and economic history, and, with rare exceptions,

¹On the history of the book review, see, e.g., Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, “Reading in Review: The Victorian Book Review in the New Media Moment,” *Victorian Periodicals Review* 49, no. 4 (2016): 626–42; Patricia Gael, “The Origins of the Book Review in England, 1663–1749,” *Library* 13, no. 1 (2012): 63–89; Thomas Munck, “Eighteenth-Century Review Journals and the Internationalization of the European Book Market,” *International History Review* 32, no. 3 (2010): 415–35; Antonia Forster, “Avarice or Interest: The Secrets of Eighteenth-Century Reviewing,” *Yale University Library Gazette* 81, no. 3/4 (2007): 167–76.

²Miller, “Reading in Review,” 626.

³“From the Editors” [Douglas Unfug], *Central European History* (CEH) 1, no. 1 (1968): 3.

⁴See the review by Peter N. Stearns in CEH 1, no. 2 (1968): 175–81.

⁵See Jürgen Kocka’s discussion of the *Sonderweg* thesis and debate in this commemorative issue.

dealt with the history of areas making up today's Federal Republic of Germany, rather than that of other German-speaking regions. Then, for unclear reasons, there were no reviews at all from early 1978 until 1991. Review articles initially compensated for this absence, covering, for example, East and West German developments in the history of German imperialism since Hans-Ulrich Wehler's foundational study of Otto von Bismarck's imperialist policies, or the appearance of the first three volumes of the landmark series, *The German Reich and the Second World War*.⁶ In the 1980's, the number of review articles diminished as well, appearing at a frequency of about one each year.

The journal entered a new phase in 1991 with the arrival of Kenneth Barkin as editor, aided by Ursula Marcum as assistant editor. The new editor expressed his intention to publish reviews of "all significant volumes" in the field, and the new publisher, Brill, agreed to add thirty-two pages to each issue to accommodate book reviews.⁷ Reviews then began appearing regularly and in increasing numbers, reaching an average of seventeen per issue over the course of Barkin's tenure as editor from 1991 to 2004. The journal primarily reviewed books in English, though approximately a third of the reviews covered books that were published in German. Reviews now discussed new publications in the history of women and gender, as well as those that demonstrated the influence of neighboring fields such as anthropology and sociology on the historical discipline. These reviews traced how broader trends in historical research and writing had specifically made their way into the history of the German-speaking lands. As David Blackbourn pointed out in his luncheon address to the thirty-seventh annual conference of the German Studies Association Conference in 2013, book reviews reflected the tendency in the historiography to favor topics in recent history over those covering earlier periods. In 1990, *CEH* published roughly equal numbers of reviews dealing with books on nineteenth-century and post-1914 subjects, as well as a dozen or so reviews of books focusing on the period before 1800. By 2010, there were close to seventy reviews of books in the post-1914 category, whereas only about nineteen reviews dealt with books on the history of the nineteenth century; a mere thirteen focused on earlier periods.⁸ Whatever their specific topic, by the end of Barkin's tenure as editor in 2004, reviews had become—as he himself noted in his outgoing reflections—an integral part of the journal, something that "we now take ... for granted."⁹

Recognizing more fully the labor involved in identifying suitable books, finding reviewers, and editing and publishing reviews, Kenneth Ledford, who became editor in 2004, invited Catherine Epstein to become associate editor, specifically responsible for book reviews. Some twenty or more reviews appeared in each issue for the next ten years, covering a range of significant books published in English, German, and occasionally other languages

⁶Woodruff D. Smith, "German Imperialism after Wehler: Two Perspectives," *CEH* 12, no. 4 (1979): 387–91; Earl F. Ziemke, "Germany and World War II: The Official History?," *CEH* 16, no. 4 (1983): 398–407. The books under review were Klaus Bade, *Friedrich Fabri und der Imperialismus in der Bismarckzeit. Revolution, Depression, Expansion*. (Freiburg i. Br.: Atlantis, 1975); Fritz Klein, ed., *Studien zum deutschen Imperialismus vor 1914* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1976); Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt, *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, vols. 1–3 (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1979).

⁷Ken Barkin, "Editor's Letter," *CEH* 24, no. 1 (1991): v.

⁸David Blackbourn, "Honey, I Shrunk German History," *German Studies Association Newsletter* 38, no. 2 (2014): 46.

⁹Kenneth D. Barkin, "Thoughts on Thirteen Years of Editing *CEH*," *CEH* 37, no. 4 (2004): 499–500 (reprinted in this commemorative issue).

such as French. Epstein continued to enforce the important criteria for *CEH* reviews that Barkin had earlier established: in order to serve as a reviewer, “the primary qualification” was “the publication of a major monograph”—as is the case for the *American Historical Review*, the premier historical journal in North America. As Barkin explained, this criterion, which is still in place, “ensures that reviewers have experienced the peer review process themselves and understand the production of a historical monograph.”¹⁰ It is intended to foster informed and fair reviewing that recognizes the value of scholarly work.

Since I took over in 2014 as associate editor responsible for book reviews, the number appearing in *CEH* has decreased somewhat, with some fifteen per issue now the norm. In addition to regular reviews and review articles, featured reviews offering more detailed consideration of important studies have become a more regular part of the book review section. As editor, Andrew Port initiated an exciting new format in these pages: the book forum, whose objective is to offer a range of different responses to an important book by several experts in the field—while, at the same time, making scholarly conversation about such publications more visible to a wide range of readers, including those who are not specialists in a particular subfield, as well as newcomers, such as graduate students.

Whether presented as a forum, review article, featured review, or standard review, the most effective commentaries distill books by providing an overview of their contents, accompanied by the reviewer’s own scholarly estimation of the book’s value. A weak review simply summarizes a book—chapter by chapter, in a worst-case scenario; a strong one gives readers a good enough sense of a book’s content and importance to know whether they should consult, or even purchase, it themselves. Alex Lichtenstein, the current editor of the *American Historical Review*, recently lamented the frequently “anodyne” quality of book reviews today. A book review should not become a podium for the reviewer’s own particular agenda, of course. But vigorous criticism and debate are welcome, provided they rest on strong evidence and avoid gratuitous or ad hominem attacks.¹¹

In the longer term, book reviews record the state of the field at a particular moment in time. In a journal like *CEH*, they not only document *what* has been published, but also indicate the *significance* of a publication, while giving a good sense of how contemporaries received it at the time. When books written in different languages are reviewed, reviews “help track the reception and transmission of books and ideas not just within their own language community, but also across borders.”¹² Indeed, book reviews not only track such scholarly and intellectual transfers but also serve as vehicles for those transfers themselves. In that sense, a review influences a book’s reception—whether across linguistic borders or not—drawing attention to a strong study, and, as an extension of the peer-review process, identifying the flaws of a weaker one.

Reviewing books remains an important and valued form of service to the profession, and there are promising new developments, such as the book fora discussed earlier, in *CEH*. At the same time, recent experience suggests that the traditional book review may be entering a recessive phase.¹³ To put it bluntly: the number of standard reviews published in *CEH* has decreased somewhat in recent years because it has become harder to find colleagues willing

¹⁰Kenneth F. Ledford, “From the Editors,” *CEH* 38, no. 1 (2005): 2.

¹¹Alex Lichtenstein, “Too Apparent to Require Comment,” *American Historical Review* 122, no. 5 (2017): xv–xix.

¹²Munck, “Eighteenth-Century Review Journals.”

¹³It is unclear whether or not this is a more general development; attempts to canvass other journals for information on this apparent trend produced no substantial responses.

to perform this invaluable task. That is regrettable, because authors generally remain eager to see the fruits of their labors reviewed in a journal of record like *CEH*. Besides allowing an author to get a sense of a book's "traction," reviews are a tangible means of demonstrating to granting bodies, as well as tenure and promotion committees, the reception of one's work by one's colleagues and its significance for the field as a whole. Publishers continue to send books to *CEH*—perhaps because this is a welcome and low-cost form of publicity, but also because they value the judgments rendered by book reviews. Where the chain often breaks down is with reviewers themselves: scholars at all levels, from senior through mid-level and junior colleagues, increasingly cite overwork and seem to see reviewing as a burden—and an unremunerated one at that—rather than as a valuable intervention in the field.

If these observations are correct, why might the writing of book reviews no longer be seen as a priority for many scholars? The declining willingness may be a sign that the authority and reach of the traditional review is shrinking. If that is the case, then part of the explanation may lie in the rise of more "immediate" media that quickly and easily deliver commentary directly to subscribers' inboxes, often very soon after the books have been published. Rather than relying on *CEH* for their "book news," scholars turn to H-Net, or to innovative podcasts such as the "New Books in History" series. These are valuable media, of course, but should be seen as complements to—not replacements for—the "slower" approach of traditional scholarly journals.

Colleagues reluctant to write book-reviews may also be responding to increasing pressures to transform universities from places of reflection and open-ended conversation into factories for the efficient "production" of knowledge and learning. Such pressures mean that university administrators, their lenses clouded with the vapors of fiscal optimization and seconded by promotion and tenure committees, favor longer publications that are perceived to be more "substantial" and thus more "useful" for marketing the university's research profile. With a high value placed on peer-reviewed articles and books, there may be little space for book reviews in the metrics of an increasingly publish-or-perish climate in a worsening academic job market.

Book reviews have likely never been a high-priority form of writing, but they are something that should be seen as a benefit rather than a liability. For one, reviews give scholars a chance to test out new ideas in a "low-stakes" forum. Reviewing also offers the obvious and undeniable pleasure of receiving a "free" book, sometimes one that is prohibitively expensive or difficult to access, or that would not have otherwise crossed one's desk. In an ideal situation, a new book should open up new perspectives and stimulate thinking, regardless of whether it precisely aligns with one's own particular research interests. In return for careful consideration and the writing of a thousand words, the reviewer has a chance to shape the reception of a book, drawing attention to a successful study, highlighting the weaknesses of another, or suggesting new directions for future research. Reviewing is, at the same time, an effective way to stay abreast of developments in the field and to establish one's own scholarly authority, especially in a new subject area. A sustained record of scholarly reviewing indicates engagement in the field, and this sign of good citizenship is (or should be) recognized by colleagues as such. The potential rewards of reviewing are many, in short—and the risks very few indeed. For that reason, let us hope that it is premature to mourn the death of the book review, whatever challenges those of us charged with procuring them may face!

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