# Book Review

Lisa Fetheringill Zwicker. *Dueling Students: Conflict, Masculinity, and Politics in German Universities, 1890–1914*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011. 314 pp. Cloth $75.00.

In *Dueling Students: Conflict, Masculinity, and Politics in German Universities, 1890-1914*, Lisa Fetheringill Zwicker challenges historical accounts that depict students of the Wilhelmine era as either politically apathetic or nascent Nazis. She describes instead a university life and culture notable for its intellectual dynamism and diversity. Extending her scope well beyond traditional dueling rituals and fraternities, she reveals that students challenged one another more with their rapier like wits than with actual rapiers. In doing so, she turns earlier historical interpretations on their heads, concluding that "the trajectory of student politics on the eve of the Great War was toward a more open, progressive, and reform orientation" (p. 3).

While disagreeing with other historians concerning how German universities changed in the decades before World War I, Zwicker endorses the standard interpretation of why they changed. During this time, student populations increased in both size and diversity as young people from outside the traditional elite matriculated. These students came from the "new" and "old" middle class of government workers and tradesmen and included increased numbers of women, Catholics, and Jews. Previous historians have argued that this influx of "outsiders" led elite students to adopt more close-minded, autocratic, discriminatory, and chauvinistic viewpoints. Zwicker accepts this conclusion up to a point but then shifts her focus from the latter group to the former, emphasizing the success new students had in fostering a university culture marked by more liberal and democratic ideals.

As the newest members of the "intellectual aristocracy," these students resented any perceived encroachment on their physical, social, or academic freedoms. While generations of German students promoted dueling as a way for "civilized" men to demonstrate honor, courage, and bravery, newer students highlighted the undemocratic aspects of this activity. On a practical level, few could afford suitable dueling equipment. Even worse, dueling fraternities often refused to accept "social inferiors" into their ranks. As such, more and more students denounced dueling as anachronistic and anathema to the supposedly egalitarian ideals of a true university. A few schools responded to these criticisms by establishing honor courts that allowed nondueling students to gain "satisfaction" when impugned. Some dueling fraternities scaled back their more ostentatious practices, replacing raucous parades and drinking

 

bouts with more formalized and sedate ceremonies. Zwicker acknowledges the limits of such reforms, but adds that such changes counter the depiction of German universities as simply "a romping place for illiberalism, anti-Semitism, and dueling fraternities" (p. 4).

Zwicker devotes two chapters to the era's most influential student organizations—the Burschenschaft and the Free Students. Her nuanced analysis of both showcases her skill at tweaking standard historical interpretations in subtle yet substantial ways. She does not dispute the Burschenschaft's connection to Aryan beliefs and Nazism but questions when and to what extent these connections took hold. Some historians mark the group's shift "from a progressive orientation to an intolerant and anti-Semitic nationalism" in the mid-1890s (p. 61). In her own thorough examination of Burschenschaft histories and newspapers, Zwicker finds evidence to support this, but rather than stopping there, she digs deeper, uncovering student debates on subjects such as worker rights, civil equality, and academic freedom that suggest by 1900, "the general direction of the Burschenschaft was toward a more liberal orientation" (p. 76).

Zwicker attributes this shift in part to the emergence of the Free Students, an organization devoted to a "pure pursuit of cultivation" that drew its membership, in large degree, from the newest members of the intellectual aristocracy (p. 79). Free Students were certainly not apathetic or apolitical, targeting dueling as undemocratic and contrary to the notions of freedom, tolerance, and equality that they presumably valued. They also took on larger university issues, inviting controversial speakers to campus, against the wishes of school officials. In 1905, the Bern chapter sent a "sympathy telegram" to Russian students swept up in that country's revolution.

However, Free Students proved less tolerant when it came to religion. They accepted Jewish members, but several chapters worried about the "increase of foreigners" and looked to restrict Jewish representation among the group's leadership. Zwicker situates such attitudes within a larger examination of anti-Semitism on German campuses. Based upon her reading of Jewish student memoirs and accounting for such sources' tendency to leave out or obscure unpleasant personal memories, she concludes that anti-Semitism played a significant but not a dominant role in their university experiences. Although often banned from certain clubs, Jewish students still qualified as members of the intellectual aristocracy. As such, they represented one of several groups, along with nationalists, liberals, conservatives, Free Students, and Burschenschafters, all laying claim to a distinct German identity.

This discussion pays due attention to the Union of German Students, who exhibited the virulent anti-Semitism that carried over into Weimar and Nazi Germany. Zwicker points out that this group made

up less than one percent of the total German student population and that even this small sampling split when it came to the depth and nature of their anti-Semitism. She distinguishes here between the "social anti-Semitism" of groups who ostracized their Jewish peers and the "explicitly racist, pseudoscientific and intensive anti-Semitism" that emerged later (p. 120). She notes that the former contributed to the latter but concludes that the Union's pre–World War I ideology reflected a conservative nationalism that stirred up racial and nonracial hatred of numerous "others" in hopes of rallying Germans of disparate social and economic backgrounds to their ranks.

Catholic students faced an uphill battle for acceptance as well. Already feeling besieged in the wake of the 1870s *Kulturkampf*, the relatively small number of Catholic students attending German universities banded together in the early 1890s to "challenge Protestant hegemony" at their respective schools. They did so in ways that made them exceedingly unpopular, self-righteously condemning the sinfulness and immorality of their peers who drank, danced, and dueled.

This animosity fueled the "Academic *Kulturkampf*" that Zwicker describes with great detail and insight in her last chapter. Catholic students and their organizations came under intense scrutiny during this time as more and more of their non-Catholic peers accused them of blindly following the directives of church leaders and, later, the Center Party. This supposed mindless fealty to papal and political doctrines marked Catholic students as pariahs among an intellectual aristocracy theoretically devoted to academic and ideological freedom. This spilled over into vociferous attacks on "confessional fraternities," and when school officials across Germany tried to tamp down tensions by stifling discussions of this issue, students balked. Such acts convinced many of them that Catholics and university administrators threatened "'academic freedom,' the central value of the 19th century university" (p. 171). While this ideological and sometimes physical assault on Catholic students appears to contradict Zwicker's argument concerning the intellectual openness of German universities, she claims that by couching their actions as a defense of academic freedom, anti-Catholic protestors demonstrated both their commitment to "liberal trends" as well as "the tensions within German liberalism" (p. 195). Such tensions manifested themselves in the fact that one group's defense of their own freedom to speak, write, and assemble as they saw fit led them to deny other groups the same freedoms.

In her account of the Academic *Kulturkampf*, Zwicker does a particularly good job of outlining how notions of masculinity informed student conflicts and politics. Defenders of academic freedom cited their own "manly courage," "manly wisdom," and "hearty men's ways," lashing out at "those little men" who stood in their way (p. 186). The

strength of Zwicker's gender analysis here, however, draws attention to the relative shallowness of such analysis elsewhere. At times, discussions of gender come across as tacked on, underdeveloped, and generalized. Early in the work, she describes rituals that men participated in without delving too deeply into the masculine connotations of these rituals. Later on, she mentions Catholic students "alternative understanding of masculinity that emphasized the importance of firm conviction and loyalty to their community" but fails to explain what renders this understanding alternative (p. 164). Conservative nationalists felt a firm conviction and loyalty to likeminded Germans, as did members of dueling fraternities and Free Students.

Still, while masculinity remains a wobbly third leg, the whole of Zwicker's argument stands up solidly. The strength of her work comes from its firm grounding in primary and secondary sources. She respects and appreciates the work of her peers and predecessors, even as she disagrees wholeheartedly with them. Using many of the same sources, including memoirs, student newspapers, and organizational histories, she counters teleological narratives that detect the specter of Nazism looming throughout the Wilhelmine era. She knows the path many German students took, but she also knows their direction was not preordained. When she finds illiberal, anti-Semitic, and undemocratic viewpoints, she incorporates them into a larger, complex, and diversified intellectual environment. As such, she offers a provocative and comprehensive depiction of university life in pre–World War I Germany, one where students dueled over important, controversial, and unresolved issues of freedom, democracy, and equality.

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