
Western Europe

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Europe: The Struggle for Supremacy, From 1453 to the Present

BY BRENDAN SIMMS. Basic Books, 2013, 720 pp. \$35.00.

This book chronicles five centuries of diplomacy, alliances, and war—all aimed, Simms argues, at asserting or blocking dominance of the European continent. The story begins with the maneuvering of absolutist monarchs before the Thirty Years' War and ends with the enlargement of the European Union. Germany, with its central location, remains the main problem throughout: its weakness and division create a power vacuum, and its strength and unity pose a threat to all. Simms' narrative is very much in the style of histories penned in past eras by the likes of A. J. P. Taylor, Leopold von Ranke, and Henry Kissinger, in which leaders pursue great-power rivalries through subtle diplomatic schemes and brutal military tactics. Less sure-footed is the analysis of leaders' deeper motivations and of the sweeping changes in domestic politics and society that transformed Europe over that time. Yet the many insights and engaging anecdotes make this a fine read.

The People's Car: A Global History of the Volkswagen Beetle

BY BERNHARD RIEGER. Harvard University Press, 2013, 416 pp. \$28.95.

The Volkswagen Beetle is one of the enduring and iconic products of the past

century, but it has meant different things to different people in different places and times. In telling its story, Rieger starts with Hitler's ambition to create an inexpensive and functional "people's car." The job was turned over to Ferdinand Porsche, who produced the cute "bug" design the car has featured ever since. War production superseded civilian priorities, however, and the Beetle was delayed until after World War II, when British occupation authorities launched its production. In Germany, the car became a symbol of the country's middle-class economic miracle. In the United States, it became a symbol of counter-cultural resistance to middle-class consumerism. As its popularity waned in developed countries, it found a foothold in Mexico, where it stood for middle-class solidity and values in the face of economic turmoil. When Volkswagen introduced a redesigned Beetle in 2011, it offered young and old alike a chance to return to imagined traditions many of them never knew.

Political Conflict in Western Europe

BY HANSPETER KRIESI, EDGAR GRANDE, MARTIN DOLEZAL, MARC HELBLING, DOMINIC HOGLINGER, SWEN HUTTER, AND BRUNO WUEST. Cambridge University Press, 2012, 368 pp. \$36.99.

The Politicization of Europe: Contesting the Constitution in the Mass Media

BY PAUL STATHAM AND HANS-JORG TRENZ. Routledge, 2012, 208 pp. \$135.00 (paper, \$44.95).

The political history of European countries is traditionally told in terms

of a small number of significant, divisive issues. These issues emerged successively—first religion, then class, and more recently “postmaterialist” values, such as the environment—creating points of identification for voters and fault lines of conflict among political parties. They persist to this day and get layered on top of one another, defining the uniqueness of each country’s politics.

Recently, some political scientists have claimed that a new and enduring cleavage has formed around globalization, a matter that has been of surprisingly little concern to European voters for the past half century. Those hurt by international economic integration now mobilize around issues such as immigration and European integration. A significant portion of them vote consistently for the radical right, helping explain its rise, while still backing the traditional welfare state. Kriesi, Grande, and their co-authors show that while globalization has grown more important as a motivation for voters, there may be less to this shift than meets the eye. Right-wing parties are actually surprisingly weak, fragmented, and local—something the authors attribute to the bias of parliamentary institutions against them. Moreover, the book shows that although a few ideological concerns, such as opposition to immigration and hostility to the EU, are widespread, no common economic or political program unites antiglobalizers.

Statham and Trenz’s examination of public debates over an EU constitution notes a similar lack of cross-border mobilization. European voters remain resolutely national in their orientation and are heavily influenced by the institutional and ideological particularities of

their home countries, making a broad shift in European politics or in the policies of the EU difficult to engineer.

Helmut Kohl: Eine politische Biographie
(A political biography)

BY HANS-PETER SCHWARZ.
Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2012,
1,506 pp. €34.99.

For most of his political career, Helmut Kohl was easy to underestimate. Yet political enemies did so at their peril. Ridiculed as a big, fat provincial with a suspiciously lightweight doctoral thesis, few clear ideals, and a ponderous speaking style, Kohl was nicknamed “the pear.” He was a political insider who cultivated tight personal relationships and accumulated bitter enemies, clambering slowly up the greasy pole of German politics with few achievements of true distinction. On reaching the top, in the early 1980s, he turned in a mediocre first term as chancellor. That all changed when the Soviet Union began to collapse. Kohl focused on reunifying Germany, strengthening the EU, and establishing a diplomatic agreement with Moscow. In this mammoth biography, destined to become the standard work on Kohl for some time to come, Schwarz portrays him as shrewd in politics but a bit naive on substantive matters. This combination still has relevance for contemporary European politics. For example, Kohl supported the establishment of the euro but did not fully consider its potential long-term effects. Europe is still living with the consequences.