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**Review Article**

**The Malaise of *Fin-de-siècle* Europe**

*The Decline of Bismarck's European Order: Franco-Russian Relations, 1875-1890.* By George F. Kennan. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979. Pp. xii, 466. \$25.00 (U.S.).

*Gold and Iron: Bismarck, Bleichröder, and the Building of the German Empire.* By Fritz Stern. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977. Pp. xxiv, 620. \$17.95 (U.S.). Paper, N.Y.: Vintage Books, 1979. \$7.95 (U.S.).

*Fin-de-siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture.* By Carl E. Schorske. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980. Pp. xxx, 378. \$15.95 (U.S.).

For many educated laymen, and, for that matter, a good number of professional historians, the Europe of the generation prior to the First World War has taken on, increasingly, an image not unlike the landscapes of Antoine Watteau with their golden autumnal hue, filled with nostalgia for the world on the advent of Armageddon. But as in the paintings of Watteau, the luminous elegance of *fin-de-siècle* Europe masked a melancholy anxiety—often buried deep in the individual and collective subconscious, and repressed by apparently inexorable optimistic materialism—that revealed to astute observers even then that the center had started to give way long before the cataclysm. Indeed, it would not be inaccurate to suggest that pre-war Europe was affected by a malaise, left undiagnosed and perhaps undiagnosable, precisely because the symptoms were so varied, and that this malaise had rent the social fabric long before it was subjected to the crucible of war.

The three books under discussion—so radically different in their approaches, subject-matter and style—all touch in one way or another on this malaise of *fin-de-siècle* Europe. Kennan has called his volume an exercise in “micro-history,” and in an important sense the

could be said about all three studies. Kennan's own book is microscopic in its examination of a diplomatic problem within a very restricted time-frame; Stern in turn sweeps across half a century through the microscopic perspective of two specific individuals; Schorske attempts to come to grips with a whole culture through the process of making a series of microscopic incisions in it. Yet each in turn illuminates a vaster panorama through the prism of his specific study. Above all, each is an impressive demonstration of the mastery of the senior generation of North American scholars. Indeed, a review in the traditional manner is quite unnecessary: all three volumes have already been widely acclaimed, and the authors themselves hardly need introductions to an informed audience.

George F. Kennan's work, *The Decline of Bismarck's European Order: Franco-Russian Relations, 1875-1890*, is animated, as the author confesses, by his "long-standing preoccupation" with the Great War, which he regards as "the great seminal catastrophe of this century." Rather than re-examine the much examined origins of this conflict, however, Kennan's concern is to analyze "the texture of the process" by a narrow focus on one of the primary elements: the Franco-Russian alliance. This volume, the first of a projected two-volume study, covers the diplomatic background leading up to "the actual negotiation of a military convention between the two Powers." What makes Kennan exceptionally successful in his aim is his ability to bring the human, or perhaps more correctly, the psychological dimensions of his problem to bear with full force. His own diplomatic experiences undoubtedly have endowed him with a capacity to see things, in a sense, from the inside, and have, perhaps, given him a propensity for getting behind the documents to the individuals involved. Certainly Kennan's analysis is much less mechanistic than traditional diplomatic history, while at the same time being much more lucid and elegant than diplomatic history currently in vogue.

Kennan's principal argument is that the crystalization of the Franco-Russian alliance was primarily a legacy of the Franco-Prussian war. While the responsibility for the war of 1870 is apportioned equally, the German exploitation of the victory is seen as a serious miscalculation. Of course, there is nothing novel in the suggestion that the question of Alsace-Lorraine became a permanent irritant in Franco-German relations, though it is not entirely convincing to argue that French *revanchism* would have been more restrained in the aftermath of a more generous peace settlement. Kennan is the first to debunk the myth of Alsace and Lorraine as the two vestal virgins

ravaged by the Teutonic barbarian, and his penetrating analysis of French policy makes it clear that, for all the resentment generated, the German intimidation of France was successful. French policy, Kennan points out, was restrained and passive, waiting for the initiative from Russia.

Hence the central question of Kennan's book is why would the Russians abandon the Three Emperors' League, or, more specifically, the German alliance, which then virtually compelled them to turn to France. There is no hesitation in branding Russian policy as "so obviously misguided and self-destructive," embarking, in the period from 1875 to 1890, on a "disastrous . . . series of mistakes." Since only a limited number of individuals had decisive influence on the course of foreign policy in autocratic czarist Russia, Kennan's "psychological" dimension dramatically illuminates the texture of the diplomacy of pre-1914 Europe. The picture of policy makers painted for us here is disturbing in the extreme: they show an inability to recognize their own errors, a desire to seek scapegoats, and, above all, an apparently infinite capacity for self-deception. For example, as the indolent, insecure and insipient Czar Alexander III is torn between the unheroic advice of his sensible, moderate and realistic foreign minister, Nikolai Karlovich Giers, and the irrational passion of men such as the journalist, Mikhail Nikoforovich Katkov, the Prokuror of the Holy Synod, Konstantin Petrovich Pobyedonostsev, and the minister of the interior, Count Dimitri Aleksandrovich Tolstoi, one is left with the depressing impression that the former waged an increasingly unsuccessful rearguard action against the inexorable force of unreason represented by the latter. In Kennan's view, Russia's diplomatic problems, especially in the Balkans, were caused by her own ineptitude, not by policy initiatives undertaken by the other Great Powers. Hence the image of Bismarck that emerges from this book is a positive one. He is seen as a man of moderation and peace, his alliance system as a simple and logical mechanism to maintain the *status quo*. For the new generation of diplomatic historians, for whom Fritz Fischer's thesis on the German role in the outbreak of the First World War has passed from heated controversy to easy orthodoxy, Kennan's perspective therefore has the effect of refocusing the hoary question of responsibility for the conflagration of 1914-1918.

Kennan's laying bare the symptoms of a social atavism in the diplomacy of the period tends to lend greater weight to the underlying causes of the Great War than to its immediate ones. Of these symp-

toms, greatest emphasis is placed on the debilitating effects of nationalism. His view of nationalism is rather traditional: a period of rapid social transformation displaced great masses of people and led to a crisis of individual identity which was overcome by an identification with the achievements of the linguistic collective. He diagnoses such nationalism as mass hysteria: "and what was this heady exaltation of nationalism, with its self-adulation, its extravagant claims to virtue, its professions of an innate superiority, but an hysteria?" It was the principal element of the malaise of *fin-de-siècle* Europe. A second element isolated by Kennan is a sanguine attitude towards war: it was seen solely as an instrument of policy, "advantageous or deleterious only insofar as it was successful or unsuccessful." Blindness to "the anguish of modern war" was the result primarily of "the survival into those decades of the romantic-chivalric concept of military conflict." In short, no small part of the malaise of pre-war Europe was the result of what Arno J. Mayer has recently aptly called "the persistence of the old regime" in Europe.

If Kennan portrays a moderate, restrained and sensible Bismarck, Fritz Stern's *Gold and Iron: Bismarck, Bleichröder, and the Building of the German Empire* focuses rather on the neurotic, paranoid, self-pitying, isolated, misanthropic, capricious, irritable, vindictive, intolerant, contemptuous, distrustful, morbid, suspicious and nepotistic Iron Chancellor. Yet in this litany of unpleasant characteristics, one overriding feature stands out above them all: "for Bismarck all people and all things were pawns." One of the most important and useful of these pawns was his private banker, Gerson von Bleichröder.

In many ways this is an old-fashioned book both in its approach and its thesis. To begin with, it is unashamedly biographical, and while demonstrating that the Prussian political elite was extraordinarily aware of the significance of the economic dimension of politics, it asserts "the primacy of politics, not economics" in nineteenth-century Germany. Stern gently eschews the "social imperialism" interpretations now so much in vogue, and has made the social sciences once more the obedient handmaidens of an uncompromisingly humanistic Clio. Small wonder, then, that some reviewers have seen nineteenth-century novelistic or even Biblical characteristics in the work.

*Gold and Iron* may also be said to be very much in the positivist tradition. Stern's research was "triggered by the appearance in New York of the private archive of Gerson Bleichröder," and the

Bleichröder papers very evidently provide the skeletal structure upon which the book is built. In that sense, of course, it is rather a biography of Bleichröder more than Bismarck, and it is the life and concerns of the banker that shape this volume. For this reason it would therefore appear that balance is often sacrificed to heretofore undisclosed detail. Minor matters richly detailed in archival sources often receive as much attention as major matters suffering from a paucity of unpublished Bleichröder material. This makes the book at times seem anecdotal, with primacy lent to the exposition of unpublished sources. Hence we learn much that is new, not only about the life of Gerson von Bleichröder, but also of Otto von Bismarck. For example, before the battle of Königgrätz we find Bismarck hedging his bets on the outcome: he had Bleichröder provide him with about \$10,000 in easily negotiable coins of various currencies, presumably "to be ready to meet all eventualities." Elsewhere we discover that it was Bleichröder who was instrumental not only in the reconciliation between Bismarck and the Liberal leader, Viktor von Unruh, in 1866, but also between the Chancellor and the Center Party leader, Ludwig Windthorst, in 1879.

On the other hand, Stern's approach has left many critics unconvinced and dissatisfied. Such dissatisfaction, however, would seem to be largely unjustified. All too many critiques reveal an intolerance for historiographical heterogeneity, and proceed from the prejudice that a certain style of historical scholarship is the only valid or profitable one left in our times. Indeed, far from failing to come to grips with major significant historical developments, Stern has focused attention on some of the most important exposed nerves of the *fin-de-siècle* European body politic. Bleichröder's career illustrates a nineteenth-century German Jewish banker's rise to wealth and respectability. It therefore simultaneously touches on two of the most significant themes of that century: the "universal effort to legitimize new wealth," and the great drama of Jewish emancipation with its attendant backlash—modern anti-Semitism. Stern does not posit any radically new theses about these developments, but he illuminates, to use Kennan's phrase once more, "the texture of the process" in an unprecedented fashion.

As the German bourgeoisie dramatically rose to economic power in the middle of the nineteenth century, they succumbed, in the hour of their victory, to the social and cultural values of the old feudal elite. They longed for their wealth to be translated into status, only to discover that it "was easier for a poor man to become rich than for

rich man to become honourable." The old elite, in turn, for all its resentment of bourgeois parvenus, coveted their wealth. Aristocrats could be condescending about the filthy money-grubbing process of becoming wealthy, but they "could not deny the realities of power or the temptation of wealth." They needed men like Bleichröder, earnestly solicited their help and advice, but at the same time could not admit it publicly and were "ashamed to be openly associated" with such plutocrats. In this context Stern's greatest contributions are to analyze the various hypocrisies engendered by this unholy alliance, to catalogue the corruptions that the "illicit relation between money and politics" brought about, and, above all, to illustrate the total amorality of the perpetually moralizing heroes of that age.

Stern suggests that Bleichröder himself was "largely oblivious of the hypocrisy, the concealed meanness with which people were using him," and "but dimly aware of [the] larger ramifications of his career." While he was constantly aware and resolutely proud of his Jewishness, he did not see his own life as a sort of parable of Jewish emancipation in nineteenth-century Germany. Sycophantic and reactionary, Bleichröder certainly was not representative of German Jewry as a whole, yet, as the "foremost mercantile Jew of his era, his life demonstrated the heights to which Jews could aspire—as well as the pain and precariousness of the ascent." What is more, Bleichröder's very success made him, in Stern's telling phrase, a "hostage of the new anti-semitism" that arose in the 1870s and 1880s. As the apparent incarnation of all the anti-semitic stereotypes, he provided an almost clichéd example to radical rabble rousers "until anti-Semitism was so prevalent a phobia that it no longer needed him as evidence." Gerson von Bleichröder was not an edifying individual, but his life was a case study in one of the great tragic ironies of *fin-de-siècle* Europe. The emancipation of the Jews had removed legal and social obstacles, so that they were able to take advantage of the modernizing forces of the century to make staggering social and economic progress, but their success bred an envy and hostility that in turn threatened the benefits that emancipation had bestowed.

Stern may be deemed old-fashioned by some; the same could hardly be said of Carl E. Schorske. His long and eagerly awaited *Fin-de-siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* is an essay into an entirely new kind of history writing, an attempt, as the author has confessed, to resuscitate a discipline out of vogue in an anti-historical age. For Schorske history marks the nexus of two divergent forces in scholarship: the humanities move increasingly towards pure textual

criticisms while the social sciences increasingly formulate social abstractions out of historical context. In its halcyon days, history was *both* a social science *and* a humanity; now, as its old syntheses seem no longer to be satisfying, it is in danger of becoming neither. As an unrepentant historian, Schorske naturally views this tendency to dehistoricization with alarm, and recognizes the danger of the pluralisation of scholarship. Yet he cautions young historians that abstract analytic modes are here to stay, that both the new structuralism of the humanists and the social studies are realities that can neither be ignored nor glossed over in the traditional manner. Instead he suggests they be taken on their own terms; their techniques mastered and exploited in the search for the similarities and parallels that are the essence of historical scholarship: "we must now be willing to undertake the empirical pursuit of pluralities as a precondition to finding unitary patterns in culture."\*

Schorske's own book boldly blazes this trail. "Diachronic" analyses of specific works of literature, political theory, psychology, architecture, painting and music are pressed into service to assess "synchronic" relations among them. This, of course, explains why this book is not the encyclopedic overview of Viennese cultural and intellectual life from the 1860s to the First World War that many had anticipated. It also at once answers the critique that the study is not comprehensive enough, for that is not what it was meant to be. Schorske focuses on a manageable unit, Habsburg Vienna in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and has a single theme, the origins and nature of modernism. These are explored through seven autonomous essays (four of which had appeared previously in periodicals between 1961 and 1973), whose connecting leitmotif is the "interaction between politics and culture." One's only lament about this book could be that the author did not choose to include a few more essays in areas such as economics that would easily have fit into his parameters.

\* I am indebted to Professor Schorske for his stimulating discussion of this whole problem during a recent lecture tour in Montreal.

Schorske suggests that the path that brought him to *fin-de-siècle* Vienna was the specific development of post-war American intellectual trends. He notes how traditional American optimism gave way in the late forties and fifties to a new mood of pessimism that affected all segments of the political spectrum. This, in turn, made

many intellectuals shift "the premises for understanding man and society from the social to the psychological realm." Here they enlisted Sigmund Freud, and it was but a short step from Freud to his Austrian contemporaries—fellow explorers, in different fields, of psychological man. It was the new-found vogue of *fin-de-siècle* Viennese artists and intellectuals that stimulated Schorske: "Illuminating the genesis, meaning, and limitations of ideas in their own time, we might better understand the implications and significance of our affinities for them in our time." But one suspects that was not the whole of it. As an historian attempting to rejuvenate his discipline in an anti-historical age, is he not seizing the devil by the tail by selecting as his locus the very place where that disturbing characteristic of modernity (certainly disturbing for an historian), the revolt against history, began?

If Schorske's implicit theme is the birth of modernism, then the putative malaise he treats is no more morbid than the birthpangs of the modern mind. In Austria this was brought about by the sudden and dramatic collapse of liberalism. Having barely established itself, it found its political assumptions, its view of man, and its culture shaken and assaulted by a political crisis that forced, in Nietzsche's phrase, a complete reevaluation of all values. "The new culture-makers in the city of Freud," Schorske maintains, "thus repeatedly defined themselves in terms of a kind of collective oedipal revolt . . . against the authority of the paternal culture that was their inheritance." But in Schorske's view, political impotence led to the "alienation" not only of the intellectuals, but of the whole middle class, giving the entire development a broader social character than elsewhere in Europe.

If alienation from classical liberalism spurred the search for new values, the quest was a rocky one. Arthur Schnitzler and Hugo von Hofmannstahl, for example, seeing the liberal conception of rational scientific man crumbling before their eyes, laboriously excavated psychological man from the distinctively Austrian cultural rubble. The functionalist architect, Otto Wagner, and the communitarian city-planner, Camillo Sitte, hammered out their respective visions against the anvil of the great physical symbols of liberalism triumphant—Vienna's *Ringstrasse* and its imposing public buildings. Georg von Schönerer, Karl Lueger and Theodor Herzl, each in his own way, attempted to channel the mass energy that the liberals had inadvertently released against themselves in their battle against the feudal order, by creating new "politics of fantasy." Sigmund Freud



consolled his class in its political impotence by giving it "an a-historical theory of man and society that could make bearable a political world spun out of orbit and beyond control." Gustav Klimt, faced with the rubble of the collapsed liberal world, pursued a tortured internalized path which, while opening up "new worlds of psychological experience," led to "aesthetic abstraction and social resignation." Through Adalbert Stifter, Ferdinand von Saar and Leopold von Andrian zu Werburg we follow progressive literary responses to the dilemma of arts's increasing divergence from social reality, marked by such milestones as self-cultivation, social withdrawal, cultural elitism, psychological frustration, ethical despair, and finally, complete narcissism.

It has become a fashionable cliché to suggest that psychology is a symptom of the disease of which it purports to be the diagnosis. The *fin-de-siècle* Viennese reevaluation of classical liberal values also led to a kind of hedonistic aestheticism which was a symptom of the dilemma to which it purported to be the resolution. Hence this Viennese garden of bitter-sweet earthly delights, too, carried within it the seeds of its own destruction. A younger generation, led by such men as Oskar Kokoschka and Arnold Schoenberg now calmly accepted "their egocentric predicament" and soon "found the forms to express the soul of men whose culture had prevented their irrational private experience from finding public expression." This "explosion in the garden" occurred well before the gunshots at Sarajevo touched off another powder keg. If men had had but eyes to see, one should have forewarned the other. But just as Watteau's elegiac lovers are reluctant to leave Cytheria, European society remained true to Shakespeare's couplet: "As testy sick men, when their deaths be near, / No news but health from their physicians know." Surely that was the ultimate malaise of *fin-de-siècle* Europe.