Alexander C.T. Geppert and Till Kössler, eds.


The volume *Obsession der Gegenwart. Zeit im 20. Jahrhundert (Obsession of the Presence. Time in the 20th Century)* provides an excellent update to the actual discussions about time. The nine papers in the volume focus on the twentieth century and cover historical case studies as well as conceptual approaches to the study of time in the discipline of history. After an introduction about contemporary history studies (“Zeit-Geschichte als Aufgabe”), the editors propose the necessity of integrating the history of time in current debates on temporality. In their introductory essay, Geppert and Kössler present a methodological framework based on a three-step analytical approach: first, the history of time in the writing of history; second, the history of time along the three poles—standardization vs. Pluralization, discipline vs. Flexibility, and acceleration vs. *Eigenzeit* (one’s own time); third, a sketch of these three concepts—temporalization, rhythm, and simultaneity. In doing so, they contextualize recent approaches in time studies, such as modernism and acceleration, the individual experience of time and the standardization of time, and the tendency of economization and optimizing of time in capitalist, totalitarian, and colonial societies.

Lucian Hölscher examines the concept of empty and filled times (“Von leeren und gefüllten Zeiten”) and the shifting perception of historical time from the eighteenth century to the twentieth century. The eighteenth century witnessed a systematic investigation of theoretical and methodological fundamentals of the science of history, which led to the ambitious endeavor to standardize the measurement of time analogous to the geographical space and hence to the definition of epochs and eras with something of the new idea of a *Zeitgeist* bound to national states. The nineteenth century, however, showed the elaboration of historical panoramas, which replaced the empty chronological universal time with a poetic alliance of specific dates. There then was a remarkable shift in the twentieth century to materiality and the empirical location of all relations of time to things on which temporal change could be observed (59). Philosophical theories of time such as Cassirer’s theory of symbolic forms and Husserl’s phenomenological analysis of time pointed out that no longer must things be located in time, but rather the reverse: time must be located in things (60). Such theories contributed to the perception of time as cultural phenomenon depending on social forms, which change over time. Hölscher states, therefore, that there is a fragmentation of universal time in the twentieth century. A second contribution to historiographic-conceptual...
approaches to the study of time in history studies is Penelope J. Corfield’s essay “Time and the Historians in the Age of Relativity.”

The additional six chapters are chronologically arranged along the timeline of the twentieth century and present historic-empiric case studies. Each of these studies is focused on a specific topic and geographical area, but in their combination they offer a transnational view, allowing the reader to draw parallels going beyond linguistic and national boundaries. For example, the following three studies—“Die Propagierung moderner Zeitdisziplin in Japan, 1906-1931” (“Propaganda of modern time discipline in Japan, 1906-1931”) by Katja Schmidtpott, “Time of the Nazis. Past and Present in the Third Reich” by Christopher Clark, and “Von der Nacht in den Tag. Zeit und Diktatur in Spanien, 1939-1975” (“From the Night into the Day. Time and Dictator in Spain, 1939-1975”) by Till Kössler—reveal unexpected similarities and parallels as they introduce the new time regimes in Meiji-time Japan, Nazi Germany, and Fascist Spain. Not only did each new government aim to civilize and educate the people through the introduction of a new time regime, but also the political leaders created an imagined time of the past in order to root the new time regime in invented traditions. That attempt to civilize the people through a rigid time management in order to set up the awareness of a new era is found in similar ways in rising national states at the dawn of the twentieth century, totalitarian regimes, and, as shown in the comparison with Fascist Spain, nations under pressure to keep up with the economical requirements of growing mass consumption in a postwar era. Furthermore, these patterns of civilizing through time can also be discerned in colonial and postcolonial powers, as in the introduction of universal time that replaced various local times.

Other articles in this collection refer to the temporal turn with the key concepts described in Reinhart Koselleck’s collection of essays Vergangene Zukunft (Futures Past, 1972), which poses the question of the meaning of time in history sciences while drawing on the argument of the intellectual historian that modernity has brought a new relation between the past and the future, which is of unbroken actuality in the present context.

Recent research on temporality has stressed the plurality of contemporaneous chronoscapes such as societal time, economic time, biological time (144), environmental time and imagined time. This approach allows one to dissociate from the presently dominant acceleration thesis, which basically correlates the increase of speed with the advancing modernity and technological innovation. The presumption of a plurality of (contemporaneous) chronoscapes could be seen as a useful tool to rethink the traditional contrasting juxtaposition of ancient and modern time, the vagueness of a temporality of longue durée imposed in the process of establishing invented traditions based on an