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BOOK REVIEW

A Nation Fermented: Beer, Bavaria, and the Making of Modern Germany

By Robert Terrell. New York: Oxford University Press, 2024. Pp. 240. Cloth, $45. ISBN 9780198881834.

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A decade ago, I took a road trip through rural Mecklenburg with a German friend. Born and raised in the GDR, he worked as a brewer for one of the largest concerns in northern Europe. At some point, the topic of beer came up and I asked him if he would ever like to try brewing ales instead of lagers. He laughed and then retorted, "Of course not! The *Reinheitsgebot* prevents it!" This memory came flooding back while reading Robert Terrell's *A Nation Fermented*, which explains how Bavarian-style lagers came to conquer German hearts, minds, and refrigerators over the course of the twentieth century. At the heart of this history is the peculiar role of the infamous *Reinheitsgebot*, a sixteenth-century, Bavarian regulation that declared beer must contain only three ingredients: water, hops, and malted barley. Around the same time, the Bavarian monarchy restricted brewing to cold months, effectively privileging lager beers, since they were made with bottom-fermenting, cold-tolerant yeasts (and were stored in *Lagerkeller*). Within decades, Bavaria and lagers were synonymous. Throughout the rest of Germany, however, no single style of beer or brewing prevailed. Instead, brewers experimented with a variety techniques and ingredients in their lagers, but also ales, which were made with heat-tolerant, top-fermenting yeasts. Across northern Germany, people could find beers made with more than malted barely but also cane sugar, beet sugar, molasses, herbs, spices, and malts of other grains. How peculiar then, that my friend, a northerner and former citizen of the GDR, held little regard for his own regional "traditions." Why did he have no interest in brewing a sour Gose ale, which originated in Leipzig and nearly went extinct in the 1930s? Why was there no love for Zerbst ale, a rosemary flavored beer that hailed from Lower Saxony? More generally, why does every major German city proudly promote its own Bavarian-style lager with nary an ale to be found?

The answer, surprisingly, lies not with a sixteenth-century Wittelsbach law but instead in twentieth-century German tax regimes. As historian Yanni Kotsonis once argued, "taxes don't merely reflect forms of rule and government; they *are* forms of rule and government" (Kotsonis, *States of Obligation*, 2014). Most Germans assume the *Reinheitsgebot* has legally protected German beer from adulterants, shoddy practices, and foreign swill since 1516. Terrell shows this is nationalist claptrap, an invented tradition that papers over a revealing fight over taxation and federal power. Pealing back the layers of myth surrounding the *Reinheitsgebot*, Terrell finds no actual "purity law," but in fact Bavarian politicians and brewers writing their provincial customs over ingredients and yeasts into subsections of a national Beer Tax Law as well as a Food Law in the years following 1906. It was through

beer tax regimes that Bavarians alternately resisted federal centralization or, when feeling assertive, expanded their provincial power across the nation. For example, backers of the beer tax laws claimed this new fiscal regime would protect Bavarian brewers from larger, industrialized northern breweries, which churned out massive quantities of cheap, "adulterated" brews. In reality, it forced their competitors to adopt restrictive Bavarian style production methods, driving ale producers across the north out of business. As recently as 1860, lagers made up just 30 percent of German beer production; by 1926, it has risen to 88 percent (25). Total victory for lagers, however, did not make the Bavarians into proud Germans. Under Weimar, Bavarian brewers chaffed against what they saw as the national government's over-reliance on beer tax revenue from the south. In 1930, they and their political allies torpedoed the Depression-era budget of Hermann Mueller, and with it, the last democratic government of the Weimar era.

It wasn't until the postwar period, however, that "Bavarian" beer became "German" beer, and as a result, German national identity became more Bavarian. In the most insightful chapters of the book, Terrell shows how the *Reinheitsgebot* achieved economic and cultural hegemony. Beginning in 1945, Bavarian brewers carved out a zone of economic privilege for their industry, claiming that calorie-rich lagers—so-called "liquid bread"—were a vital solution to food scarcity and agricultural disruptions. As result, a new generation of beer drinkers was born. During the *Wirtschaftswunder*, lager consumption grew exponentially, serving as a proxy for economic prosperity. For the first time in history, a majority of Germans drank their beer at home, in their single family kitchens, next to their space-age refrigerators, purchased with their Fordist family wages. But it was during the debates surrounding the European Economic Community in the 1970s, that Bavarian brewers and their proxies pushed all Germans to see the *Reinheitsgebot* as a sacred national tradition that protected consumers from the "chemical beers" of the English, Dutch, and French. In press events, magazine ads, and television commercials, Bavarian brewers weaponized claims about "purity" to protect their own national market share. Combined with resurgence of West German lager exports abroad and the promotion of Oktoberfest into a national holiday, Bavarian brewers successfully remade German beer culture in their own image by the end of the Cold War.

Terrell's innovative book will be of particular interest to historians of German business, of the German state, and of Bavaria. In locating a history of German nationality in food, he revitalizes older debates over Heimat, provincialism, and nationality. While many Germanists automatically recoil at the stereotype of the Lederhosen-wearing, Bierstein-swigging, polka-dancing German, Terrell reminds us that a core truth lies beneath. The stereotype is in fact a byproduct of Bavaria's unrecognized economic and cultural conquest of beer production and consumption throughout Germany in the twentieth century, a success on par with the international reputations of the German auto industry, chemical manufacturing, and even the national football team.

Returning to the story of my East German friend, the *Reinheitsgebot* played a role in reunification. During the 1990s, as the *Treuhand* commission put every state-run enterprise on the auction block, millions of East Germans lost their jobs, including brewers, as western capital from across Europe took the "profitable" parts of each industry and left the rest to rust. In the wake of privatization, European-owned, former East German breweries quickly moved to ratify the *Reinheitsgebot* as the new production rule. In this way, East Germans like my friend could find comfort in the arms of this invented tradition. After all, if Germans couldn't own their own breweries anymore, at least the beer made in them would stay "pure" German.

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