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Exhaustively researched, Katherine Aaslestad’s monograph marks a significant addition to the literature on Hamburg, Germany, and the revolutionary era, particularly in English. The book draws together strands of social and cultural as well as diplomatic history to provide a richly textured account of Hamburg’s experiences and civic culture from the late eighteenth century through the Napoleonic epoch and on into the nineteenth century.

The volume’s title, it must be said, is somewhat misleading. While politicians and publicists from Bremen and Lübeck do feature at times, the focus remains very much on Hamburg, with occasional reference to its near-neighbor Altona. The book is not a history of North Germany, or of the Hanseatic towns more narrowly.

Aaslestad’s work is divided into four sections, and deals with two main themes. Following the introduction, she offers a lengthy background depiction of Hamburg’s eighteenth-century civic culture, including its social and economic context, its republican beliefs and mores, and its press and associative life. The second part of the book then provides an original thematic investigation of changing conceptions of Patriotismus and republican identities during the 1790s and 1800s, while the third is essentially a narrative history (solid and colorful) of Hamburg’s domestic, diplomatic, and military fortunes during the Napoleonic period. Fourthly and finally, the „Epilogue“ examines the subsequent commemorations of Hamburg’s liberation in 1813 during the anniversary years 1838, 1863, and 1913.

In terms of themes and theses, the book focuses on two primary areas. The first concerns the balance of local, regional, and national identity in Hamburg. Here Aaslestad strongly contests any notion that an upsurge of German nationalism contributed to the anti-Napoleonic Wars of Liberation. Even in the 1980s it was common to argue that understanding the Wars of Liberation as a nationalist uprising was itself a nationalist myth, in that German national sentiment remained the possession of a narrow intellectual elite and had not taken root farther down the social scale. More recent work by Matthew Levinger, Abigail Green, Karen Hagemann, and others has gone even farther and emphasized the predominance in this period of territorial identities and dynastic loyalties, even among the elites, though German nationalism was significant as a minority phenomenon. Aaslestad however goes farther still, attempting to demonstrate the almost complete absence of German nationalism in the city during these years, and in the Epilogue tracing the paths by which the nationalist invention of the Wars of Liberation was woven into Hamburg’s collective memory in the course of the nineteenth century. The commemorative festivities of 1838 still celebrated the autonomy and freedom of the city itself as distinct from any nascent German nation, yet by 1913 they highlighted the experience of Hamburg as harbinger of and metonym for the birth of the German nation in the struggles against Napoleon, part of the foundation myth of the Prussian-led German Empire. Such a radical reversal of opinion on German nationalism probably does work better in the case of Hamburg than for some other regions, though even here Aaslestad may underestimate the German nationalist commitment of figures such as Friedrich Perthes or C. F. Wurm. Aaslestad also argues convincingly that the Napoleonic period saw the development of a lasting Hanseatic regionalism which would increasingly come to mediate between local and national identities (along the lines of Alon Confino’s work on Württemberg).

The most original and compelling portion


of the work is that dealing with Hambur-
gers’ changing conceptions of republican va-
values and Patriotismus, particularly Chapter
Four’s treatment of the debate over „Luxus“
and „Egoismus“ during the 1790s and 1800s.
Here Aaslestad engages with the literature on
Atlantic classical republicanism and Central
European „Stadtrepublikanismus“ in order to
understand the strains in Hamburg’s contem-
porary public discourse. Aaslestad suggests
in her introduction that she will challenge the
standard dichotomous narrative of a simple
shift from republicanism to liberalism, depic-
ting instead an emerging fusion of the two po-
litical languages. In the event, however, the
fusion of liberal and republican themes seems
to have pertained to the more stable years
of the eighteenth century, where individual
wealth and prosperity were seen as congruent
with the good of the community rather than
as conflicting with it. During the unsettled
years following the French Revolution, and
associated with the temporary economic up-
swing of the 1790s, on the other hand, Ham-
burg’s political culture seems to have resolv-
ed itself into the more traditional split be-
 tween republican communalism and liberal in-
dividualism, as republican publicists lamen-
ted the decline in civic „morality“ and com-
mitment attendant upon mushrooming mate-
rialism, luxury, and self-interest. This stand-
off then gave way to the triumph of liberal,
laissez-faire ideology in the years after the
French occupation of 1811-1814 (partly the re-
 sult of exposure to French ideas, but also to
economic hardship during that period of ex-
 ploitation).

There are some potential problems with
Aaslestad’s account. We tend for example to
hear only one side of the debate, namely, those
critical of the alleged new materialistic indi-
 vidualism, that liberalism is supposed to
have won the day within a very few years, one
 is left wondering where its defenders were to
be found, unless liberal dominance is meant
to imply the level of lifestyle and mores rather
than of ideology.

There may also be some difficulties with the
analytical framework employed to dissect the
relationships between republicanism and li-
beralism. In general the conceptions of „vir-
tue“ that Aaslestad finds in the case of Ham-
burg already seem more like a liberal, Pro-
testant, commercial „Tugend“ of honesty and
frugality than a classically republican „virtù“
of civic activism and military commitment.
In this sense, it could have been useful to
have looked more intensively at the debates
and practices surrounding the civic militia in
Hamburg, as Ralf Pröve has done for Prussia
and Hessen, in one of the few relevant works
not cited in this so well-researched volume.

Militia controversies are mentioned, both in
the 1790s and in the period of the failed up-
piring and the Wars of Liberation in 1813, but
they are not subjected to much sustained ana-
lysis, which might have helped in untangling
the ideological or cultural relationships and
trends within the discursive matrices of „lu-
 xury and egoism“ or „commerce and virtue.“

Aaslestad shows particular balance in her
analysis of gender, where against the back-
drop of a separate spheres framework, the
public roles of women are also acknowled-
ged, up to and including the services of An-
na Lühring, who disguised herself as a man
and fought during the Wars of Liberation, on-
ly to be publicly celebrated for these trans-
gressive acts after the victory. The discussion
of fashion magazines within the context of the
luxury-egoism debates is particularly nuan-
ced and insightful, as Aaslestad reveals the
ways in which plates and texts „produced
contradictory images of gender and projected
an unfixed notion of femininity and masculin-
ity as old and new conceptions coexisted wit-
in its pages.“ (p. 200) The potential tensions
between text and image in public discourse
are often not dealt with sufficiently, and it is
to the author’s credit that they receive keen
attention here.

It must be said that the editing of the
volume could have been much tighter, even
in the text but above all in the footnotes.
Wolfgang Kaschuba for example appears as
„Kushaba,“ Quentin Skinner as „Quenton“
and „Skillners,“ Jost Düffler multiple times
as „Düffler,“ and Jean Quataert as „Quartet“
(among several other such mistakes).

3 Pröve, Ralf, Stadtgemeindlicher Republikanismus und
die „Macht des Volkes“ civile Ordnungsformationen
und kommunale Leitbilder politischer Partizipation in
den deutschen Staaten vom Ende des 18. bis zur Mitte

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On balance, Katherine Aaslestad’s new work will certainly provide a prime point of reference and of departure for students of the history of Hamburg, Germany, and the revolutionary era for some time to come.