

*A Bavarian Historian Reinvents Himself: Karl Bosl and the Third Reich*. By Benjamin Z. Kedar and Peter Herde. Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press. 2011. 162 pp. \$25.00 (paperback).

This small volume is quite uncommon. Two renowned medievalists, one Israeli the other German, publish a study and an appendix of documents on a professor of regional history who perished in 1993: Karl Bosl (born in 1908) held the chairs of Bavarian history in Würzburg (1954-1960) and Munich (1960-67). For decades, he was a distinguished and influential protagonist of German regional history, author of numerous monographs and articles, advisor of more than 200 PhD students, nearly two dozens of whom later became professors themselves. Evidently, approaching his political biography during the Third Reich and in the years after the Second World War was likely to trigger a great deal of attention in German and especially Bavarian history departments.

Bosl was member of the *Stahlhelm* since 1930, joined the NSDAP in May 1933, and fulfilled minor functions in Nazi organizations. He seemed merely a nominal member of the Nazi Party, who even forgot to pay his membership fees after moving to another city in 1934. Yet the reactivation of his membership became urgent in 1938 when he was made a secondary school teacher and took the first steps in his academic career. In the last days of the Nazi regime, he was said to be member and even the guiding spirit of a local group of pupils and students, who kept distance to the Nazis and discussed political and moral questions. Some of them made desperate attempts to rouse the population of their city by spreading leaflets opposing the continuation of the war. The 20-year-old student Robert Limpert cut the telephone line of the local command post, was caught, sentenced to death in a summary trial and executed. Most likely he acted as an

individual and not on behalf of the group. But in the years after the German breakdown Bosl and some friends of him related this act of solitary resistance to the discussion group, even claiming that Bosl himself tried to cut the cables at the same time.

This is the setting of Kedar's and Herde's engagement with Bosl's political biography, including the question how he dealt with his past after 1945. During the denazification process, Bosl himself did not give any details on the alleged acts of sabotage, but his character witnesses told the committee about his activities at the end of the war. Furthermore, he stressed the non-political character of his research and disguised his political and scholarly commitment by falsely claiming that he had been denied the title of *Privatdozent* for political reasons. In the following years, he always remained vague about his role in the Limpert case, neither specifying it nor correcting false impressions. He preferred to assume a prominent role in the local commemoration of Robert Limpert.

Benjamin Z. Kedar and Peter Herde deliver a diligent analysis of these postwar efforts at rewriting a political biography, based on all available sources. They balance different conclusions and do not omit contradictions, inconsistencies and voids. The crucial sources are edited in the appendix, e.g. facsimiles of Bosl's party membership card, select publications, material of the denazification proceedings, archival sources and an interview which Bosl gave Kedar in 1986. The material amounts to more than a half of the slim volume, allowing readers to form their own opinions. Indeed, a definite evaluation of Bosl's conduct is not

possible, as comprehensive sources are missing and some interpretations are thus open to challenge.

But there is at least considerable uncertainty – this reviewer is tempted to speak of strong doubts – about Bosl's alleged acts of resistance. His efforts at dissociating himself from the regime are clearly outlined. Bosl may not have been an especially dedicated follower of the Nazis. But he also did not stand aside when loyalty helped foster his academic career. An article by Matthias Berg sheds light on this somewhat neglected aspect and is therefore strongly recommended for supplementary reading (*Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 59 (2011), pp. 46-63). Berg's analysis of Bosl's career strategy during the Third Reich completes Kedar's and Herde's findings. By linking his – in some respects traditional – scholarly interests to the topics and approaches of *Volksforschung*, the Bavarian historian took part in an innovative yet ideologically charged branch of historiography. He secured access to funding via the *SS-Ahnenerbe*, which offered him the chance to maintain his scholarly work even in 1944. After 1945, Bosl's publications could be read as non-political, as most of his interested readers and colleagues silently agreed on ignoring the context of the *Volksgeschichte* paradigm.

Kedar's and Herde's book convinced the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* to question the 'legend of a humanist' (6 July 2011). Although the deconstruction of Bosl's self-portrayal may not be set off against his later merits in the young German democracy, there remains some ambiguity about the way in which he and his surroundings made use of the martyrdom of Robert Limpert. Apart from

this particular constellation, it is far more irritating that Bosl's biography and especially his political flexibility after 1945 was only too common in postwar German academia and society more broadly. Bosl's 'legend' is also the legend of numerous representatives of the educated *Bildungsbürgertum* and especially of quite a few young academics who began their career in the 1930s, rewrote their own biographies after 1945, swiftly advanced in the young German democracy, and shaped their disciplines for decades. In this respect, Kedar and Herde have provided a contribution to an ample field of research, which will continue to attract scholarly attention.

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