

REVIEWS

Gerda Lerner. *Why History Matters: Life and Thought*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. Pp. xvii, 249. Cloth, \$30.00; ISBN 0-19-504644-7. Paper, \$13.95; ISBN 0-19-512289-5.

Those of you who have been around two or three decades might skip this paragraph and go to the second paragraph below. Those new to the study of history should read my remarks about how stodgy and male-dominated the historical profession used to be. During the decade of the sixties historians were much slower than their counterparts in sociology, anthropology, political science, and literature in believing that women's studies were relevant to their discipline. History faculties were more heavily dominated by males than were other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. Many college students who were part of the civil rights and antiwar movements thought of history as unimportant. History, they believed, dealt with a dead and meaningless past--they were more concerned with changing the present. As a young history professor in 1975 I organized a summer workshop on methods, materials, and themes for teaching women's history in the secondary classrooms of Kansas. I wrote both the AHA and the OAH and asked for any materials or suggestions they might have--they were sympathetic but had nothing available; I relied on other disciplines and various activist organizations for materials and resource people.

There has been a great deal of change in the historical profession since then. Gerda Lerner, the late Joan Kelly, and an increasing number of other feminist historians have brought women's studies into the mainstream of historical scholarship and teaching. Lerner has steadily insisted on high standards of scholarship and the development of a different perspective in looking at the past of those previously marginalized--not only women, but other groups oppressed because of race, religion, sexual orientation, or other reasons.

In *Why History Matters* she provides a good introduction to her philosophy of history and how her early life shaped that philosophy. Her earlier volume of essays, *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), contained her views on history and feminism from 1969 to 1979. She focuses in the present work on her ideas since 1980, but begins with her early years in Austria during the Holocaust and as a wartime refugee.

In the first of three parts, one entitled "History as Memory," she writes of her own early life--how her personal history has influenced her ideas and her scholarship. "I have sometimes been asked, 'How has your being Jewish influenced your work in Women's History?' The simplest way I can answer this question is, I am a historian because of my Jewish experience." After having been jailed, she and her mother and sister were able to join her father in Liechtenstein shortly before *Kristallnacht*. After making their way to the United States, she and others like her registered as "enemy aliens" during World War II. She provides a moving account of adjusting to a new language and culture.

Lerner concludes the first part by describing a recent visit to France, Germany, and Austria. She walks in southern France among the ruins of those medieval victims of

persecution, the Cathars. She ends this section with her speech in Austria in which she accepts a state prize for women historians fifty years after she had fled "as an outsider, branded subhuman and deviant." She concludes: "I accept this prize with gratitude and a deep sense of obligation toward those who were forgotten, those who were exiled and hunted, and those who, in the darkest times, acted as human beings."

The second part, entitled "History: Theory and Practice," opens with an account of early non-violent resistance among Quakers and abolitionists in America, including a number of women leaders, and how this idea, next expressed in the writings of Thoreau, spread to Tolstoy in Russia, Gandhi in India, and then back to America during the civil rights movement.

American values and the conflicts between community and individualism are explored in a chapter that discusses the persecution of various religious groups, including Jews, Catholics, and Mormons at different times, and the persecution of ethnic minorities, including Blacks, Chinese, Irish, Native Americans, and others. Lerner also writes about the pressures for political conformity against trade unionists in the Progressive era, the deportation of alleged anarchists during the twenties, the McCarthyism of the fifties, and the attack on wartime opponents during the Vietnam War. These present many contradictions in our values and beliefs, she notes, but there are many other contradictions, such as the "wasteful and insensitive" destruction of the landscape, along with wilderness preservation, resource conservation, and movements for pure air and water. The exclusion of women from public offices and corporate power, and "church and academic leadership" until recently, along with continued under-representation, presents another such contradiction. "In order to draw on the largest possible pool of talent to solve the problems of the 21st century, open access to education and opportunity not only for women but for minorities and the economically disadvantaged is a national necessity."

The second part concludes with her presidential address in 1982 to the Organization of American Historians on the necessity of history: "For women, all history up to the twentieth century has truly been prehistory." It is presently history, "the known and ordered past," which enables those today to develop goals and visions for the future.

The third part of the work, entitled "Re-Visioning History," expresses most fully Lerner's philosophy of history and the need for change.

Gender, race, ethnicity, and class are processes *through which hierarchical relations are created and maintained in such a way as to give some men power and privilege over other men and over women by their control of material resources, sexual and reproductive services, education and knowledge.* (Italics original)

It is the historical experience of women, she holds, in her final chapter, rather than the biological differences, that has conditioned women to their unequal roles. In prehistoric societies men and women pursued different roles based on their biological differences.

Women and men were involved in different economic activities but were not necessarily unequal. Women become more subordinate as the "cultural elaboration of difference" develops into an institutionalized hierarchy that is patriarchal. Women's history, Lerner asserts, connects women to their past and is essential in creating a feminist consciousness and in developing a vision for the future. The stories of the past become part of our present and future, she concludes, and "shapes the way next generations experience their lives. That is why history matters."

This work would obviously be of interest in classes on women's history, but I plan to use it also in my historiography class. Some of Lerner's ideas relating to patriarchy are discussed in greater detail in her other works, but here she provides topics for discussion on a wide variety of subjects relating to Carl Becker and relativism, minorities and the oppressed, and many other areas in modern historiography.

Emporia State University

Sam Dicks

C.J. Bartlett. *Peace, War and the European Powers, 1814-1914.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996. Pp. x, 202. Cloth, \$45.00; ISBN 0-312-16137-9. Paper, \$18.95; ISBN 0-312-16138-7.

Peace, War and the European Powers, 1814-1914 is the first title published in a new British series, *European History in Perspective*, edited by Jeremy Black. The author, C.J. Bartlett, Professor of International History at the University of Dundee, has written extensively on European diplomacy in the nineteenth century, including *Great Britain and Sea Power, 1815-1853* (1963), *Castlereagh* (1966), and *Defense of Diplomacy* (1993). The book's brief 180 pages devote equal time to European diplomacy from the Congress of Vienna to the Franco-Prussian war and from the Bismarckian System to World War I.

In this "extended essay," Bartlett tests the views of those historians who attribute the relative peacefulness of the nineteenth century to the role of diplomacy based on what Paul Schoeder has called "consensual politics," the willingness of European diplomats to work within an international system rather than single-mindedly pursuing national self-interest. While the author does see some evidence of "consensual politics" in the nineteenth century, especially in the era immediately following the Napoleonic wars, he points out how frequently the European powers used the international system to promote their own interests.

Bartlett argues that, rather than a balance of power system or an equilibrium maintaining peace in the nineteenth century, it was a power imbalance against France before 1854 and a power imbalance in favor of Germany in the latter part of the century that helped to prevent major wars from occurring. The danger of war was increased when there was a movement away from imbalance, as happened in the post-Crimean war period