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Book review

The Logistic Revolution: The Rise of Logistics in the Mass Consumption Society, Richard Vahrenkamp. Josef Eul Verlag GmbH, Köln (2012). €59 (paperback), ISBN: 978-3-8441-0118-8

This book, written by a Professor of Logistics at the University of Kassel in Germany, considers the development of logistics activity by charting the parallel developments of the growth in the mass consumption society and the evolution of transport infrastructure and services. The focus is on the German situation, but with some examples from elsewhere. Most of the attention is devoted to the 20th century, though with some discussion of earlier transport developments associated with the emergence of the railway in the mid-19th century. The growth of the German railway and road networks receives a lot of attention, as does the role of policy makers in funding and regulating the transport sector. The consequences for freight transport activity are discussed in a lively and engaging manner. The final sections of the book deal with the Single European Market and the associated supply chain developments and transport policies of the last 20 years. Overwhelmingly, though, the book concentrates on the interrelationships between the historical development of the retailing and transport sectors in Germany, making a strong argument for the fundamental role of "logistics" in allowing the mass consumption society.

The overall purpose and intended readership of the book could be clearer. It is likely to be of interest primarily to historians of transport or retailing, but should also appeal to those interested mainly in present day freight transport activity. A clearer rationale for the structure and content of the book would have helped, since the inclusion of some material is not sufficiently justified in the broader context of the topics discussed. In general, though, the author makes a good case of integrating the complex web of social, political, economic and technological developments. The analysis demonstrates very clearly the ways in which contemporary supply chains, particularly for consumer goods, have evolved, together with the critical role of the transport modes in this evolution. The use of many examples (e.g. relating to the growth and decline of specific department stores, or the expansion of individual logistics service providers) enriches the broader discussion of the key trends, although the sections on contemporary European transport policy add relatively little to knowledge. That said, this discussion does draw the book to a close by emphasising the important changes in the scale and nature of logistics activity and political intervention in more recent years. At times, the examples seem to stand in isolation and, while interesting in their own right, are not sufficiently related to the overall arguments being presented.

This book is generally well-written and accessible, though with the occasional ambiguous section of translation or inconsistent syntax style. While written in an accessible style that suggests it may be targeting a wider audience of interested lay people, there is comprehensive referencing of source material which indicates considerable rigour on the part of the author in conducting the research. It therefore represents a solid piece of research likely to be of value to other researchers or to academics seeking case study material to use with groups of students studying transport geography, economic development or related courses. Not surprisingly, sources are almost exclusively in German. While some of the material presented is unique to the German experience, not least the changing spatial and political structure of Germany during the 20th century, there are many aspects of the analysis that can be generalised across the European continent (and possibly beyond) and at times the author makes some good comparisons with other countries. There are sufficient maps and other supporting materials to ensure that those not familiar with German geography are able to make sense of the detailed content.

In conclusion, the book makes a considerable contribution to the freight transport literature, building on a broad range of social science disciplines, with the German focus complementing the existing English language literature. It also makes a strong case for other disciplines to recognise the huge importance of the role of transport in determining the nature of the consumer-driven society now found across Europe. The translation of the original German text into English is certainly worthwhile so as to reach a broader audience, although the price of the book is likely to deter those with only a passing interest in the topic.

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