Review of Professor em. Rolf-Harald Wippich, former professor of European history at Sophia University, Tokyo (Japan), in Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft [Journal of History], edited by Wolfgang Benz et al. (Metropol: Berlin), vol. 5 (2014), pp. 465-467:

Shipowner and politician: Those are the striking career points between which the eventful life of Michael Jebsen (1835-1899) from North Schleswig oscillated. Bert Becker precisely fixed the references in the subtitle of his substantial biography on the entrepreneur from Apenrade. This is because Jebsen was always more than a mere shipowner and local politician from the northern edge of Germany: on the contrary, he purposively extended his activities to the national and to the international stage. (…)

Jebsen was a moderate and a firm advocate of economic growth in Germany’s global-political expansion. He supported these goals for national-political concerns, demonstrating sound judgement but was otherwise rather lukewarm to colonialist fervour and to the German Empire’s engagement in China at Kiaochow. In that respect, he supported the naval policies of Tirpitz and made a contribution to the inauguration of world politics; through that he expected increased protection of merchant shipping and overseas trade, a belief which finally proved to be mistaken.

The author, who teaches modern history at the University of Hong Kong, characterises his protagonist as “Agent of Globality” (p. 17), a judgement which can only be unquestionably confirmed after studying the minutely detailed vita. As an exemplary symbolic figure of his time, Michael Jebsen, who as a politician supported important decisions and profited from them as an entrepreneur, is worthy of an academic and critical treatment: on the one hand, the tiresome path of Germany’s inner unification is vividly reflected in his activities, on the other, he is effectively the personification of the fatal course of the German Empire’s imperialist expansion via foreign ambitions and shipping interests. With regard to Becker’s intention which was to present a “culturally-oriented biography” (p. 16), it has entirely worked out.

The book offers a lively testimony to an outstanding personality of the Wilhelminian era. That the shipping company founded by Jebsen is still active until the present day in East Asia is not a point which should only be mentioned in passing. The work with its rich content is impressive and this is not only due to the book’s physical weight.