

ERNST NOLTE

The Past That Will Not Pass: A Speech That Could Be Written but Not Delivered

The “past that will not pass” can only mean the National-Socialist past of the Germans or of Germany. The theme implies the notion that normally the past passes and that thus this nonpassing must be something exceptional. Still, in normally passing, the past cannot be seen as disappearing. The age of Napoleon I, for example, is repeatedly made present in historical studies. The same is true for the age of Augustus. But these pasts have apparently lost the vividness that they had for their contemporaries. For this reason they can be left to the historians. The National-Socialist past, however, appears not to be subject to this process of attenuation, as Hermann Lübke recently pointed out. It seems to be becoming more vital and more powerful—not as a representative model but as a bugaboo, as a past that is in the process of establishing itself in the present or that is suspended above the present like an executioner’s sword.

BLACK AND WHITE IMAGES

There are good reasons for this. The more unequivocally the Federal Republic and Western nations in general develop toward social-welfare societies, the more disturbing becomes the image of the Third Reich with its ideology of warlike self-sacrifice; its maxim of “canons instead of butter”; and the Edda quotations, such as “Our Death Will Be a Festive One,” loudly chanted at school celebrations. All people today are pacifists by conviction, but they cannot look back from a safe distance upon the bellicosity of the Third Reich because they know that year in and year out both superpowers spend far more for their arms than Hitler spent from 1933 to 1939. Thus a deep-seated insecurity remains. We prefer to confront our enemies from a position of certainty rather than from the confusion of the present.

Much the same can be said for feminism: In National Socialism, the “mania of masculinity” was still full of provocative self-confidence. In the present, however, this masculinity tends to efface itself and go underground. Thus National Socialism is the present enemy. Hitler’s claim of

“world domination” appears to us to be all the more horrifying as it becomes the more evident that in world politics today, the Federal Republic can at maximum play a moderately important role. Still, harmlessness is not attributed to this country, and in many places the fear is still alive that while the Federal Republic could not be the cause, it could be the place where a third world war begins. More than anything else, however, memories of the Final Solution have contributed to the inability of the past to pass. The monstrosity of the factory-scale annihilation of several million humans appears to us to be all the more incomprehensible since the Federal Republic has joined the vanguard of humanitarian nations. But doubts have remained even here, and numerous foreigners have been as unlikely as the Germans to believe in the identity of *pays legal* and *pays réel*.

But has it only been the stubbornness of the *pays réel* of normal, everyday Germans who have set themselves against this nonpassing of the past and have wanted a line to be drawn so that the German past might be seen as not essentially different from other pasts?

Is there not a core of truth in many of these questions and arguments that in a sense erect a wall against the desire to ceaselessly deal with National Socialism? I am offering some of these arguments and questions in order to conceptualize this “failing,” which, in my opinion, is the decisive one, and to outline this process of “coming to grips with the past,” which has little to do with the much-evoked desire to finally draw a line under the German past.

It is especially those people who most frequently and most negatively speak of “interests” who fail to allow the question whether with this nonpassing of the past interests are also at play, for example, the interests of a new generation in the age-old struggle against “the fathers”—or interests of the persecuted and their heirs in having a permanent special status and the privileges that go with it.

The talk about “the guilt of the Germans” all too blithely overlooks the similarity to the talk about “the guilt of the Jews,” which was a main argument of the National Socialists. All accusations of guilt that come from Germans are dishonest since the accusers fail to include themselves or the group they represent and in essence simply desire to administer the coup de grace to their old enemies.

All the attention devoted to the Final Solution simply diverts our attention from important facts about the National-Socialist period—such as the euthanasia program and the treatment of Russian prisoners of war. More important, however, it diverts attention away from pressing questions of the present—for example, the question of “unborn life” or the presence of genocide yesterday in Vietnam and today in Afghanistan.

A rash pronouncement by a member of the Bundestag about certain demands by spokesmen of Jewish organizations or the slip into tasteless-

ness of a municipal politician are blown-up symptoms of “anti-Semitism,” as if all memory of the genuine and by no means exclusively National-Socialist anti-Semitism of the Weimar period had disappeared. And at the same time the television broadcast *Shoah*, the moving documentary film by a Jewish director, in several places makes it seem plausible that the SS troops in the concentration camps might themselves have been victims of a sort and that among the Polish victims of National Socialism there was virulent anti-Semitism.

The visit of the U.S. president to the military cemetery in Bitburg was the cause of a very emotional discussion. The fear of being accused of settling old scores, and in fact of any comparisons at all, prevented the simple question of what it would have meant if in 1953 the chancellor of the Federal Republic had refused to visit the national cemetery in Arlington, arguing that men were buried there who had participated in terror attacks on the German civilian population.

For the historian the most regrettable result of the nonpassing of the past is that the simplest rules that are in effect for every past appear to be suspended: Every past is knowable in its complexity; the connectedness in which the past is interwoven should be made more visible; black-and-white images of politically involved contemporaries should be correctable; earlier histories should be subject to revision.

But in the case of the Third Reich, this rule seems to be “dangerous for the people”: Could it not lead to a vindication of Hitler or at least to exculpation of the Germans? Might it not allow for the possibility that the Germans could again identify with the Third Reich, as the great majority did between 1935 and 1939, and that they might fail to learn the lesson imposed upon them by history?

These questions can be answered briefly and apodictically: No German can desire to justify Hitler, even if only because of his March 1945 order to annihilate the German people. Historians and journalists cannot guarantee that the Germans will learn lessons from history—but that is guaranteed by the total shift in the relationships of power and by the obvious and evident results of two great defeats. The Germans can of course still learn false lessons, but only in one way, a way that would be novel and “anti-Fascist.”

It is true that there has been no shortage of efforts to transcend the level of polemic and to draw a more objective picture of the Third Reich and its führer. It will suffice to mention the names of Joachim Fest and Sebastian Haffner. Both focused on the domestic German situation, however. I would like to attempt, using a few questions and key words, to suggest the perspective in which this past should be viewed if it is to be treated with the equality that is a principal postulate of philosophy and of any historical scholarship that desires to highlight differences.

SHEDDING LIGHT WITH KEY CONCEPTS

Max Erwin von Scheubner-Richter, who later was to be one of Hitler's closest associates and who in 1923 during the march to the *Feldherrenhalle* in Munich was felled by a bullet, was a German consul in Erzerum. There he was witness to the deportations of the Armenian population, which represented the beginnings of the first great act of genocide in the twentieth century. He spared no effort to try to hinder the Turkish officials, and in 1938 his biographer concludes his description of these events: “But what were these few people against the Turk's will to annihilate, against people who closed their ears even to the most direct reproaches from Berlin. What could they do against the wolflike savagery of the Kurds who were loosed upon the Armenians, against this horrendous catastrophe in which one people of Asia was settling scores with the other one in an Asiatic way, far from European civilization?”

No one knows what Scheubner-Richter would have done if he, instead of Alfred Rosenberg, had been made minister for the occupied *Ostgebiete* [Nazi-occupied eastern territories]. But little speaks for the idea that there was a fundamental difference between Scheubner-Richter and Rosenberg and Himmler, or even between Scheubner-Richter and Hitler. But then one must ask: What could bring men who had experienced the act of genocide as “Asiatic” to initiate an act of genocide of an even more brutal nature? There are a few concepts that can shed light on this situation. One of them is the following:

When Hitler received news of the capitulation of the 6th Army in Stalingrad on February 1, 1943, he predicted in his briefing that several of the captured officers would become involved in Soviet propaganda: “You have to imagine, he (an officer like this) comes to Moscow, and imagine the ‘rat cage.’ He'd sign anything. He will make confessions, proclamations.”

Commentators offer the explanation that “rat cage” meant Lubjanka. I think that is wrong.

In George Orwell's *1984* there is a description of how the hero, Winston Smith, after long abuse is finally forced by Big Brother's secret police to deny his fiancée and thus to renounce his humanity. They place a cage containing a half-starved rat in front of his head. The interrogator threatens to open the door, and at that point Winston Smith collapses. Orwell did not invent this story. It can be found in numerous places in anti-Bolshevik literature about the Russian Civil War, among other places in the writing of the usually reliable socialist Melgunov. It is attributed to the “Chinese Cheka.”

GULAG ARCHIPELAGO AND AUSCHWITZ

It is a notable shortcoming that the literature about National Socialism does not know or does not want to admit to what degree all the deeds—

with the sole exception of the technical process of gassing—that the National Socialists later committed had already been described in the voluminous literature of the 1920s: mass deportations and executions, torture, death camps, the extermination of entire groups using strictly objective selection criteria, and public demands for the annihilation of millions of guiltless people who were thought to be “enemies.”

It is likely that many of these reports were exaggerated. It is certain that the “White terror” also committed terrible deeds, even though its program contained no analogy to the “extermination of the bourgeoisie.” Nonetheless, the following question must seem permissible, even unavoidable: Did the National Socialists or Hitler perhaps commit an “Asiatic” deed merely because they and their ilk considered themselves to be potential victims of an “Asiatic” deed? Was the Gulag Archipelago not primary to Auschwitz? Was the Bolshevik murder of an entire class not the logical and factual prius of the “racial murder” of National Socialism? Cannot Hitler’s most secret deeds be explained by the fact that he had *not* forgotten the rat cage? Did Auschwitz in its root causes not originate in a past that would not pass?

One does not have to have read Melgunov’s now-vanished book to ask such questions. But one fears to pose them. I have long feared to pose them. They are seen as bellicose anti-Communist slogans or as products of the cold war. They also do not quite fit into the discipline of history, which is often forced to choose narrower questions. But these questions rest on simple truths. To intentionally ignore truths may have moral reasons, but it also violates the ethos of the discipline.

This ethos would be violated if historians were to stop at such facts and questions and not seek to place them in a greater context—such as the qualitative ruptures in European history that begin with the industrial revolution and that have always inspired an agitated search for the “guilty parties” or for the “originator” of what is seen as a threatening development. Only in this framework can it become clear that despite all similarities the acts of biological annihilation carried out by the National Socialists were qualitatively different than the social annihilation that Bolshevism undertook. No one murder, and especially not a mass murder, can “justify” another, and we will be led astray by an attitude that points only to the *one* murder and to the *one* mass murder and ignores the other, even though a causal nexus is probable.

Those who desire to envision history not as a mythologem but rather in its essential context are forced to a central conclusion: If history, in all its darkness and its horrors, but also in its confusing novelty, is to have a meaning for coming generations, this meaning must be the liberation from collectivist thinking. That should also mean the decisive turn to a liberal and democratic political order that allows and even encourages criticism insofar as it takes aim at acts, ways of thinking, and traditions, and thus also at governments and organizations of all kinds. Organizations and

governments, however, are obliged to stigmatize criticism of existing states of affairs as impermissible. Individuals can free themselves from these stigmas only with great difficulty. This means criticism of “the” Jews, “the” Russians, “the” Germans, or “the” petit-bourgeoisie. To the degree that the debate about National Socialism is characterized by this kind of collectivist thinking, one should draw a line. It cannot be denied that if this happens, thoughtlessness and self-satisfaction will have a heyday. But it *does not have to be* that way, and truth does not have to be made dependent upon utility. A more comprehensive debate, one that would have to mostly consist of thinking about the history of the past two centuries, might cause the past about which we are talking here to pass—as is suitable for every past. And this kind of a debate would also appropriate the past, making it our own.

Source: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, June 6, 1986

Author’s Note: The title for this speech suggested by the Römerberg Talks (a conference) was “The Past That Will Not Pass: To Debate or to Draw the Line?”

JÜRGEN HABERMAS

A Kind of Settlement of Damages: The Apologetic Tendencies in German History Writing

It is a notable shortcoming that the literature about National Socialism does not know or does not want to admit to what degree all the deeds—with the sole exception of the technical process of gassing—that the National Socialists later committed had already been described in the voluminous literature of the 1920s. . . . Did the National Socialists or Hitler perhaps commit an “Asiatic” deed merely because they and their ilk considered themselves to be potential victims of an “Asiatic” deed?

Ernst Nolte, in the
Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, June 6, 1986

I

The Erlangen historian Michael Stürmer argues for a functional interpretation of historical consciousness: “In a land without history, the future is controlled by those who determine the content of memory, who coin concepts and interpret the past.” In keeping with Joachim Ritter’s neoconservative image of the world, which was updated by his students in the 1970s, Stürmer envisions the processes of modernization as a kind of unavoidable settlement of damages. This settlement occurs because the individual must be compensated for the inevitable alienation that as a “social molecule” he experiences in material industrial society. In keeping with the molecule metaphor, Stürmer is less interested in the identity of the individual than in the integration of the community. Pluralism in values and interests leads, “when it can no longer find common ground, sooner or later to civil war.” What is needed, according to Stürmer, is “a social mechanism for endowing higher meaning, something that, after religion, only nation and patriotism have been capable of.” A politically responsible discipline of history will heed the call to activate such a mechanism and produce and disseminate a historical image that can foster a national consensus. The discipline of history is “propelled by collective, for the most part unconscious, drives toward the inner endowment of higher

meaning, but it must”—and this is what Stürmer sees as a real dilemma—“work this out according to scholarly methods.” In this view, the discipline sets out to “find the balance between endowing higher meaning and demythologizing.”

Let us first observe the Cologne historian Andreas Hillgruber as he walks this tightrope. I feel confident in approaching the most recent study of this renowned historian, even though I have no special competence in the field, since the investigation evidently is addressed to laymen. Hillgruber’s study was recently released in a deluxe edition by Siedler Verlag with the title *Zweierlei Untergang* [Twofold Fall]. I will record the observations of a patient subjected to a revisionist operation on his historical consciousness.

In the first part of his study Hillgruber describes the collapse of the German eastern front during the last year of the war, 1944–1945. In the first pages he mentions the “problem of identification.” With which side in the conflict should the author identify? Four possible perspectives suggest themselves. He dismisses the position taken by the would-be assassins of Hitler on July 20, 1944, as merely “preferentially ethical” and therefore inferior to the “responsibly ethical” position of the local commanders, state officials, and mayors. This leaves three perspectives for consideration. Hillgruber dismisses Hitler’s perspective of perseverance and survival as social Darwinism. Nor does an identification with the victors seem possible; such a perspective of liberation would only be appropriate for the victims of the concentration camps, he claims, and not for the German nation as a whole. The historian has just one choice: “He must identify with the concrete fate of the German population in the East and with the desperate and sacrificial efforts of the German army in the eastern theater and of the German navy in the Baltic. The military forces in the East were trying to protect the German population in the East from the orgies of revenge by the Red Army, the mass rapes, the random murders, and the forced deportation, and . . . to hold open the escape route to the West.”

Perplexed, one wonders why a historian in 1986 has to block out a retrospective point of view from the distance of forty years, in other words, his own perspective, a standpoint from which he cannot remove himself anyway. Additionally, his own real-time perspective offers hermeneutical advantages. It sets in relation the selective perceptions of the parties involved; it weighs them against one another and completes them from the perspective of knowledge acquired since then. Hillgruber does not want to write his presentation from this, dare one say “normal” standpoint, because, as he claims, then questions of “morality in wars of annihilation” would come into play. And they are to be ruled out. Here Hillgruber brings to mind the remark by Norbert Blüm. Blüm argued that the actions of annihilation in the camps could in fact continue only as long as the German eastern front held. This fact ought to cast a long shadow on the “picture of horror of raped and murdered women and children” that

presented itself to the German soldiers who retook Nemmersdorf, for example. Hillgruber wants to present what happened in eastern Germany from the view of the brave soldiers, the desperate civilian population, also the “tried and true” higher-ups of the Nazi party (NSDAP); he wants to set himself inside the experiences of the fighters of yesteryear, at a point when they are not yet compromised and depreciated by our retrospective knowledge. This intention explains the principle behind his dividing the study into two parts: “Collapse in the East” and “Annihilation of the Jews.” These are two processes that Hillgruber precisely does *not*, despite the announcement on the dust jacket, want to show “in their gloomy interweaving.”

II

After completing this operation in the first part of his study, which evidently is the kind of history that Stürmer would call the endowing of higher meaning, Hillgruber does not hesitate in the second part of his study to make use of the knowledge of the latter-day historians in order to prove a different thesis. In the foreword he introduces the notion that the expulsion of the Germans from the East is in no way to be understood as a “response” by the Allies to the crimes in the concentration camps. By reference to the Allied war aims he argues that “at no point was there ever a prospect, once Germany was defeated, of preserving the greater part of the Prussian-German eastern provinces.” He explains the lack of interest on the part of the Western powers in preserving the eastern provinces by referring to a “cliché-image of Prussia” that conditioned the thinking of Allied policymakers. It does not occur to Hillgruber that the structure of power in the Reich could actually have had something to do, as the Allies assumed, with the social structure especially well preserved in Prussia. He makes no use of social-scientific information. Otherwise he could hardly have attributed the transgressions of the Red Army, for example, which occurred not only in Germany but also before that in Poland, Rumania, and Hungary, to the barbaric “notions of war” of the Stalinist period. Be that as it may, the Western powers were blinded by their illusorily perceived war aim, the destruction of Prussia. Only too late did they recognize how “all Europe,” through the march forward of the Russians, would become “the loser of the catastrophe of 1945.”

By setting the stage in this way, then, Hillgruber can push the “struggle” of the German Army of the East into what he sees as the proper light—the “desperate defensive battle for the preservation of the great power status of the German Reich, which, according to the will of the Allies, had to be destroyed. The German Army of the East provided an umbrella of protection for a centuries-old settlement area, the homeland of millions, who . . . lived in the heartland of the German Reich.” The dramatic presentation

closes then with a wishful interpretation of the surrender on May 8, 1945: Forty years later the question of the “reconstruction of the destroyed European Center (is) . . . as open as it was then. Those living at that time, whether as actors or as victims, became witnesses of the catastrophe of eastern Germany.” The moral of the story is obvious (to him): Today at least the alliance of forces is correct.

In the second part, Hillgruber takes twenty-two pages to treat the aspect of the war that he had so far kept separate from the “tragic” acts of heroism on the eastern front. The subtitle of the book already signals a changed perspective. The “Destruction of the German Reich,” something that had been pledged in the rhetoric of the war pamphlets (and that evidently happened only on the eastern front), stands in contrast to the soberly registered “End of the European Jewry.” Now, “destruction” requires an aggressive opponent; an “end” seems to some extent to appear on its own. In the first part of the book “the destruction of whole armies” stands “beside the sacrifice of individuals”; in the second part of the book, the topic is “stationary successor organizations” of the *Einsatzgruppen*. While in the first section “many anonymous people reached beyond themselves in the imminent catastrophe,” in the second section the gas chambers are euphemized as a “more effective means” of liquidation. In the first section, we read the unrevised, unpurified clichés of a jargon retained since childhood; in the second section, we experience the frozen language of bureaucracy. However, the historian does not simply switch the perspective of presentation. In the second section he sets out to prove that “the murder of the Jews” was “exclusively a consequence of the radical doctrine of race.”

Stürmer was interested in the question, To what extent had it been Hitler’s war and to what extent the war of the Germans? Hillgruber poses the analogous question with regard to the annihilation of the Jews. He poses hypothetical considerations about how life would have looked for the Jews if a right-wing coalition like the nationalists and the *Stahlhelmer* [veterans’ group] instead of the Nazis had come into power in 1933. The Nuremberg laws would still have been introduced, just as would all other measures up through 1938 that forced on the Jews a “separate consciousness.” This would have been so since these measures found “accord with the sensibilities of a large part of the society.” Hillgruber doubts, however, that *all* decisionmakers between 1938 and 1941 saw a policy of forced emigration as the best solution to the Jewish question. Still, by that time, two-thirds of the German Jews had “ended up abroad.” Finally, regarding the implementation after 1941 of the Final Solution, it was Hitler alone, according to Hillgruber, who had his mind set on it from the beginning. Hitler wanted the physical annihilation of all Jews “because only such a ‘racial revolution’ could lend permanence to the world-power status of his

Reich." Since Hillgruber does not use the verb in the subjunctive, one does not know whether the historian has adopted the perspective of the participants this time too.

At any rate, Hillgruber makes a sharp distinction between the euthanasia programs, to which 100,000 mentally ill fell victim, and the annihilation of the Jews proper. Against the backdrop of the social Darwinism of human genetics, the killing of "life unworthy of living" is supposed to have found support in the populace. However, Hitler in his idea of the Final Solution is supposed to have been isolated even in the narrowest leadership circles, "including Göring, Himmler and Heydrich." After Hitler has been identified as the sole responsible author for the idea and decision, only its execution needs an explanation. But this explanation ignores the frightening fact that the mass of the population—as Hillgruber certainly assumes—was silent throughout all of it.

To be sure, the goal of the difficult neoconservative revision would be endangered if this phenomenon of silence had, after all, to be delivered up to a moral judgment. At this point, therefore, the historian, who has been writing in the narrative mode, switches over to an anthropological-general tone. In his opinion, "the acceptance by the mass of the populace of the gruesome events, events that were at least darkly suspected, points out the historical singularity of the event." Standing firmly in the tradition of the German mandarin, Hillgruber is most deeply appalled by the high proportion of university-trained men who participated—as if there were not a completely plausible explanation for that. In short, the phenomenon that a civilized populace let these horrible things happen is one that Hillgruber removes from the technical competence of the overburdened historian and blithely pushes off into the dimension of the generally human.

III

In the *Historische Zeitschrift* (vol. 242, 1986, pp. 465ff.) Hillgruber's colleague from Bonn, Klaus Hildebrand, commends a work by Ernst Nolte as "showing the way" because the work does the service of removing the "seemingly unique" quality of the history of the Third Reich. As part of the process of historicizing, he categorizes "the destructive capacity of the worldview and of the regime" as part of the global development of totalitarianism. Nolte, who with his book *Faschismus in seiner Epoche* [Fascism in Its Epoch] (1963) had already found wide acclaim, is in fact cut from a different cloth than is Hillgruber.

In his contribution "Zwischen Mythos und Revisionismus" [Between Myth and Revisionism], he based the necessity for a revision on the observation that the history of the Third Reich had predominantly been written by the victors, who then made it into a "negative myth." To illustrate, Nolte invites us to take part in a tasteful thought experiment. He sketches for us the image of Israel that would be held by a victorious PLO

after the destruction of Israel: "For decades, perhaps even for a century, no one would venture . . . to attribute the rise of Zionism to its spirit of resistance against European anti-Semitism." Even the theory of totalitarianism, which predominated in German historical scholarship of the 1950s, offered no change in perspective from the negative myth initiated by the historians of the victorious nations; instead, the totalitarianism theory had only led to the Soviet Union also being pulled into the negative image. A concept that lives to that extent off the contrast with the democratic constitutional state is not enough for Nolte; he attributes much to mutual threats of destruction. Long before Auschwitz, Hitler, so he claims, had good grounds to believe that his opponents wanted to destroy him—"annihilate" is the word in the English original. As proof he cites the "declaration of war" that Chaim Weizmann in September 1939 delivered on behalf of the Jewish World Congress and that then was supposed to justify Hitler in treating German Jews as prisoners of war—and in deporting them. A few weeks ago one could have read in *Die Zeit* (although without names being named) that Nolte served up this argument to a Jewish dinner guest, his colleague, historian Saul Friedländer of Tel Aviv.

Nolte is the officious-conservative narrator who tackles the "identity problem." He solves Stürmer's dilemma between the endowment of higher meaning and scholarship through an energetic decision and chooses as a point of connection for his presentation the terror of the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia. He reconstructs a background history for mass terror. As it reaches back in time it includes the "Gulag," Stalin's expulsion of the kulaks, and the Bolshevik revolution; he sees antecedents to mass terror in Babeuf, the early socialists, and the agrarian reformers of the early nineteenth century. In all these figures he perceives a line of revolt against cultural and social modernization, a revolt driven by the illusionary and passionate longing for the reestablishment of an understandable, autarchic world. In this context of terror stretching across the globe and over the centuries, the annihilation of the Jews appears as a regrettable, but perfectly understandable, result. It is seen as a reaction by Hitler to what he is assumed to have sensed as a threat of destruction: "The so-called annihilation of the Jews during the Third Reich was a reaction or a distorted copy, but not a first act or an original."

Nolte attempts in another essay to explain the philosophical background of his "trilogy on the history of modern ideologies." This essay will not be discussed here. In what Nolte, the student of Heidegger, calls his "philosophical writing of history," I am interested only in the "philosophical."

In the early 1950s there was a debate in philosophical anthropology about whether human beings were "open to the world" or "captives of the environment." The discussion involved A. Gehlen, H. Plessner, K. Lorenz, and E. Rothacker. Nolte's rather odd use of the Heideggerian concept of "transcendence" reminds me of this discussion. He has been

using “transcendence,” actually since 1963, to explain the great shift, the historical process of the breakup of a traditional way of life in the transition to modernity; his explanation invokes the timeless category of the anthropological-original. At this depth of abstraction, in which all cats are gray, he pleads for understanding for the anti-modernist impulses. These impulses are directed against an “unconditional affirmation of practical transcendence.” By this category of practical transcendence Nolte refers to the putatively ontologically grounded “unity of world economy, technology, science and emancipation.” All this fits neatly with attitudes that dominate today—and with the circle dance of Californian worldviews that sprout from it. The leveling of differences required by this abstraction, however, is rather more annoying; from this perspective it makes “Marx and Maurras, Engels and Hitler, despite all the emphasis on their contrasts, nevertheless related figures.” Not until Marxism and fascism are acknowledged to be attempts to answer “the frightening realities of modernity” can the true intention of National Socialism be neatly and cleanly separated from its unhappy practice. “The ‘atrocities’ was not concluded with the final intention, but rather with the ascribing of guilt, a process that directed itself against a human group that itself was already so severely affected by the process of emancipation in liberal society that it declared itself, in the words of some of its prominent representatives, to be mortally endangered.”

Now, one could let the scurrilous background philosophy of this prominent, eccentric mind rest on its own merits, if the neoconservative historians did not feel obliged to play the game of revisionism in precisely this way.

As a contribution to this year’s Römerberg Talks, a conference that also treated the topic of the “past that will not pass” in presentations by Hans and Wolfgang Mommsen, the culture section of *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, June 6, 1986, included a militant article by Ernst Nolte. It was published, by the way, under a hypocritical pretext with the heading “the talk that could not be delivered.” (I say this with knowledge of the exchange of letters between the presumably disinvited Nolte and the organizers of the conference.) When the Nolte article was published Stürmer also expressed solidarity. In it Nolte reduces the singularity of the annihilation of the Jews to “the technical process of gassing.” He supports his thesis that the Gulag Archipelago is “primary” to Auschwitz with the rather abstruse example of the Russian civil war. The author gets little more from the film *Shoah* by Lanzmann than the idea that “the SS troops in the concentration camps might themselves have been victims of a sort and that among the Polish victims of National Socialism there was virulent anti-Semitism.” These unsavory samples show that Nolte puts someone like Fassbinder in the shade by a wide margin. If the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* was justifiably drawn to oppose the planned performance of Fassbinder’s play, then why did it choose to publish Nolte’s letter?

I can only explain it to myself by thinking that Nolte not only navigates around the conflict between the endowing of higher meaning and scholarship in a more elegant way than others but also has a solution ready for another dilemma. This other dilemma is described by Stürmer with the sentence: “In the reality of a divided Germany, the Germans must find their identity, which is no longer to be grounded in the nation state, but which is also not without nation.” The planners of ideology want to create a consensus about the revivification of a national consciousness, and at the same time, they must banish the negative images of the German nation-state from the domain of NATO. Nolte’s theory offers a great advantage for this manipulation. He hits two flies with one swat: The Nazi crimes lose their singularity in that they are at least made comprehensible as an answer to the (still extant) Bolshevik threats of annihilation. The magnitude of Auschwitz shrinks to the format of technical innovation and is explained on the basis of the “Asiatic” threat from an enemy that still stands at our door.

IV

If one has a look at the composition of the commissions that have designed the plan for the German Historical Museum in Berlin and the House of the History of the Federal Republic in Bonn, one cannot help but get the impression that the new revisionism is to be realized in these museums in the form of displays and pedagogically effective exhibits. It is true that the expert reports submitted so far have a pluralistic face. But things will be no different with the new museums than they were with the Max Planck Institutes: The programs and memos that regularly precede the founding of a new institution have little to do with what the newly appointed directors actually make of it. That has also dawned on Jürgen Kocka, the token liberal on the Berlin expert commission: “In the end the decisive matter is what person takes charge. . . . Here, too, the devil resides in the details.”

No one desires to oppose seriously meant attempts to strengthen the historical consciousness of the population of the Federal Republic. There are also good reasons for a historicizing portrayal that seeks to gain distance from a past that will not pass. Martin Broszat has written convincingly on this. Those complex connections between the criminality and the dubious normality of everyday life under Nazism, between destruction and vital productivity, between a devastating systematic perspective and an intimate, local perspective, could certainly stand being objectified and brought up to date. Then this pedantic co-optation of a short-circuited, moralized past might give way to a more objectified understanding. The careful differentiation between understanding and condemning a shocking past could also help put an end to our hypnotic paralysis. But this kind of historicization would not be guided by impulses such as the ones that provided impulses to the revision recommended by Hildebrand and Stürmer and conducted by Hillgruber or Nolte, who set out to shake off the

mortgages of a past now happily made morally neutral. I do not want to impute negative intentions to anyone. There is a simple criterion that distinguishes the people involved in this dispute. The one side assumes that working on a more objectified understanding releases energy for self-reflective remembering and thus expands the space available for autonomously dealing with ambivalent traditions. The other side would like to place revisionist history in the service of a nationalist renovation of conventional identity.

Perhaps this formulation is not unequivocal enough. Those who seek to do more than revivify a sense of identity naively rooted in national consciousness, those who allow themselves to be guided by functional imperatives of predictability, consensus-formation, social integration via endowing meaning, are bound to avoid the enlightening effect of history writing and reject a broad pluralism of historical interpretations. One will hardly misrepresent Michael Stürmer if one is to understand his editorializing in the following way: "When looking at the Germans and their relationship to their history, our neighbors are bound to pose the question: Where is this all leading? . . . The Federal Republic is the centerpiece of European defense within the Atlantic system. But it is becoming evident that each generation living in Germany today has differing, even opposing, views of the past and the future. . . . The search for a lost past is not an abstract striving for culture and education. It is [an undertaking that is] morally legitimate and politically necessary. We are dealing with the inner continuity of the German republic and its predictability in foreign policy terms." In reality, Stürmer is making a plea for a *unified* understanding of history that might replace the increasing privatization of religious values with identity and social integration.

Historical consciousness as vicarious religion—isn't this overtaxing the old dream of historicism? To be sure, German historians can look back on a truly national tradition in their discipline. Hans-Ulrich Wehler recently reminded us of its ideological contribution toward stabilizing the *klein-deutsches Reich* and excluding "enemies of the Reich." Until the late 1950s the discipline had been dominated by an attitude that had been in the process of being shaped ever since the failure of the revolutions of 1848–1849 and the defeat of liberal history writing such as that of Gervinus: "For almost 100 years, liberal, enlightened historians could only be found either isolated or in small fringe groups. The majority in the discipline thought and argued in a way that was conscious and affirmative of nationalism and influenced by the state and the power of the state."

The fact that since 1945, at least among younger historians educated after 1945, not only a new spirit but also a pluralism of modes of understanding [*Lesarten*] and of methodologies has made itself felt is not a mishap that can simply be undone. The old attitude was really just an expression of mandarin consciousness, rampant in the discipline. And this

attitude has fortunately not survived the Nazi period. By its impotence against or even complicity with the Nazi regime, the discipline showed itself to be without real substance. The resultant self-reflection by the discipline influenced more than just the ideological premises of German historiography; it also intensified the methodological consciousness of the contextual dependence of *all* history writing.

However, it would be a misunderstanding of this hermeneutic insight if the revisionists of today assume that they can illuminate the present with the spotlights of arbitrarily constructed prehistories and choose from these options a particularly suitable notion of history. The intensified methodological consciousness also means the end of a closed understanding of history and precludes any conception of history that might be prescribed by government historians. The unavoidable pluralism of modes of understanding [*Lesarten*] is a reflection of the structure of open societies. This pluralism provides us with the opportunity to more clearly understand our own identity-forming traditions and their ambivalences. Precisely this is necessary for a critical appropriation of ambivalent traditions and to shape a historical consciousness that is as incompatible with closed and organic images of history as it is with all forms of conventional identity.

What is today being lamented as a "loss of history" is not just an aspect of deliberately repressing and ignoring; it is not only an aspect of being overly focused on an encumbered history that seems to have come to a standstill. If the traditional national symbols have lost their power for younger people, if a naive sense of identification with one's own history has given way to a more tentative way of dealing with history, if the discontinuities are felt more strongly and continuities are not celebrated at every turn, if national pride and a collective sense of self-worth are forced through the filter of a universalist orientation of values—to the degree that these things are true we can speak of evidence for the formation of a postconventional identity. In Allensbach this evidence is described with forecasts of doom. But this evidence seems to reveal one thing: that we have not gambled away the opportunity that the moral catastrophe could also mean for us.

The unconditional opening of the Federal Republic to the political culture of the West is the greatest intellectual achievement of our postwar period; my generation should be especially proud of this. This event cannot and should not be stabilized by a kind of NATO philosophy colored with German nationalism. The opening of the Federal Republic has been achieved precisely by overcoming the ideology of Central Europe that our revisionists are trying to warm up for us with their geopolitical drumbeat about "the old geographically central position of the Germans in Europe" (Stürmer) and "the reconstruction of the destroyed European Center" (Hillgruber). The only patriotism that will not estrange us from the West is a constitutional patriotism. Unfortunately, it took Auschwitz to make

possible to the old culture nation of the Germans binding universalist constitutional principles anchored in conviction. Those who want to drive the shame about this fact out of us with phrases such as “obsession with guilt” (Stürmer and Oppenheimer), those who desire to call the Germans back to conventional forms of their national identity, are destroying the only reliable foundation for our ties to the West.

Source: *Die Zeit*, July 11, 1986

MICHA BRUMLIK

New Myth of State: The Eastern Front. The Most Recent Development in the Discipline of History in the Federal Republic of Germany

This is a report on the decline of the German discipline of contemporary history to the level of the *Landserheft* [the cultural equivalent of Combat Comics]. In Siedler Verlag's fancy and much-too-expensive gift editions, which were shamelessly christened “elegantly appointed,” two lectures and essays of Hillgruber's that had recently been presented elsewhere have appeared under the title *Zweierlei Untergang* [Twofold Fall]. This little volume contains a long essay with the title “Der Zusammenbruch im Osten 1944/45 als Problem der deutschen Nationalgeschichte und der europäischen Geschichte” [The Collapse in the East 1944–45 as a Problem of German National History and European History] (59 pages) and a much shorter effort, “Der geschichtliche Ort der Judenvernichtung” [The Historical Locus of the Annihilation of the Jews] (22 pages).

A NEW LEVEL

In terms of shamelessness and cynicism, the first essay puts everything in the shade that has appeared as “serious” scholarship with a pro-Nazi position; the second essay disposes of its subject with rather less enthusiasm.

The appearance of Hillgruber's book with Siedler Verlag marks German conservatives' turn to aggressive nationalism. The framework of this turn is the nationalists' insight into the paradox of their attempt in Bitburg and then on the Rhine to force a reconciliation between victims and executioners. It is as though those who planned the collective commemorative ceremonies in the patriotic, nationalistic mode were aware of this paradox. The awareness led them to avoid the useless attempt to be reconciled with the murdered Jews, Gypsies, and Slavs. They concentrated totally on the Germans who died in the war and during the deportations.

Examples of this are the statements of Dr. Alfred Dregger, the CDU majority leader. In the discussion about the planned national memorial, he let it be known unambiguously that he and many of his political friends wanted