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## The Age of Tyrants: History and Politics: The Administrators of the Enlightenment, the Risk of Scholarship, and the Preservation of a Worldview. A Reply to Jürgen Habermas

Jürgen Habermas's article "A Kind of Settlement of Damages," July 11, 1986, in *Die Zeit* about the putative "apologetic tendencies in German history-writing" is a dark brew of politics and scholarship, of weltanschauung and historical perspective, of prejudices and facts. That the Hamburg weekly [*Die Zeit*] characterizes his so-called call to arms as in the "best Enlightenment tradition" does not alter the facts. Precisely under the rubric of Enlightenment, antienlightenment is being conducted. And, as always in cases of a mixture of politics and scholarship, the one betrays the other; scholarship gets completely lost along the way.

Even the obligatory reference to the value-ladenness of all scholarship hardly helps. It seems threadbare when one strays from the search for the truth into politicizing. The author of an article wrapped in the veil of the philosophical, an article that really has nothing to do with the essence of scholarship, namely, to set oneself above desire and aversion and to be committed to objectivity, renders a bad service to politics and denies scholarship outright.

### FALSE QUOTATIONS

It is not the intention of this reply to take issue with the judgments of worldview and politics that dominate in Habermas's article. Detailing the error-filled quotations of his essay will also be avoided. Habermas's ridiculous mischaracterizations (for example that Jürgen Kocka is a liberal) will be skipped over with a grin, along with the enraged roundhouses against Michael Stürmer's views on history and politics. One quotation that virtually falsified the sense of the text must, however, be mentioned.

Habermas claims that the Cologne historian Andreas Hillgruber wanted

to present "The Destruction of the German Reich and the End of European Jewry" (*Zweierlei Untergang* [Twofold Fall], Bibliophile Edition, Siedler, Berlin, 1986) "from the perspectives of the brave and obedient soldiers, the desperate civilian population, and also the 'tried and true' higher-ups of the NSDAP." This is supposed to be posthumous whitewashing for Hitler's "Golden Pheasants" by an acclaimed representative of West German historical scholarship—or so suggests Habermas, the "practitioner of the Enlightenment." A glance at Hillgruber's study reveals, however, something substantially different.

Hillgruber's elaborations attempt to make precisely those distinctions that must remain foreign to Habermas, lest his "call to arms," which had been thrown together in the first place by blurring distinctions, collapse on itself. At any rate Hillgruber writes: "Of the higher-ups in the NSDAP, many proved themselves in the crisis of the final, confused defense, of collapse and flight; others failed, in part in a miserable fashion." And then for the next sixteen lines the conclusion about the failures of the others is illustrated with examples. But this so obviously interferes with Habermas's black-and-white rendering of progress and reaction in the German writing of history that he blithely skips over the sixteen lines and foists on Hillgruber an appreciation for the "tried and true higher-ups of the NSDAP."

The content speaks for itself and is rounded off by the snide accusation that Hillgruber's essay recalls in its first part the "rhetoric of the war pamphlets." One can well imagine what the reactions of the "critical" social scientists would be if their works were to be certified using the jargon of a once-fashionable, but now radically antiquated, adolescent Marxism. Such a polemic would have led yet again to the deepest "concern" for those who, ignoring the truth, deal in morality and "sensitivity": fascism *ante portas!* Therefore, with this one example we will let the matter rest so we can make the transition to the central problems with Habermas's "call to arms." These problems concern his disturbed relation to scholarship and research.

Along this line, Andreas Hillgruber, in his study referred to above, with the subtitle "The Destruction of the German Reich and the End of European Jewry," is supposed by Habermas to have undertaken a project to partition, so to speak, the "German catastrophe" (Friedrich Meinecke) and to segregate the presentation of the annihilation of European Jewry from the glorification of the final struggle of the German soldiers on the eastern front during 1944–1945. The suggestion is misleading. Ignoring for a moment the second part of the bibliophile volume, in which Hillgruber presents in extenso the positions of the research in the field and his interpretation of the National-Socialist politics of race, the consciousness of this moral outrage, consistently referred to in plain language, permeates his book (see, for example, pages 45 and 64).

It is crucial that only against such a backdrop of moral outrage does

Hillgruber's interpretation of German and European history of these years become comprehensible at all. He understands this period as a tragedy. The historical situation for the Germans in the East was reduced to an alternative that had been falsely proclaimed from the beginning by the National Socialists in their propaganda but that in the last months of the war had ironically become reality for the Germans. They were boxed in between the archevils of the century, between Hitler and Stalin, between an annihilation under the banner of race or the banner of class.

In stating the alternative in this way, Hillgruber is not trying, as Habermas's "call to arms" asserts, to balance the atrocities of the Russians with those of the Germans. But this fact escaped Habermas, perhaps due to a lack of expertise, perhaps also due to an unfamiliarity with historical research. In Solzhenitsyn's *August 14* the medievalist Olda Orestovna once correctly observed that one should remember from time to time that history is not politics, where one repeats or refutes what another has said: "The stuff of history is not views, but the sources."

#### HISTORY AS UTOPIA

In this vein, above all as a result of his study of British files that have become accessible only in recent years, Hillgruber came to the insight that the wide-ranging war aims that entailed frightening displacements of territory and population had been drawn up not only by Stalin, who was of Hitler's ilk and so resembled him, but also by the British leadership, and all before the National-Socialist atrocity of genocide was well known. Thus the plans to break up the German East were not a reaction to the West's knowledge of the Holocaust. It is obvious that in this connection there needs to be a lot of research into backgrounds, motives, and aims. Time and again on the English side in this connection the record reveals an antipathy toward Prussia, whose history and existence were viewed as the cause responsible for Hitler's violent politics.

The reasons for Habermas's sneering at these facts about the war aims do not really become plausible. It is his right to demand a social-scientific explanation. What he tries then, admittedly in another connection, to conclude about the atrocities of the Red Army as social-scientific interpretation remains obscure. "He [Hillgruber—K. H.] 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." One should differentiate between spontaneous atrocities and isolated war crimes, on the one hand, and long-term programs of war aims and a programmatically executed murder of populations, on the other. The latter was followed and realized by Hitler's Germany under the banner of racial dominance and by Stalin's Russia under the banner of class dominance.

By evaluating the preferentially ethical resistance and mentioning Hitler's "halt commands," Hillgruber investigates the destiny and sensitivities of the German soldiers fighting in 1944–1945 in the East, the soldiers who dueled for Hitler against Stalin. In complete contradiction to Habermas's suspicions about a putative glorification and false justification of such deeds, this approach appears legitimate and necessary, not least of all against the backdrop of Hillgruber's presentation of the state of research. The tragedy of these soldiers, whose battle against the Red Army prevented untold harm and nevertheless extended the existence of the National-Socialist regime of injustice, becomes more evident in this volume, page by page.

To take up this issue in the effort to understand is, without a doubt, among the highest tasks of the historian. If he abandons this effort too soon, perhaps through an all too optimistic faith in social-scientific explanation, then he will certainly miss a central dimension of human and historical existence. All that remains then are the one-sidedly demanding gestures of the prophet and the deceiving belief in secular salvation. "If one counts on the revolution to remove his own tragedy from the world, one is simply thinking wrongly." Clearly this statement is as valid now as when André Malraux formulated it in 1937.

Consistent with this perspective, Hillgruber formulates the judgment according to which it is not appropriate "in relation to the fate of the German nation as a whole" to think of the end of the war in 1945 simply as a liberation: "Liberation does not circumscribe the reality of spring 1945." To work further in this field and to come upon differentiating results is a task that does not fit for Habermas into the simplistic image of history with which he has become familiar. He wants steadfastly to hold on to his image without regard to new sources, new realizations, and new questions—the very things that constitute the progress of scholarship. According to his image, however, history and the writing of history would be converted to a final situation resembling a utopia. Dangerous, and in many respects even totalitarian, traits would be connected to this utopia, as to every utopia. History, as the declared enemy of stasis, is the opposite of utopia: The writing of history, properly understood, is accordingly the constant defense against totalitarianism.

Even pertinent scholarly questions, which always contain a certain measure of opinion, seem unsympathetic and suspicious to Habermas. Those who set up such obstructions to scholarship in the service of what they believe to have been established once and for all hinder research. They pay homage to a dogma. Thus, in contrast to Nolte's questions and theses posed independently of political tides and turns, Habermas's unabashed politicizing on the problem of the singularity and comparability of the National-Socialist genocide yields nothing productive. Habermas is struggling against a growing insight that historical facts could just possibly be stronger than uncritical philosophy.

To be sure, historicizing the National-Socialist genocide is a project that cannot yet be comprehensibly completed. It still requires research and debate. If completed, it would not automatically lead to the political consequences that many on the Right would like to connect to it. They must be disappointed just as others on the Left must be who want automatically to derive political action from the singularity of the phenomenon. For the political consequences cannot simply be logically postulated out of the scientific findings. Since there are no liberal or reactionary research findings, however, it is not evident why we should stand with our feet in the cement of any particular image of history and prohibit the posing of questions. Such prohibitions in particular would prevent our inquiring about parallels between the quality of annihilation of communism and that of National Socialism or for that matter prohibit our pursuing the forerunners and traces of the "murder of the Jews" in history.

Certainly one is not obliged to agree with all of Ernst Nolte's interpretive suggestions about the "plurality of the Hitler epoch." At the same time, the obligation is unavoidable to take up intensively the issues he raises and not simply deny them. The racial atrocity of the Third Reich has widely and justifiably been seen for some time as unique. The atrocity explains—or serves as an explanation for—the consequences of the war that affected Germany and that were also often seen as incomparable. With continued research we now see at any rate that the Reich was not conquered solely in order to liberate, tame, and civilize the Germans. The reality of the Soviet war aims, and in part of the Britons and Americans, was much more extensive than that.

#### THE EVIL AND THE GOOD

Independently of what the Germans did, Stalin primarily followed his wide-ranging foreign policy goals and—tolerated by the United States—shaped postwar developments substantially to his benefit. That the former Allies nevertheless acted as they did and always set their mutual differences aside in the face of the presumed unique "brown" past of the Germans is decisively related to Hitler's previous politics. His policies had starkly broken with all standards of the practical and the principled.

The Germans are still burdened with the legacy of Hitler. The comparison with the quality of annihilation under Soviet communism and the realization of the antagonistic relationship between National Socialism and communism clearly lead, however, to the following insight. Completely differently from what Ranke formulated, a compelling, violent force lay in the ideas that came to power in both countries. This violence must be taken into account in explaining the phenomenon of the "unsuspected baseness of human beings" (Wilhelm Röpke) that became evident in the dictatorships of race and class. Totalitarianism, genocide, and mass displace-

ments belong to the signature of the twentieth century, even if they also, thank god, do not describe its normal state of affairs.

Such a conclusion about the familiar quality of annihilation in no way speaks for trivializing the National-Socialist past. On the contrary. Even the totalitarianism of the twentieth century, which portrays so gruesomely the absurdity of human existence, does not have to be blindly accepted as destiny. Liberation from totalitarianism is accomplished not least of all by the work of the historian to understand the past and tell about it. His search for truthfulness works against the rule of terror, just as his scholarly work, even in the certainty of error, endows the past with both a particular and a general meaning. This is all the more so since today, unlike in antiquity, we can conceive of "Sisyphus as a happy man" (Albert Camus). Or less "existentially" speaking and more "Enlightenment-like," less "philosophically," and more "practically": Successful therapy assumes a *comprehensive* diagnosis.

With regard to the pressure for therapy, Jürgen Habermas has been reproached in another connection for the fact that his diagnosis fell short. Therefore he should not, out of falsely understood concern, advise historians to do something for which he himself could be criticized. To be specific, he should not—under the spell of a fixed image of history—mistrust research and use in its place bloated concepts like "postconventional identity" without saying whether the "undiscoverable socialism" (Raymond Aron), or whatever, is concealed behind them, and without acknowledging historical facts that do not translate concisely into political terms but instead only require freedom of thought and expand freedom of action. But this is just what Habermas seems to fear, just as he is afraid of a comprehensive revelation of the terror and outrages of a century that early on was characterized as an "Age of the Tyrants" (Elie Halévy). The territory of these terrors is not limited to Germany.

As always, he who wants to preserve his image of history and its power at the expense of the discovery of truth must take refuge in simplifications and distance himself from research. The consequences articulate themselves as the loss of reality and Manichaeism. Then the German world is once again divided, characteristically for the land of the Reformation, into evil and good, into black and white, into, if simplicity so desires, so-called government historians and Jürgen Habermas. The maxim of Boethius fits his "call to arms" quite well, that he would have been better silent—*philosophus mansisses*.

Source: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, July 31, 1986