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The Impoverished Practice of Insinuation: The Singular Aspect of National-Socialist Crimes Cannot Be Denied

There are discussions that attain their charm by the fact that it is not always clear what is meant. Instead of asking questions and giving answers, which are then examined, statements are presented in the form of questions with the intention of suggesting what cannot and should not be proven. And the people who are caught in this game respond with outrage and a look of innocence and ask, One can ask, can't one? In reality, however, the question is not a question at all but a concealed statement. In this way the apparent questioner manages to sidestep the trouble of having to provide reasons. Instead, he has left the job of convincing people to a few innuendos. This is the kind of perplexing game that is being played in this country.

It began with the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* article of June 6, 1986, in which Ernst Nolte pleaded that we should look "not only at the one murder," that is, the one committed by the National Socialists, but recognize the other, that is, the Bolshevik one. It is characteristic of the rules of the game that Nolte, if taken quite literally, did not plead but rather only stated (and even then qualified by a secondary clause) that *an attitude* that examined only the one murder would lead us completely astray. Nolte did not betray the name of the person who is supposed to have taken this attitude. But he imputed that someone had.

Should that be true, it would be obviously nonsensical. What would history be if it were so one-sided? But instead of using a few words to make this simple insight even more obvious, he intimated in another secondary clause that between the two murders "a causal nexus was likely." That was news, especially coming from the mouth of a respected historian. One would be justified in expecting Nolte to support his thesis and in this way bring the discussion to a head.

But nothing of the kind occurred. Instead, Jürgen Habermas responded in *Die Zeit* of July 11 by accusing Nolte and several other German historians of apologetic tendencies. Indeed, Nolte's argumentation (we will

discuss this later) gave reason for this suspicion, and Habermas backed up his claim by objecting to the choice of words used by some historians. But he said nothing about the topic itself or about Nolte's thesis. Klaus Hildebrand also failed to do so when he, in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of June 31, responded to Habermas by coming to the aid of his colleague Andreas Hillgruber, whom Habermas, as I see it, treated unjustly. Hildebrand said little more about Nolte than that he could not understand why we should impose "prohibitions on the questions we ask." He did not betray who was trying to impose such prohibitions. He continued the game by insinuating that someone had done so.

And thus the situation continued with a few letters to the editor and a number of articles—until on August 29 Joachim Fest intervened in the discussion by, in the same newspaper, expressing his opinion in detail in "The Controversy about the Singularity of National-Socialist Mass Crimes." He started out by calling Habermas's comments "a new variant" of an "impoverished practice" that had become customary since the end of the 1960s. By this he meant the tendency not to discuss the findings of the historians but their motives. Fest provided no reason to support his assertion that this had been common practice since that ominous date. Nor could he have provided a reason. For it is undeniable that since time immemorial both the motives and the findings of historians have been discussed. It is really old hat that Tacitus claimed to write *sine ira et studio* but in fact did not do so since he, too, had motives. This kind of study is called an ideology critique, and it is both legitimate and an integral part of the discipline. Fest, however, terms it an "impoverished practice" and, using a chronological insinuation, blames it on the Left on top of it all.

But just as one began to fear that the discussion would again end up out of bounds, Fest, this must be said to his credit, got to the point. Of course he took up a topic that had not been discussed to that point. He claimed that Nolte had "not denied the singularity of the National-Socialist acts of annihilation." Indeed, Nolte did no such thing. Only Habermas used the concept, and then only once. But that too is part of the game: One picks up what has not been said because one anticipates what was meant and speaks of a controversy where none exists. Next, Fest produced three arguments that allegedly speak against singularity and then declared himself in Nolte's camp by saying that we must be permitted "to establish a connection between the horrifying reports from the East and Hitler's readiness to act in an extreme way." One also wonders, he continued, about "the real reasons" for the irritation caused by Nolte's comments that the events in Russia were "the logical and factual prius" to Auschwitz and that between both a "causal nexus" was probable.

In this way Fest brought the game to a new climax. He did not say there was no causal nexus. He merely said that it would not be impermissible to establish one. And if the comment caused irritation, then he was not

interested whether that could be explained by the fact that the comment contradicts the historical sources. No, he uses the “impoverished practices” he has just castigated and asks about motives.

But now it is time to stop the game. I for one do not want to play any longer. I also do not want to ask for the motives of the participants, even though that would be permissible. I want to talk about the subject. Two clearly phrased claims can be precipitated out of the tangle of legalese and Latinisms such as *prius*, *nexus*, *logical*, *factual*, and *causal*. The first, which, as Fest correctly notes, not Nolte, but Fest himself stated, is: The National-Socialist mass murder of the Jews was not unique. And the second, which Nolte considers probable and Fest calls not impermissible: There is an originary connection between this act of mass murder and that of the Bolsheviks.

Regarding the first claim, Fest cites three arguments that he says he is using to support the singularity thesis—and then he contests them with counterarguments. First, the perpetrators did not care about the guilt or innocence of their victims—but neither did the Bolsheviks. Second, the murders were carried out in an administrative and mechanical way. Third, the murders were carried out by a “cultured people.” But this argument, he went on, could not be accepted because in it is “the old master race attitude.”

Fest does not say who used these arguments. And I find not one of them valid. Innocent people have time and time again been killed administratively and mechanically. Where the killings took place seems of little importance in determining whether the killings were unique. I, however, claim (and not for the first time) that the National-Socialist murder of the Jews was unique because never before had a nation with the authority of its leader decided and announced that it would kill off as completely as possible a particular group of humans, including old people, women, children, and infants, and actually put this decision into practice, using all the means of governmental power at its disposal. This idea is so apparent and so well known that it is quite astonishing that it could have escaped Fest’s attention (the massacres of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire during the First World War were, according to all we know, more like murderous deportations than planned genocide).

Regarding the Bolshevik murders, Fest quotes the head of the Cheka, who declared at the end of 1918: “We are in the process of exterminating the bourgeoisie as a class.” But that in no way proves that he meant that every individual bourgeois was to be killed—not to mention women and children. Fest endeavors to produce proof that such extermination was common practice. The head of the SS, Heinrich Himmler, was much clearer in this respect when he declared on October 6, 1943 (and anyone who so desires can verify that he was speaking the truth): “The question was posed to us: What about the women and children? I have decided to

find a clear solution here, too. I just did not feel justified in exterminating the men (that is, in killing them or having them killed)—and allowing avengers in the form of little children to grow up for our sons and grandsons. We had to come to the grave decision to make this people disappear from the face of the earth.”

The question of uniqueness is, by the way, not all that decisive. Should the Federal Republic then pay no more reparations? Or should the chancellor no longer bow in Yad Vashem? Or should the citizens feel better? It is really not that this society is languishing, bowed by grief and in need of solace. It lives well and should continue to do so, as far as I am concerned. But the problem is that the society knows little about these murders. When the federal president, in an honorable speech on May 8, 1985, spoke of six million Jews murdered in concentration camps, historians can recognize how small the effect of their research is. According to our latest, quite precise estimates, 150,000 Jews were killed in concentration camps. Another five million were killed in death camps, in the ghettos, and by shooting.

Much more important and stimulating is the second claim that Nolte declares probable and that Fest takes up—that is, the causal relationship between the Bolshevik and the National-Socialist murders. Of course a rational discourse about this is extraordinarily important. The discipline of history knows no more difficult task than linking two historical causes. Historical causes do not exist anywhere such that one can seek and find them. Moreover, two different things are meant by the concept: On the one side are motives that cause someone to engage in an act; on the other are the conditions without which no actions can be imagined. Historians are constantly involved in trying to understand this process.

Nolte does not make these efforts easy. He only provides, as he terms them, “illuminating key concepts.” These begin with a statement by Hitler on February 1, 1943, which suggested that in Moscow the German officers captured in Stalingrad would be put in the “rat cage,” where they would sign anything. Nolte also noted that the commentators (in reality it was the editor of the stenographic transcript) suggested that “rat cage” meant Lubyanka prison. He continues: “I consider that to be wrong.” He has either missed the point or is not bothered by the fact that in this meeting Hitler himself twice said that he meant Lubyanka. Nolte thus knows better; then he speaks about Orwell’s novel *1984*, which did not appear until 1949. Here, too, a rat cage appears. Orwell was not inventing history, Nolte says. This rat cage can be found in anti-Bolshevik literature about the Russian civil war, “among other places in the writing of the usually reliable socialist Melgunov” and is attributed to the “Chinese Cheka.”

Nolte still needs to explain what that has to do with the killing of the Jews that began in June 1941. It is characteristic that he derives few of his conclusions from this abstruse chain of associations. After a few self-constructed objections he writes: “The following question must seem per-

in the late 1960s, the second, broader period of repression has been letting the reality of the persecution of Jews disappear in universalist consideration about "totalitarianism, genocide, and mass displacements as the signature of the twentieth century" (Hildebrand). This second displacement follows on the attempts at genuinely clarifying this most difficult chapter of German, certainly also of European, history. It covers the "shame" about what happened by suggesting that every people had its Hitler and then returned to normalcy. Although the anti-Bolshevism and anti-Semitism always appeared as Dioscuri, this form of "coming to grips with the past" [*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*] sees its justification in having sought out the Soviet Union as the root of all evil. If there is a lesson to be drawn from the National-Socialist catastrophe, then it is this, to free oneself from all "collective" hostile images.

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MARTIN BROSZAT

Where the Roads Part: History Is Not a Suitable Substitute for a Religion of Nationalism

In view of the considerate and collegial style that historians maintain not only for reasons of opportunism, it was obvious that the reckless aggression of Habermas's July 11 polemic should not only be welcomed as a breath of fresh air that might purify the atmosphere but should also be rejected as an unwelcome denunciation by an outsider. If one of the weakest points of the attack by the Frankfurt philosopher was that he lumped together politically agile professors such as Michael Stürmer and Klaus Hildebrand with the phlegmatic Andreas Hillgruber and that grand eccentric of contemporary history, Ernst Nolte, then this "most absurd kind of conspiracy theory" (Joachim Fest) seems to have been at least partially validated. Recently an ideologically conformist group of historians, inconspicuously sponsored by the Schleyer Foundation, has been meeting in a symposium ("To Whom Does German History Belong?") under the leadership of Klaus Hildebrand, with Stürmer and Hillgruber as additional speakers.

The selection of active participants and the timing of the symposium, one week before the beginning of the Historical Convention in Trier, suggests the programmatic intention with which the voices of only one partisan group are holding court about the troublemaker Habermas.

It is no less important to keep in mind that the controversy set in motion by Habermas must be seen in the context of an older discussion about several key questions: In what way is the fashionable lament about the loss of history and the desire for a new sense of identity that might be posited by historians related to the critical and Enlightenment-oriented trend, which after 1945 took shape in the discipline of history in the Federal Republic? After all, this discipline had been the product of sad experiences of history being used as political theater. When we consider the Nazi period, what new relationship between historicization and political sensitization is produced for the historian forty years after Hitler? And aren't we running the danger that the ever-overworked national question and the desire not to abdicate to the GDR responsibility for the cultivation of our national history might gradually make us blind to the postulate of West

German constitutional patriotism, the priority of which has been generally accepted until now?

In the case of the recent dispute, hypersensitivity drove Jürgen Habermas to overreaction. Cologne historian Andreas Hillgruber hardly deserves to be accused of trivializing National Socialism, even though the compilation of Hillgruber's lectures, which was quickly patched together by the Berlin publisher Wolf Jobst Siedler for a new volume in his bibliophile series and which treats two quite heterogeneous topics (the collapse of the German eastern front and the National-Socialist mass murder of the Jews), is no masterpiece. The explanation for the interdependence of the two processes that was announced in the title (*Twofold Fall*) was not forthcoming. This misleading linkage to a grand theme caused Hillgruber's original intention to come perilously close to being apologetic. He had set out to express his understanding for the "ethic of responsibility" of German soldiers, civilians, and party officials who, toward the end of the war in the East, attempted to slow down the inundation by the Red Army. But the material was just not sufficient to justify the scandal that Habermas made of it.

SPLITTING HAIRS IN AN APOLOGETIC WAY

What Ernst Nolte recently formulated—and not for the first time—on categorizing and relativizing the Nazi act of genocide is all the more astonishing. If we generously concede that even in this area scholars are to be granted the freedom to engage in experimental inquiry, a freedom that should not be limited by sensitivities, the final criterion for judging scholarly quality is conscientious argumentation. The fact that Nolte has once again, in arrogant disdain for empirical and historical procedures, exceeded such limits, causes many of this renowned scholar's arguments to appear to be querulous hair-splitting. This is sufficient to shock all those—myself included—who owe many an impulse to Nolte's thought.

The most offensive thing Nolte had written to date appeared in a 1985 anthology in London (W. Koch, *Aspects of the Third Reich*). Long before any notice of Auschwitz reached the attention of the world, Nolte wrote here, Hitler had good reasons to be convinced that his opponents wanted to annihilate him. Nolte then places Jewish Agency leader Chaim Weizmann's statement that in the event of war the Jews of all the world would fight against Hitler on the side of England in this context. He concludes that this could support the thesis that Hitler was justified in treating Jews as prisoners of war and interning them.

In this way, Ernst Nolte associates himself with the thesis that Jewry "declared war on Germany"—a notion that for years has been a hallmark of right-wing pamphlet literature in the Federal Republic. The fact that the World Congress of Zionists in whose name and mission Weizmann spoke in 1939 was not an entity in the definition of international law and the fact

that the message Weizmann communicated in the name of the congress never had the legal meaning and status of a "declaration of war"—these facts may be overlooked by a right-wing publicist with a dubious educational background, but not by the college professor Ernst Nolte.

This is the point where, objectively, his argument turns into apologetics. Aside from his motivations and despite the fact that Nolte is, as everyone knows, not intentionally an apologist, this kind of trivialization cannot be allowed, nor can attempts such as Joachim Fest's to restylize these thoughts. These kinds of argument should not be made respectable—particularly since they stem from such a respected scholar.

For this reason Klaus Hildebrand should also admit that he at least secretly disapproves of or simply overlooked Nolte's thesis when, in this spring's issue of the *Historische Zeitschrift* (no. 242, p. 466), he praised Nolte's article. He did this, as he wrote, because the essay "undertakes in an extraordinarily provocative and fruitful way" to "reinterpret for the history of National Socialism central elements of the destructive capacity of Nazi ideology and of the regime." It is not to be assumed that he lacks the ability to read, or that this is a case of political opportunism. The fact that Hildebrand failed to invite Nolte (who lives in Berlin) to the Berlin symposium of the Schleyer Foundation could lead us to conclude that this is a slight, diplomatic attempt to distance himself.

Through all the dispute, most people failed to see the keystone of Habermas's polemic—his commitment to the integration of the Federal Republic into the West. The main passages deserve to be repeated: "The unconditional opening of the Federal Republic to the political culture of the West," this "greatest intellectual achievement of the postwar period," as Habermas puts it, "has been achieved precisely by overcoming the ideology of Central Europe," which is again being warmed up by Michael Stürmer and others with their "geopolitical drumbeat about the old geographically central position of the Germans in Europe. The only patriotism that will not estrange us from the West" is the kind of "constitutional patriotism" that unfortunately was only able to take shape after Auschwitz. For this reason, he adds, it is hard to accept the recent use of phrases such as "obsession with guilt" to drive the shame about these facts out of the Germans in an attempt to call them back to the "conventional forms of their national identity." This process, Habermas says, destroys "the only reliable foundation for our ties to the West."

A LACK OF COMMON SENSE

Here, too, one is faced with the question of whether Stürmer deserves this vehement attack. Of course Habermas knows that the Erlangen historian is neither a German nationalist nor a political romantic. Quotations from his recently published collection of essays (*Dissonanzen des Fortschritts*, Munich, 1986) can be put together to demonstrate him to be a skeptical

rationalist and a decisive supporter of the Atlantic Alliance. And in this way and by using his own quotations, Stürmer defends himself against Habermas (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, August 16, 1986)—without, however, being able to deemphasize the quite different sounding quotations that Habermas took aim at. It is not hard to add other quotations to those (all from the essay collection *Dissonanzen des Fortschritts*):

History promises signposts toward identity and other anchors in the cataracts of progress.

A community that separates itself from its history will not survive long in the consciousness of its citizens.

It is hard to mistake the fact that the loss of history and the destruction of the constitutional consensus are among the dangers that threaten the present.

If we do not succeed in agreeing on an elementary culture curriculum so that we might continue to work for continuity and consensus in this country and for moderation and a measure of patriotism, then it could be that the Federal Republic of Germany has the best part of its history behind it.

If this is not an example of neoconservative “ideology planning,” as Jürgen Habermas interpreted it, then this kind of pessimistic Cassandra rhetoric represents, at the minimum, a grave lack of mental precision and common sense, embedded as it is in pretentious language that suggests more profundity and significance than it contains. The reader of the more recent Stürmer articles is confronted with a kind of thinking and speech that attempts—in vain—to reconcile two things: on the one side a rational affirmation of democratic pluralism and the universalist principles of the Western constitutional state, and on the other side an invocation of pre-modern, community-producing elites, conventions, cultures, and historical traditions—all in a priestly tone.

In this context, history is far more than the simple story of man’s experience and suffering. It also has the function of an ersatz religion and thus must, for reasons of state, be propagated to achieve a democratic consensus—especially if we are to stand up to the challenge of the tyrannical systems of totalitarianism and their historical myths.

HISTORY OVERTAXED

Stürmer accords history a leading role in social and national integration. And this overtaxes the discipline. In the Bundestag budget debate of September 10, Alfred Dregger said, “Historylessness and ruthlessness toward our own nation worry us. Without the kind of elementary patriotism that is a matter of course in other countries our people will not be able to survive. Those who misuse so-called *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* [coming

to grips with the past], as necessary as that was, in order to rob our people of a future, will meet with our resistance.” When Stürmer speaks of the “erect posture” that is supposed to be made available to the Germans again, he means the same. Habermas formulated it succinctly: These are attempts to drive the shame out of the Germans.

Here the roads part. Those who want to talk the Germans out of self-critically dealing with their older and their more recent history rob them of one of the best elements of the political culture that has been developing since the late 1950s. The most revealing aspect is the fundamental misunderstanding inherent in these thoughts—as if the moral sensitivity to one’s own history, achieved through necessity, puts us at a cultural and political disadvantage compared to other nations, as if it were a matter of copying their more often robust or naive and usually politically harmful historical sense of self.

Such perversions of the desire for history threaten to deprive us of the only thing we gained from the experience of the Hitler period. And it was precisely these experiences that placed the West Germans in a position to gradually make themselves at home in the legal and social structures of the Federal Republic—without needing emotional nationalism. For the first time in German history, Germans have affirmed the political reality—not in a grand nationalistic consciousness of their special status, but rather in a simple sense of well-being in their civilization.

The complaint that this is not sufficient and must be complemented by national history has, it seems to me, little to do with reality as it is perceived by the younger generation in the Federal Republic. Rather, it reflects the political ambitions of the elites in our country who desire to be bearers of culture. Having arrogated political leadership roles to themselves, they now believe they cannot manage without some kind of national-pedagogical watchdog office.

Source: *Die Zeit*, October 3, 1986