

relationship as possible to the past—and that means an appropriate, comprehensive, common, and critical relationship; they fulfill important societal needs and contribute in a fundamental and indirect sense to finding identity, provided one employs a concept of identity that includes self-distancing and reflection, as well as constant change and always renewed criticism.

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Author's Note: The title and subtitle were added by the editors of *Frankfurter Rundschau*. A long version of the article appeared with the title "Criticism and Identity: National Socialism, Everyday Life and Geography," in *Die Neue Gesellschaft/Frankfurter Hefte*, October, 1986, pp. 890–897.

NOTES

1. This formulation has been justifiably criticized as inexact. The reference is to Nolte, "Between Myth and Revisionism? The Third Reich in the Perspective of the 1980s," in H. W. Koch, ed., *Aspects of the Third Reich*, London 1985, pp. 17–38, 27ff. (Compare with the first article in this volume.) Nolte mentions "Chaim Weizmann's statement in the first days of September 1939, that in this war the Jews of all the world would fight on England's side." Nolte cites this in the imprecise reprint in the *Archiv der Gegenwart*, 1939. The actual wording of this letter from Weizmann of August 29, 1939, to the British prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, can be found in *Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann. Series A. Letters*, vol. 19, January 1935–June 1940, Jerusalem 1977, p. 145. Weizmann offered in the letter the participation of Jews in military efforts under British leadership on behalf of the Jewish Agency (at that time a recognized public entity and part of the World Zionist Organization for Palestine, which among other things advised the British Mandate Government in Palestine). "In this hour of supreme crisis . . . the Jews 'stand by Great Britain and will fight on the side of the democracies.'" Nolte interprets Weizmann's position as "something like a declaration of war" and concludes indefensibly: "It might justify the consequential thesis that Hitler was allowed to treat German Jews as prisoners of war and by this means to intern them." Weizmann was in 1929–1931 and again in 1935–1946 the president of the World Zionist Organization (WZO), which regularly held Zionist world congresses. The letter may have been written in the context of the Twenty-first Zionist World Congress 1939 in Geneva. There were close ties between the WZO and the Jewish Agency. The letter is to be seen in the context of the connections between the British Mandate Government in Palestine and the Jewish Agency. That is clear in the wording of the letter.
2. The section under the heading "Middle of Europe" can be found, in part word for word, in part just the sense, in my review of the books *Das ruhelose Reich: Deutschland 1866–1918*, by Michael Stürmer and *Weimar* by H. Schulze in *Geschichtsdidaktik* 9 (1984) pp. 79–83.

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Questions We Have to Face: No Historical Stance without National Identity

Enlightenment has to do with clarity, and what Jürgen Habermas communicates in his *Zeit* article of July 11, 1986, about recent tendencies in German history writing seems to be clear. The problems are easy to survey: On the one side is the community of enlightened liberals who have learned from the errors of German history and pay homage to a "pluralism of modes of understanding." On the other side is a small clique of questionable historians benevolently supported by ruling conservative circles. These historians, rooted in unsavory older traditions of nationalist and affirmative German historiography, are, in the interest of shoring up the stability of the federal government and the NATO alliance, in the process of designing a statist image of history with the intention of endowing a sense of national identity. To do this they make use of a trick by which they deny the singularity of the decisive point of reference of our constitutional order, National Socialism. They also compare Nazism with other totalitarian systems such as those of Stalin or Pol Pot, and in this way "sanitize" German history.

That is nice and lucid; the moral is obvious, and the *ecrase l'infame* is visible between all the lines. Once again, Habermas demonstrates himself to be a virtuoso simplifier, which in some cases can be useful in explaining complex matters. But this clarity is blurred on closer inspection. The argumentation changes in an irritating way. Habermas is in essence interested in politics, even in morality. His attack takes aim at the theoretical and practical positions of the discipline. But a question on one of these levels can be represented as being on another. For this discipline has to do with the world of being, of morality, of politics—and with the world of ethical obligation. One cannot support moral statements with scholarship, nor can one support scholarly statements with political ones. But that is just what Habermas constantly does.

Anyone who believes he will gain clarity about new historical problems and their difficulties will be disappointed reading Habermas, because the problems at hand are not at all compatible with Habermas's approach. The

singularity of National-Socialist crimes, the call of historical scholarship to promote “the endowment of higher meaning,” the question about the national identity of Germans, the tension between national and constitutional patriotism—these are problems that are too important to be used as slogans for doing ideological battle.

Are the National-Socialist crimes singular? On the level of historical scholarship the question answers itself: Every historical event is singular or must at least appear to us that way. Every individual historical event stands at the crossroads of undeterminable causal chains, which themselves result from an indeterminate number of related events and can neither be described nor analyzed in their entirety. Which does not mean that a particular historical event might not be comparable to another.

Historians by no means seek to claim the identity of two historical events. They seek a formal process by which two or more individual events can be referred to a transcendent point of view that is constructed from shared aspects. In this way, similarities as well as differences become evident. In the case of the National-Socialist mass murder of the Jews, there are aspects in common with other historical events. Examples would be the extermination of the kulaks in the Soviet Union and the mass annihilations carried out by the Pol Pot regime. Common to these acts are the mechanical massivity of the killing, the membership of those killed in a particular group, and the primarily ideological motivation of the murderers.

When the historian discovers similarities such as these, he can formulate theories with the help of which he can analyze the causes and circumstances of political mass crime in a way that goes beyond the individual case. These analyses can help to prevent comparable acts in the future. On the other side, the peculiarity of an individual event can be made visible by historical comparison. The rationality and the technicity of the National-Socialist mass murder of the Jews find no correspondence in Stalin’s Russia or in Pol Pot’s Cambodia—the industrialization of mass murder is a German invention.

For the discipline of history, singularity and comparability of historical events are thus not mutually exclusive alternatives. They are complementary concepts. A claim that historians such as Ernst Nolte or Andreas Hillgruber deny the uniqueness of Auschwitz because they are looking for comparisons stems from incorrect presuppositions. Of course, Nolte and Hillgruber can be refuted if their comparison rests on empirically or logically false assumptions. But Habermas never provided such proof.

But even on the moral-political level the question about the uniqueness of National-Socialist crimes is not without complications. Does the special responsibility of the Germans for the crimes committed in their name depend upon singularity? If the mass murders were only a trace less abhorrent or if comparable crimes had been committed in other places and at other times, is the obligation of the Germans to learn lessons from the crimes of the National-Socialist period reduced? An odd sense of insecurity

is at play here. For if the historical question about comparability cannot be answered morally, then historians’ answer to this question is morally without consequence. Anyone who tries to connect the one thing with the other is also stepping on politically and pedagogically slippery ground. One just has to recall the initial years of our republic when historians like Friedrich Meinecke, Michael Freund, or Gerhard Ritter tried to explain National Socialism as an incursion of demonic forces, as a withdrawal of Germans from history—that is, as singular.

In recent years one has been able to observe the interesting process by which extensive thematic areas and paradigms of interpretation have shifted from the conservative to the leftist camp. The fact that Jürgen Habermas until now has decisively opposed this process speaks for him, so he in particular should be careful about using concepts like the singularity of National Socialism. Such concepts promote neither the rationality of historical knowledge nor our understanding of the necessity of the Federal Republic of Germany’s bond with the West. That which is singular is unhistorical and for that reason can teach us nothing about the future.

And what about another of Habermas’s provocative phrases, “the endowment of higher meaning,” to which the historians under attack, particularly Michael Stürmer, are said to be obligated? This strikes dread into the heart of the theoretical side of the philosopher Habermas. He invokes the “dilemma between endowing meaning and conducting scholarship” and accuses his opponents of wanting to place the discipline of history in the service of “NATO philosophy colored with German nationalism.” That would indeed be bad—not because it would be a NATO philosophy but because scholarship has in principle no normative competence and quickly degenerates into being a producer of ideological slogans if it arrogates this kind of thing to itself. But who is actually trying to do this? It is interesting how Habermas supports his claim. He mixes direct and indirect quotations with virtuosity. Incriminating statements about the alleged intentions of the four “government historians” can exclusively be found in the indirect quotations. The people attacked have since stated that the indirect quotations are not from them but rather represent the interpretation of Jürgen Habermas. If we examine only the direct quotations, a different problem arises: the fact, known all too well by historians, that increasingly, expectations of a political-legitimatory kind are being put onto the discipline of history—and not only by governments and the opposition but also by numerous people ranging all the way to students in history seminars.

What should the historian do in a case like this? On the one hand, since Max Weber’s speech “Scholarship as an Occupation,” everyone has known the dangers connected with being a “prophet of the lectern.” On the other hand, history always has to do with politics. Politics is its object, political interests affect the questions history deals with. Historical research can have political consequences. And thus the question of the political

responsibility of the historian arises. That is what Michael Stürmer calls a "tightrope walk between endowing meaning and demythologization"—a tightrope walk with which Jürgen Habermas is very familiar.

Here we have entered realms that are a part of the ethics of scholarship. The question of how far a person on the tightrope is allowed to lean to one or the other side cannot be readily answered. How far can the scholar go in advising politicians? To what degree can he bring his results to market without betraying scholarly standards? What political consequences arise from the historian's constructions and interpretations, and which consequences can one desire? These are questions that must be asked and discussed. And it is to the credit of Michael Stürmer that he asks them.

It is obvious when compared to the previous questions that historians possess their own notions of history and use every available opportunity to propagate them. In a country like ours, in which opinions supportive of the government have no privileged access to the public but are in open competition, a unified progovernment image of history is not possible—as the discussion precipitated by Habermas shows best. The pluralism of interpretations is guaranteed, not only for Stürmer but also for Habermas. For in spite of Habermas's moralizing verdict, historians in the future will also not allow themselves to be deprived of the right "to illuminate the present with the spotlights of arbitrarily constructed prehistories and to choose from these options a suitable notion of history"—inasmuch as "arbitrarily" solely refers to positing questions.

Also Habermas has allowed himself to be deceived by the "conventional forms of national identity" that are allegedly the goal of revisionist historians. He believes that concealed behind this notion lies the attempt to reduce National Socialism to an insignificant episode in German history that will be irrelevant for constructing the self-definition and the memory of Germans today. Here, too, scholarly and political problems diverge.

In this context, "national identity" simply means that the present for the Federal Republic is not sufficient to explain why this nation is the way it is and why the "German question" poses itself in this specific form not only for the Germans but for other Europeans as well. The reason Germans are the way they are, or to put it more simply, the identity of the Germans, can only be sufficiently explained if one understands the conditions of their historical development. For that reason it is important for historians to make the national identity of the Germans an object of their research. The political effect of this kind of description of identity is, incidentally, quite different than Habermas thinks. The necessary linkage of National Socialism and the present cuts across the collective assurance of national identity. For only as participants in the shared historical identity of the German nation are we today also responsible for our national history and its consequences. That is precisely the reason why the GDR denies its identification with the totality of German history.

And finally, we come to Habermas's pitting "the conventional forms of national identity" against "binding universalist constitutional principles anchored in conviction." Here I can only warn of the consequences. As laudable as his reference to constitutional patriotism as a *raison d'être* for the Federal Republic is, it is problematic to polemically and categorically set this concept off from national identity. The actual point at hand is the old and very German theme of freedom and unity and the experience that the price of the one has always been the atrophy of the other. But history can also offer another relevant experience: that the constitutional patriots of the first German republic had nothing effective to set against the powerful emotional appeal of the nationalists. No doubt, the experience of National Socialism has dampened the German leaning toward nationalist extremes. But whether this dampening will last more than one or two generations is doubtful—despite all the political pedagogy, about the effectiveness of which there should be no illusions.

Questions about German unity and national identity continue to be asked, and it is not only a matter of scholarly interest but also of political prevention when historians take up these questions and rationally and soberly take a position on them in order not to abandon the topic to other, perhaps more dangerous forces. For this reason we always have to tell and explain the *whole* story. This includes freedom, the constitution, *and* the nation, but also Auschwitz *and* Weimar.

There is nothing wrong with a heated dispute. But the discussion should not be conducted with a Manichaean reduction of reality and artificially constructed hostile images. [The discussion that Jürgen Habermas initiated is good, as is any dispute that leads us back to fundamentals. And there is nothing better than a good polemic. On the contrary, our scholarly enterprise will be enlivened by it. But the discussion should not be conducted with a Manichaean reduction of reality and artificially constructed hostile images, nor with willfully distorted quotations if the clarification of problems and facts is what is intended and not only an exchange of political pamphlets. It is important to give one's opponent the chance to objectively refute what has been said. And this is only possible if all participants learn to do without moral sledgehammers and are prepared to grant their opponents the legitimacy of scholarly pluralism.]* Otherwise the dispute will be unfair—which is a devastating verdict in the realm of Western (but only Western) political culture. The "greatest intellectual achievement of the postwar period" that Habermas praises, the "unconditional opening of the Federal Republic to the political culture of the West," has not, at least judging by the debating style of German intellectuals, been fully achieved.

Source: *Die Zeit*, September 26, 1986

**Author's Note:* The original manuscript contained the bracketed passage here.