

MICHAEL STÜRMER

## History in a Land without History

In a country without memory anything is possible. The pollsters warn that among the industrialized countries the Federal Republic displays the greatest lack of communication between the generations, the smallest sense of self-confidence among its people, and the most thorough shift in values among these people. How will the Germans themselves see their country, the West, themselves tomorrow? One can assume that there will be continuity in the Germans' understanding of their country. But one cannot be certain.

Throughout the country one notes the rediscovery of history and finds that praiseworthy. Museums are booming, flea markets are alive with the nostalgia for olden times. Historical exhibitions have nothing to complain about in regard to interest and attention, and historical literature, peripheral for twenty years, is now being written and read again.

There are two possible explanations for this search for a lost time. One sees in this search a renewal of historical consciousness, a return to our cultural traditions, a promise of normalcy. The other reminds us that if we find no substance in the present we will turn our gaze to the past in order to find direction and assurance. Both explanations are relevant to the recent search for older history. A loss of orientation and a search for identity are closely related. But anyone who believes that this trend will have no effect on politics and the future is ignoring the fact that in a land without history, the future is controlled by those who determine the content of memory, who coin concepts and interpret the past.

It is doubtful whether this insecurity began in 1945. Hitler's rise stemmed from the crises and catastrophes of a secularized civilization that tumbled from new start to new start and whose main characteristic was a loss of orientation and a futile search for identity. "There is nothing that is not questionable," Karl Jaspers said in 1930 in a memorable Heidelberg lecture. From 1914 to 1945, the Germans were exposed to the cataracts of modernity to a degree that destroyed all tradition, making the unthinkable thinkable and barbarism a form of state. This is the reason Hitler was able to triumph; this is the reason he was able to capture and corrupt Prussia and patriotism, the state, and middle-class virtues.

But even before this epoch of wars and civil wars our history was a history of permanent upheaval. To lament the absence of revolution in our

history would be to little understand the agrarian revolution, the demographic revolution, the industrial revolution, the semirevolution of 1848, and the revolution from above that triumphed with Bismarck. A horizon of hope has presented itself anew to each generation of the past 200 years. German history can claim to have worn out a great number of constitutions, value systems, and images of the past and future.

For a long time the German dictatorship was the be-all and end-all of German history writing—and how could it have been otherwise? The more the Federal Republic gained distance from its beginnings, the more past epochs presented themselves to our view. Since 1973, when the price of oil shot up and *Tendenzwende* [conservative shift] became the name for a new consciousness, the Germans have been discovering that the Federal Republic and the world system of which it is part are subject to historical movement. Today, studying the history of the postwar system has become a part of political and historical studies.

That, however, has had the result that the achievement of Konrad Adenauer, the man who did everything to overcome our moral and political alienation from the West, has become clearer. At the same time the infamous Stalin note of 1952, which was intended to prevent just this reversal of alienation, is being portrayed as a myth about missed chances for unification, while the Russian tyrant is being portrayed as a Santa Claus who would grant the Germans' every wish: unity, freedom, prosperity, and security. In truth, what the Russians were offering was an early stage of a Soviet Germany. And amidst the ghosts of the past we are again becoming aware of antifascism: the legend of the noble intentions of the Communists, of the failure of the German Social Democrats, and of the blessing of a popular front. The fact that Kurt Schumacher's party recently—it was the fortieth anniversary of the German surrender—assigned itself the task of battling the social foundations of fascism in the Federal Republic betrays concealed thoughts about the future.

Nonetheless, 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 has political and economic responsibility in the world. It 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. It is also becoming evident that the technocratic underestimation of history by the political Right and the progressive strangulation of history by the Left is seriously damaging the political culture of the country. The search for a lost past is not an abstract striving for culture and education. It 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 a country without memory anything is possible.

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MICHAEL STÜRMER

**Letter to the Editor of the  
*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*,  
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Concerning Professor Jürgen Habermas's letter to the editor titled "The Writing of History and Historical Consciousness" (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, August 11, 1986), Habermas can either be taken seriously or he can continue to combine sloppy research with patched-together quotes in an attempt to place historians on his blacklist. He cannot do both. Concerning his statements:

1. National question? He confuses that with the German question, which I did not invent and which without doubt is frequently posed today. That has nothing to do with geopolitics, but it has a lot to do with the economic, intellectual, and strategic preconditions of Europe in history and in the present. My answer lies not in the socialist nostalgia of Jürgen Habermas but in the affirmation and development of the Atlantic and European ties of our country.

2. Endowing meaning? Whatever identity is, somebody seems to be in search of it. To what degree history as a discipline has contributed to this is a matter of controversy. Endowing meaning should be left to others. Jürgen Habermas has attempted to endow meaning—fortunately without success—long enough.

3. Endowment of higher meaning? Not long ago I asked whether history was called upon to provide such a thing (*Dissonanzen des Fortschritts*, Piper Verlag, 1986). I did not leave the readers in the dark regarding the answer: "From its very beginning history has had to counter legend, myth, and partisan distortion. That remains its dilemma: It is spurred on by collective, largely unconscious needs for the endowment of higher meaning, but it must rid itself of such notions in its scholarly methods."

What should one think of an indictment that even fabricates its own sources? Habermas will not be able to duck the accusation of, say, imaginative invention. He stakes an exclusive claim on the Enlightenment

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and has the ends justify the means. It's a shame about this man who could have had something to say.

*Source: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, August 16, 1986

*Publisher's Note:* This letter to the editor appeared under the title "An Indictment That Fabricates Even Its Sources."

MICHAEL STÜRMER

## How Much History Weighs

"Do you love democracy? And do you intend to defend yourselves?" When Andre Glucksman asked this question of the German Left during the missile crisis of 1983, indignation appeared in place of a response. A part of the *incertitudes allemandes* of the French is their doubt about which image the Germans have of themselves, their future, and their history. After 1945, one was relieved that the defeated Germans looked back with anger and disgust. It was a precondition of reconciliation that the *Grundgesetz*, or constitution, and the integration into the Western alliance prevented new upheavals and dangers.

A few years ago the influential publicist Pierre Hassner asked: "Is the German question here again?" He was giving voice to insecurity about the question: What will become of the German consensus in security policy? Since that time, the French involvement in Germany has been accompanied by the appeal to have the courage needed for democracy, to face history, and to affirm the consequences of the *Grundgesetz* and the politics of the West as a precondition for the future. From Charles de Gaulle's vision of a Europe of national states that cannot exist without Germany to the Quai d'Orsay official Jean-Marie Soutou's statement, published in this newspaper, that Europe needed the responsible and understandable national consciousness of Germany, French involvement has been motivated by the knowledge that the German partner is needed. Should the Germans change their minds, however, France could and would carry on. The majorities in favor of the alliance are reassuring. The dissent about its foundations causes a sense of unease.

In 1986, industrialist Alain Minc published the successful book *Le Syndrome Finlandais*. It contains a scenario in which a vacillating Federal Republic draws Western Europe along with it into an irreversible tilt toward the East. It is a source of concern that the Germans, because of ecological pacifism, might forget the chasm between democracy and dictatorship and might seek a future in a "Central Europe." As Alfred Grosser said after the Nuremberg Party Congress of the SPD, it is an important task to "counteract the minimization of the Soviet Union."

Behind such worries lie cultural dissonances: on the German side much recent history and little self-assurance, on the French side the blue-white-

red consensus about the past and the future, a self-assured patriotism, and the imperturbability of national character.

Would a book such as Ferdinand Braudel's *The Identity of France: Geography and History* (1986) be possible in this country? Braudel, the cofounder of the school of thought associated with the journal *Annales*, while he was a German prisoner of war wrote this outstanding book about the Mediterranean world in the age of Phillip II of Spain. In the foreword of his last book Braudel wrote that he loved France with a passion and without distinguishing between vice and virtue or between "what attracts me and what repels me." Then he described land and people and concluded by asking if geography had invented France.

For Braudel, identity is the central problem: "The determination of France is made through itself, by acknowledging the actuality of all that the human past has deposited, layer on layer. . . . All in all a residue, an amalgam, numerous additions and many crossings. In addition to that, a process, a struggle against oneself that always propagates itself." Why is that so hard to translate into German? That kind of self-confidence has been alien to the Germans since the downfall of the old Reich around 1800. Even Bismarck's state was not for long the unquestioned form of German being. After that, the founding of the Second Reich seemed to many people to be an unnecessary "boyish prank" (Max Weber) insofar as it was the end of something and not the beginning of something far greater. In 1897, Bülow demanded "a place in the sun," and even that was not enough. "There is nothing that is not questionable" (Karl Jaspers, 1931)—this diagnosis of the age stood at the beginning of Hitler and his revolution against all revolution. At its end stood the words with which the historian Ludwig Dehio described German despair: "Wherever we seek a solid place to stand, we find the earth quaking, shaken way back into the centuries by the same catastrophe that is shaking us now." All of our interpretations of Germany have collapsed. How can one live in this rubble?

Is it possible that the popular front and anti-fascism mythology, the opposition to which unified all democrats of 1949, no matter what else separated them, again has a future in the media and the political parties? Can we still count on the antitotalitarian consensus of the constitution, aimed as it is at the National-Socialist past and the Communist present and even at a Communist future?

The German temptations for self-destruction that begin our history and end with the constitution are becoming visible again today. The democrats should thus listen to Helmut Schmidt's warning that no people can exist in the long term without a national identity: "If our German history is only to be evaluated as a single chain of crimes and failures and acts of neglect . . . then our people's present could lose its stability, and that could risk the future." There is good reason to ask how much history weighs in Germany.

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