

I am indeed of the opinion that not only the Germans have a “troublesome past” and that the troublesome past is not only that of Germany. A simple inversion of nationalism is not adequate to understand the reality of the twentieth century. New ways of rethinking the past and present are required on all sides—especially on the side of the Germans and the Russians—if coexistence is to represent more than an economic reality. Similarly, in the intellectual realm, we must get away from the particularism that seeks above all to prove the guilt of opposing peoples, classes, and races and is thus unable to grasp the fundamental guilt that lies in attributing guilt to whole groups. There are hopeful beginnings in this direction with Soviet dissidents and here and there even in the official literature. Jürgen Habermas would have an important part in a discussion like this, but he would first have to learn to listen even when he feels his prejudices are being challenged.

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Author's Note: This text was originally entitled “A Mere Inversion: Against Negative Nationalism in History. A Response to Jürgen Habermas and Eberhard Jäckel.”

ANDREAS HILLGRUBER

No Questions Are Forbidden to Research

QUESTION: Professor Hillgruber, in recent months a debate has begun, first among historians, then among other specialists, and then in the general public, about the way we view our history. Are you as a historian happy that such a debate is under way, or do you feel something like horror about what has been unleashed and now is being debated and about the way it is being debated?

I am not happy about what has been unleashed by Jürgen Habermas's article in the weekly *Die Zeit* on July 11 of this year, and for the following reasons: Habermas, with the insinuation that they advocate apologetic tendencies, carries out massive attacks against four West German historians of completely different stripes, with completely different scholarly fields of inquiry and themes. His attacks are not founded in scholarship but rather are politically motivated. This finds expression, not insignificantly, in his connecting the whole thing with the plans of the Kohl government to erect a German Historical Museum in Berlin and a House of the History of the Federal Republic of Germany in Bonn. The scholarly works of the historians he attacks have nothing to do with that. In each case Habermas brings up a jumble of historical, political, and journalistic problems, which is made even worse by his working with falsified quotations and by his manipulation of quotations, something he must do in order to be able to present his insinuation effectively. I have demonstrated these manipulations in detail, quotation by quotation, in an essay that will appear in the December 1986 issue of the journal *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* [History in Scholarship and the Classroom]. It is a singular scholarly scandal.

QUESTION: Then you would not see yourself in a line with Professors Nolte, Hildebrand, and Stürmer or with Joachim Fest?

For two decades I have been closely associated with Herr Hildebrand, who has found his way into this attacked group because of a review in a scholarly journal. I have a friendly collegial relationship with Herr Nolte, and likewise Herr Stürmer, without having to have anything to do with their completely different scholarly motivations, areas of interest, theses,

or hypotheses. Habermas “mixes” everything together in order to prove his insinuation of a “revisionism” of recent history, supposedly advocated by us together. Now “revisionism” of scholarly finding is the most natural thing in every discipline, indeed, it is its norm. “Revisionism,” although it was not originally so for Habermas, has become a polemically charged concept, a “bellicose” concept.

Habermas understandably has not stayed abreast of historical research in recent decades. With some excitement he now discovers contradictions to what he until now had held to be a firm “image” of the Third Reich. By his “call to arms,” he gives the public the impression that something completely new is being published by the historians he has been attacking. In fact Nolte, for example, had already expressed the essential thoughts that he has now formulated more sharply in his large work *Faschismus in seiner Epoche* [Fascism in Its Epoch]. Likewise, what so excited Habermas in my volume published by Siedler is already contained in substance, though not in detail, in my largest studies.

QUESTION: *What motivations are there then to revise the state of facts or the writing of the history of the Nazi period?*

Revision of the results of scholarship is, as I said, in itself the most natural thing in the world. The discipline of history lives, like every discipline, on the revision through research of previous conceptualizations. The accusation of “revisionism” now being raised in public aims at the fact that the “revision” now being played up by Habermas and his followers is allegedly of a more fundamental kind and would bring about a total change in the image of the Third Reich. Here I would like to say that in principle since the mid-1960s substantial revisions of various kinds have taken place and have rendered absurd the clichéd “image” that Habermas as a nonhistorian obviously possesses. The originally predominant Hitler-centrism was, for example, superseded by structural analyses. The role of everyday life in the history of the Third Reich has been researched: consider the large “Bavarian project” of the Institute for Contemporary History in Munich. Resistance research became much more highly differentiated; the original concentration on July 20, 1944, and on the conservative forces in the resistance was superseded by research into the whole broad spectrum of the resistance. In short, revisions have been a permanent feature, granted without the public’s having sufficiently taken notice of them.

QUESTION: *Then, in Twofold Fall you wrote nothing that you had not similarly already said or written earlier in another place?*

I wrote an essay about the downfall in the East in 1944–1945 that sketches the fighting German armies from the perspective of the populace, that is, not from Hitler’s standpoint or from the victorious Red Army’s standpoint. I connected this sketch with the presentation of the war aims of the opposing

powers in the East and West to the extent that they touched the fate of eastern Germany—on the basis of new research. The attempt to present what happened from the view of those affected fits in with the efforts of colleagues (for example H. Mommsen and M. Broszat) in other fields of the history of the Third Reich similarly to experience things from the perspective of the main body of the populace.

QUESTION: *Recently the editor of the Spiegel, Rudolf Augstein, in a “Spiegel Essay” took precisely these publications as the occasion to call you a “constitutional Nazi” and suggested that a teacher who says things like this should be released from school service. Is that pure polemic, or are you willing to have a serious discussion with Herr Augstein?*

I take this attack from Herr Augstein to be absolutely undiscussable, in every respect. It is a low point never reached before in the steady decline of a publicist whose arguments were once of import. I have taken legal advice. Augstein doubtless had his criticism legally “checked on” in advance so that, as things stand, one could not successfully proceed against him in the courts. This essay in *Der Spiegel* and something similarly nonsensical in the foreword of the so-called anniversary edition of the “Frederick” book by Augstein defy any description in this matter; they are absurd and grotesque. I know that I am in agreement with my colleagues, whatever they may think of my scholarly assertions.

QUESTION: *The question is whether the Third Reich is a historical epoch like any other. At least as far as concerns the moral evaluation and estimation of the regime, is it really important whether one comes to one conclusion or the other about whether the Third Reich is unique or not?*

Morally, the Third Reich is characterized by innumerable crimes, above all the mass murder of the Jews. I do not know of a single serious historian who would challenge that. In the current discussion about the “singularity,” the following should be established: Everything in history is “singular”—every figure, every epoch, every occurrence. But every occurrence, every event, every personality, has to be compared; that is an essential element of the discipline of history. Singularity and comparison do not exclude one another. If one takes as the yardstick of comparison the Western world, the mass murder of the Jews is singular. Nothing similar existed, for example, in Fascist Italy.

If one incorporates Bolshevik Russia in the comparison, then one can say that the mass murder of the kulaks in the early 1930s, the mass murder of the leadership cadre of the Red Army in 1937–1938, and the mass murder of the Polish officers who in September 1939 fell into Soviet hands are not qualitatively different in evaluation from the mass murder in the Third Reich. Here, as there, a simple characteristic of the people (on the basis of the insanity of race or the ideology of class) led to their murder.

In the case of the Third Reich, because of the availability of sources the

mass crimes can be quite thoroughly proven and presented. Bolshevik Russia distinguishes itself even now by its practice of secrecy, so numerical comparisons, which anyway are not decisive for the moral evaluation, remain difficult.

QUESTION: *Can you understand when such comparisons—like those Nolte has just drawn—between the Nazi regime and Stalinism are viewed very critically abroad? Does one have to tolerate the accusation that scholarly work of this kind amounts to exculpation?*

My answer is very decisive here: Either we do historical scholarship, and scholarship is the concern of an international community of researchers in which nationality is of no interest, or we renounce the claims of scholarship altogether. Renunciation would mean falling back into bad times. The West German discipline of history is, like every discipline of history that is worth its name, free in the questions it poses. The answers must obviously be accountable in a scholarly way.

QUESTION: *That means you would say there are no forbidden questions for scholarship?*

Absolutely correct.

QUESTION: *Now comes the accusation, from people like Habermas or others, that the results of scholarly work are being used to view our current German reality differently through a changed description of the Nazi past.*

I am actually not the right one to speak with here. With my book, which deals exclusively with the Third Reich and the downfall in the East in 1944–1945, I have been pulled into a discussion that primarily has to do with the government's plans for museums. They are not my topic.

QUESTION: *Are you participating in setting up this Historical Museum in Berlin and the Museum of the History of the Federal Republic of Germany in Bonn?*

I have nothing to do with the museum in Berlin. As far as the House of the History of the Federal Republic of Germany is concerned, I have just received an invitation from the Federal Republic's minister for construction, Herr Schneider, in which he invites me to participate in the steering committee that has yet to be appointed. The results of the work there are to be awaited.

QUESTION: *What function and what meaning could these museums have, in your view?*

Every nation has its historical museums. In East Berlin the GDR has put up its well-known Museum of German History, erected on the foundation of Marxism-Leninism, in which the visitor gets an overview of the epochs of German history. It is in my view high time that the Federal Republic undertake the attempt, not in view of the East Berlin museum but rather

completely independently of it, to lay out for visitors the ever-changing ways of German history since the Middle Ages and to do this on the basis of the results of historical research. This will demonstrate the historical place of the Federal Republic of Germany. I see this as a legitimate task.

QUESTION: *You said that in the mid-1960s there was already a revision in the direction of a stronger social and economic view. It is impossible not to acknowledge that in the past five years a revision reappeared. One can assume that it strives for a stronger national historical view. This assumption is supported by a series of publications that have appeared in the Siedler Press and that include publications by Professors Stürmer and Schulze as well as by you. Is there such a thing as a new orientation to a stronger national view of history?*

The series you refer to has in fact the theme "Germans and Their Nation." It is centered around German national history. But the European context is observed in all the books you named; that even holds for the last volume by Thamer about the Third Reich, which has just appeared. Here the newest results of research are incorporated into the study. The history of the Third Reich is not viewed in isolation. Rather the European context is fully incorporated into the presentation of national history.

QUESTION: *Now the phrases "location in the European Center" and "national identity of the Germans" are cropping up in this whole debate again. What ground actually exists in scholarship or journalism for touching on this stable situation in Central Europe? We have actually done well in this middle situation in the last forty years, haven't we?*

Let us leave the political assertion aside as to whether everything really is so "golden." That would be far afield of this discussion. One has to distinguish two things: On the one hand is the old theme of "Central Europe" that is now being attacked from various sides, not only from the political Right but also from the Center and from forces standing to the left of center. This leading concept latched on to particular traditional connections in Central Europe that were severed by the end of the Second World War and seeks to bring them to life again. It is concerned with, among other things, shaping the relationship anew between the Federal Republic and the GDR, the relation to Poland, to Czechoslovakia, and to Hungary so that these "Central European" connections become viable. I see this as a thoroughly sensible undertaking. Think of the recent visit by the president of the Federal Republic to Hungary.

Something altogether different is connected to the theme "Central Europe," if one wants to latch on to the old concept of Central Europe that played a part in Germany before the First World War. It is the thought of consolidating under German leadership a broader Central Europe, cut out according to German interests. Such an effort is historically hopeless because of the way the Second World War ended. To want to develop such a projection now would mean to bring the powers in the East and the West

together against the Germans. I cannot imagine that anyone is earnestly striving for that.

Reminiscences of good cooperation between the German and Slavic peoples in the middle of Europe before the First World War, and in part also still between the wars, are awakened whenever journalists or historians travel to Poland, Czechoslovakia, or Hungary. In that atmosphere it seems imperative to express how closely one feels connected to representatives of these nations. This is understandable, but it cannot all merge into a notion of "Central Europe" that could be misunderstood as taking up the old concept again, which is, as I said, no longer realizable. In a word, I think the effort to latch on to the connections torn apart in 1945, because of the outcome of the war and then in turn because of the cold war, is a sensible political task, especially for the West Germans.

QUESTION: *You said at a conference of historians in the Hanns-Martin-Schleyer Foundation in Berlin a few weeks ago in this regard that in this country one must pay attention to the way the GDR discipline of history goes about the business of German history. I will just name two key examples: the GDR's characterization of itself as maintaining the heritage, and the attempt to present itself as the better German state. Could that not lead one to start thinking again here in the Federal Republic about one's own national history? Is the fear of the GDR behind it all when West Germans concentrate on their own national history?*

It is without a doubt correct that changes in the way the GDR is looking at German history have influenced the political leadership as well as historians. I doubt whether the efforts on the part of the Federal Republic of Germany are to be understood primarily or even exclusively as competing with the developing "modern" image of German history of the GDR. It is a fact that the GDR gave up its originally provincial Marxist-Leninist view of German history in favor of greater self-certainty in dealing with epochs and historical figures that do not fit so cleanly into the traditional rhetoric of a socialist Germany. We can think of Frederick the Great or Bismarck. Certainly one day Stresemann will be discovered in GDR history as a politician between East and West. In this way the GDR raises the claim of being the German state toward which all of German history has coursed and from which one day, by exploding out of the "narrowness" of the GDR, historical development will lead to a unified Germany, a socialist unified Germany.

Before this backdrop it is, in my opinion, sensible to sketch the counterpart image—founded in scholarship—that presents German history (in the frame of European history) as a development culminating in the liberal-democratic order of the Federal Republic, in a unified Germany on the basis of the right of self-determination. This seems to me not only a necessary historical, but also political, perspective.

QUESTION: *Those historians of the Federal Republic who today exhibit a national-historical view are very close to the government, for example, Michael Stürmer. Socially and economically oriented researchers, however, are on the side of the social-liberal coalition. Do you have any sympathy for the critics' assertion that historians are justifying, with what they are undertaking, contemporary political motifs, for example, the "blessing of late birth?"*

An example: My colleague Jäckel, who in his scholarship very pronouncedly emphasizes Hitler's role in the Third Reich and in this matter agrees with me, is a Social Democrat. He is in a scholarly controversy with his Social-Democratic colleagues who emphasize the internal structures of the Third Reich and hold these structures responsible for the realization of the Final Solution in the form of the mass murder of the Jews in the territory controlled by Germany. Jäckel, however, sees Hitler's role as decisive in this. I only want to indicate by this that scholarly position and political preference are not identical.

In the public, nevertheless, a clichéd conception in the sense of oversimplified scholarly and political categorization is connected with individual historians. Political historians cannot work without the research of social and economic history and vice versa. Only when someone sees his research exclusively as a political function is an understanding with colleagues difficult.

QUESTION: *In your view how can one emerge from this very confrontational situation? Could you imagine an international symposium including scholars from East and West at which the various opinions that have been formulated in this debate were presented in order to bring the whole problematic to a head in an objective atmosphere?*

A symposium, a colloquium, by itself would not be enough by a long shot. The profusion of topics that have been addressed necessitates a whole series of colloquia or symposia, which, moreover, would only be sensible in a tolerant atmosphere. To discuss them all together at a single congress is, I believe, out of the question, in light of the incredible breadth and complexity of the topics that are now so excitedly being discussed in the public press.

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Publisher's Note: The questions were put by Rainer Krawitz.