

Kocka, Jürgen

Article — Digitized Version

The weight of the past in Germany's future

German politics and society

Provided in Cooperation with:

WZB Berlin Social Science Center

Suggested Citation: Kocka, Jürgen (1988) : The weight of the past in Germany's future, German politics and society, ISSN 0882-7079, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, Mass., Iss. 13, pp. 22-29

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/112554>

Standard-Nutzungsbedingungen:

Die Dokumente auf EconStor dürfen zu eigenen wissenschaftlichen Zwecken und zum Privatgebrauch gespeichert und kopiert werden.

Sie dürfen die Dokumente nicht für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, öffentlich zugänglich machen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Sofern die Verfasser die Dokumente unter Open-Content-Lizenzen (insbesondere CC-Lizenzen) zur Verfügung gestellt haben sollten, gelten abweichend von diesen Nutzungsbedingungen die in der dort genannten Lizenz gewährten Nutzungsrechte.

Terms of use:

Documents in EconStor may be saved and copied for your personal and scholarly purposes.

You are not to copy documents for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the documents publicly, to make them publicly available on the internet, or to distribute or otherwise use the documents in public.

If the documents have been made available under an Open Content Licence (especially Creative Commons Licences), you may exercise further usage rights as specified in the indicated licence.



WZB-Open Access Digitalisate

WZB-Open Access digital copies

Das nachfolgende Dokument wurde zum Zweck der kostenfreien Onlinebereitstellung digitalisiert am Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung gGmbH (WZB).

Das WZB verfügt über die entsprechenden Nutzungsrechte. Sollten Sie sich durch die Onlineveröffentlichung des Dokuments wider Erwarten dennoch in Ihren Rechten verletzt sehen, kontaktieren Sie bitte das WZB postalisch oder per E-Mail:

Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung gGmbH

Bibliothek und wissenschaftliche Information

Reichpietschufer 50

D-10785 Berlin

E-Mail: bibliothek@wzb.eu

The following document was digitized at the Berlin Social Science Center (WZB) in order to make it publicly available online.

The WZB has the corresponding rights of use. If, against all possibility, you consider your rights to be violated by the online publication of this document, please contact the WZB by sending a letter or an e-mail to:

Berlin Social Science Center (WZB)

Library and Scientific Information

Reichpietschufer 50

D-10785 Berlin

e-mail: bibliothek@wzb.eu

Digitalisierung und Bereitstellung dieser Publikation erfolgten im Rahmen des Retrodigitalisierungsprojektes **OA 1000+**. Weitere Informationen zum Projekt und eine Liste der ca. 1 500 digitalisierten Texte sind unter <http://www.wzb.eu/de/bibliothek/serviceangebote/open-access/oa-1000> verfügbar.

This text was digitizing and published online as part of the digitizing-project **OA 1000+**.

More about the project as well as a list of all the digitized documents (ca. 1 500) can be found at <http://www.wzb.eu/en/library/services/open-access/oa-1000>.

THE WEIGHT OF THE PAST IN GERMANY'S FUTURE

By Jürgen Kocka, Professor of History, Bielefeld University

This article is an edited transcription of the talk given by Dr. Kocka at the Center for European Studies on May 1, 1987.

The so-called "Historikerstreit" started with an article by the Berlin historian and philosopher, Ernst Nolte, in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung in June 1986, which was followed by a strong attack from the Frankfurt philosopher and sociologist, Jürgen Habermas, in Die Zeit about one month later. When Nolte tried to re-evaluate the meaning of National Socialism in the course of German history, Habermas attacked not only Nolte, but also the Cologne historian Andreas Hillgruber, the Erlangen historian Michael Stürmer, and some others for trying to distort and harmonize the German view of the past in order to serve specific conservative needs of the present. In the following months, a large number of articles in widely-read national newspapers appeared, written primarily by historians.

The media, radio, and television covered the debate to a certain extent -- a debate which also included controversies over some concurrent government plans such as the building of two historical museums, one in Bonn covering the history of the Federal Republic, and one in Berlin depicting German history as a whole. The debate also touched on other projects such as the thus far futile attempt to erect a national monument in Bonn to commemorate those who died in World War II and under the Nazi dictatorship. These issues also played a limited role in the campaign for the

Bundestag election in the winter of 1986-1987.

The debate continues, although with few new arguments. It has moved away from the weekly and daily newspapers to lecture series and panel discussions organized by university departments, student groups, church-related academies, and other such fora. Recently some professional journals have started to reflect on the debate. For those who have started to participate and want it to continue, it has become something of an industry. There are events in the Federal Republic and abroad on the subject, and book publications have already occurred with more to follow. It has proven to be extremely difficult to put together a collective volume, although four very useful anthologies on the subject have recently appeared (as reviewed in this issue), with more to follow.

This is not a debate only among experts. No new sources and no new results have been discovered. Even the questions are not that new. In terms of professional history, the debate yields little. It is a debate in the overlapping spheres of professional history and politics in a broad sense. Fundamental questions of our collective self-understanding have been raised, particularly for us as Germans and as citizens of the Federal Republic of Germany. While the debate has been left mainly to the historians, it has been much

more -- and in another sense, much less -- than an historians' debate. Those of us who have been taking part in it do so not just as historians but also as citizens. History is held in high regard in the public debate in both German states at the moment, so this is certainly a special opportunity for historians. Yet there is also a danger in professional terms in that one can easily overreach oneself. Something akin to the "politics of history" is taking place, and as historians we certainly have to be careful not to be enticed into positions or instrumentalized by events which are well beyond our purview and responsibilities.

There is no time and no reason to reconstruct the intricacies of the debate for this audience, but basically the topic has two dimensions. It deals first with the place of National Socialism in German history and in a comparative historical framework. And secondly, it raises questions about the relationship between history and politics, particularly the relationship of historical consciousness to national identity. In this context, I want to emphasize four points: first, the Nolte thesis on certain causes of National Socialism; second, the problem of comparability of the Holocaust; third, some of the underlying assumptions; and fourth, the timing of this debate, i.e., why are we discussing it now?

I.

Early in this debate, Ernst Nolte suggested a causal link between the Bolshevik terror, on the one hand, and National Socialist mass murder on the other. I quote: "Was not the Gulag more original (ursprünglicher) than Auschwitz? Was not the class murder of the

Bolsheviks the logical and factual predecessor of the racial murder by the National Socialists? Did the National Socialists -- and Hitler -- carry out an Asiatic action, perhaps only because they regarded themselves and their kind as potential or real victims of another Asiatic action which they had experienced before and which they had reason to see as a continuous threat?" This thesis has been severely criticized, and correctly so. I doubt whether Nolte wanted to draw this conclusion, but in the logic of his argument, the Holocaust seemed to be an understandable and even meaningful reaction to an alleged threat from the East, a kind of Präventivmord (preventive murder), as one critic has written. Based on Nolte's publications so far, this is a crude speculation unsubstantiated by any evidence. Other authors have said that it must be possible to ask such questions, but no serious historian has supported Nolte's thesis, perhaps with the exception of Klaus Hildebrandt of the University of Bonn and -- to some degree -- Joachim Fest from the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. [1] If this thesis is an attempt to attach meaning to the Nazi mass murder as part of an anti-Bolshevik struggle, it is embarrassing and has no chance of surviving critical scholarship. Nolte seems to have slightly modified his position in the meantime, e.g., in a television debate with Hans Mommsen and an article in Die Zeit, but has not withdrawn the gist of his argument. Rather, he announced the publication of a new book (October 1987) which is meant to defend his view. One can only speculate about how Nolte came to formulate such a thesis; one can try to place it in the sequence of the development of his oeuvre, but ultimately one cannot be sure of his motives.

II.

Much more ambivalent and professionally serious is the attempt by Nolte and others to compare the Nazi dictatorship and the Holocaust with other 20th-century dictatorships and genocides, and thus to question its absolute singularity. Basically this is a legitimate and necessary endeavor which has enjoyed a long tradition, but the notion of absolute uniqueness is both methodologically and politically problematic. Comparisons in history, in a way, are the functional equivalents of laboratory experiments in the natural sciences -- if one wants to explain causally, one has to compare. Politically, if one declares something to be unique, one implies that there is no danger of repetition. Comparative analysis of National Socialism has a long tradition of employing the concept of totalitarianism and/or that of fascism. Both have been used to put National Socialism in a comparative perspective. Certainly the purpose of comparison in history is to find not only similarities, but also differences. One discovers both, i.e., what 20th-century genocides have in common and also what was unique to National Socialism -- to the Holocaust. The Stuttgart historian, Eberhard Jaeckel, stresses that Hitler's destruction of the Jews was in several senses unique because "never before had any state, with all the authority of its responsible leader, decided and announced that it intended to annihilate a particular group of human beings, including the old, the women, the children, and the sucklings, as completely as possible, and then translated this decision into action with every possible expedient of power at the state's command." One can add other specifics of the German Holocaust in

this category of uniqueness. I think that there is a qualitative difference between the dispassionate, bureaucratic, systematic mass murder by the industrialized, highly organized, and relatively advanced German Reich, on the one hand, and the brutal mix of civil war, mass liquidations, slave work, and starvation in relatively backward Stalinist Russia on the other. Certainly there are other elements distinguishing the Gulag and Auschwitz, but I will leave this aside for the moment.[2]

There is another problem built into this comparative approach as it was implicitly and explicitly used in the recent debate: to whom does one want to be compared? Should we compare ourselves with Stalin's dictatorship, or the Turks' mass murder of the Armenians in the First World War, or even Pol Pot in Cambodia or Idi Amin in Uganda, as has been done by Nolte and Fest in the recent debate? Or should we rather, in the tradition of the so-called Sonderweg debate, continue to compare our history to those Western countries who did not turn fascist or totalitarian in the interwar period? Without doubt the result of any comparison strongly depends on the choice of reference point. And this choice entails not only a scholarly question, but also a political one, in the broad sense of the word. There is much to be said in favor of locating the interpretation of our past in a frame of reference in which comparison with Western countries or the West in general is central, even if this leads to a more critical view of German history and even if it raises certain arguments about the whole Sonderweg thesis, which I am not going to explore at this juncture.[3] In contrast to the Sonderweg view of German history, the recent debate

is no longer based on comparison with Western countries. This is a shift of comparative reference which in itself is meaningful and even irritating.

III.

Nolte and Fest have explicitly mentioned political reasons for slowly revising our notion of the past, including our view of National Socialism. Politicians like Franz-Joseph Strauss and Alfred Dregger have argued in a similar fashion. Alfred Dregger has said, "Besorgt machen uns Geschichtslosigkeit und Rücksichtslosigkeit der eigenen Nation gegenüber. Ohne einen elementaren Patriotismus, der anderen Völkern selbstverständlich ist, wird auch unser Volk nicht überleben können. Wer die sogenannte Vergangenheitsbewältigung, die gewiss notwendig war, misbraucht, um unser Volk zukunftsunfähig zu machen, muss auf unseren Widerstand stossen." ("We are worried about the loss of history and rigor, and the lack of attention to our nation. Without an elementary patriotism which is self-evident for other peoples, it will be impossible for our people to survive. Those who misuse the so-called mastery of the past in order to render our people incapable of mastering the future must be rejected.") Michael Stürmer has spoken of "aufrechter Gang" ("standing tall") which, according to him, should become possible again for the Germans.

Such arguments fit into a general mood of rising interest in history as a tool of building consensus and collective identity in order to survive better in the future. This argument has many sides, and many different people have contributed to it. By some we are invited not to focus too

intensively on the National Socialist period because this leads to an overly critical view of our past which would not lend itself easily to the needed process of national identification. They have stressed that German history is long and complex, and that even during the period of 1933 to 1945, there were phenomena other than National Socialism. Some people think that there is an obsession with guilt in our country, which allegedly paralyzes our ability for collective action. Others, among them Michael Stürmer, deplore tendencies of social disintegration and a lack of consensus and direction, and they discover deficits of collective identity in the Federal Republic. They hope to counteract it by stressing common (and that usually means national historical) memories and traditions. This general demand for history as a tool or a basis for collective identification seems to underlie the most recent attempts at revision of our past, and it is this neo-conservative demand for a more acceptable German history ("zustimmungsfähige Geschichte," as Habermas said) which is indeed shared by writers as different as Nolte, Stürmer, Fest, and Hillgruber -- people who correctly stated in the debate that in many other respects, they have different positions. Habermas was not at all wrong when he attacked them together.

How convincing is this "neo-conservative demand," if I am using this word correctly? I would contend, first of all, that a certain collective identity and basic solidarity -- so strongly stressed by neo-conservatives -- is indeed essential to any society for defining common goals and solving common problems. I would also concede that the memory of the National Socialist period remains

extremely difficult, even painful. It is true, few people support the thesis of collective guilt -- and I personally do not see any paralyzing "obsession with guilt" in Germany. Still, one knows that those crimes and catastrophes belong to one's national heritage. (It is interesting to note how differently West Germany, East Germany, and Austria have dealt with them.) And how does one live with this in a responsible, rather than self-destructive way? To the extent that the present Historikerstreit tries to come to grips with this difficult problem, this debate is, I think, indispensable, or at least understandable, and not at all superfluous and detrimental, as Thomas Nipperdey, for instance, has written. I would also agree that our view of National Socialism has to change with the help of the perspective gained over time. It becomes easier to see National Socialism in a broader context by using comparisons and by assessing its long-term consequences, which were largely destructive yet also contributed to the modernization of German society and its liberation from certain problematic traditions. The relative stability of the Federal Republic of Germany has something to do with the impact of National Socialism. I agree with Martin Broszat (an outspoken critic of Nolte and Stürmer) who suggests that with the growing distance of time, it becomes easier to identify and discuss all aspects of the period between 1933 and 1945, including those which are not completely part of the "system of evil" and cannot be understood as specific to National Socialism. Also, it becomes easier with time to discover shades and nuances of this period and to avoid a rigid black-white categorization. There is, I believe, nothing wrong with

stressing the fact that German history is long and complex and that National Socialism is but one period in it.

Still several points must be made concerning the neo-conservative challenge. First, there are certain attempts to achieve a greater acceptability of our past which cannot be permitted in professional terms. Distortions like Nolte's speculation on the anti-Bolshevik and defensive character of the Holocaust violate the standards of historical scholarship. Comparison must not be misused to relativize and trivialize the Nazi experience. And certainly forgetting is not possible. (None of those discussed here has advocated suppression or forgetting.) It is neither possible nor desirable to draw a Schlussstrich. Contrary to the hopes of some people and the fears of certain critics, particularly abroad, there is no real danger of that anyway. Today the Nazi past receives more attention than it did 10, 20, or 30 years ago. Our job as historians is to preserve, not to mutilate, historical memory.

Second, in contrast to the neo-conservative position, I would argue that a clear and lively recollection of the most disastrous period of our history does not paralyze us as a political society. It may well be the opposite. For many of us, a critical awareness of the Nazi period has been a major motivation for political, scholarly, and intellectual commitments and activities. Knowing that such things are possible, one tries to prevent them from recurring. I also think that recollecting and accepting the Nazi crimes as part of one's national heritage does not necessarily prevent us from what Stürmer calls an aufrechter Gang. In fact, there

could perhaps even be a certain amount of pride in the record of the Federal Republic, which has emerged as a relatively liberal, relatively democratic system, distancing itself from that past. As Habermas and others have argued, one of the basic elements of the political culture of the Federal Republic of Germany (and also of the GDR) is stressing the difference between itself and the National Socialist past. In this respect, any relativization of the National Socialist past has the potential of undermining a certain element of the political culture of the Federal Republic. In addition, I think there is a certain pride in the fact that we are willing to scrutinize and publicly debate the history of National Socialism, an effort which compares favorably with other European countries who have had experiences with dictatorships and failed to expose them in a comparable fashion.

Third, in contrast to the neo-conservative position, I do not share the fear that we will suffer from a lack of collective identity. Rather I would stress that it is normal and desirable to have a manifold collective identity. Individuals are Bavarians and Catholics and citizens of the Federal Republic of Germany and Germans and Europeans. These affiliations, nevertheless, mix in different ways within each person. The resulting loyalties may compete, but they are not necessarily incompatible as long as there is mediating discourse among them. Our society is far from what Stürmer has called intellectual civil war (geistiger Bürgerkrieg). We do not have more of a crisis than many other societies; perhaps on the contrary, there is more stability in the Federal Republic than elsewhere. Certainly there

are some German particularities in contrast to, for example, Switzerland or the United States: the incongruity between nation and nation-state, on the one hand, and the deep ruptures between 1933 and 1949 on the other. But these particularities may not always be only a liability. For instance, we are far away from nationalism. There is a certain amount of caution in foreign policy which I regard as an asset. Those who feel alarmed by the ambiguities, the heterogeneity, and the lack of national uniformity in present-day Germany may be wrong; they should re-examine the standards by which they measure.

Fourth, even if there were a weakness of collective identity, one could nevertheless ask whether it is a good idea to stress national identity as a sort of counter-measure, particularly in the German case. The project of the nation-state does not belong among the success stories in German history. Stressing national identities may have counterproductive results with respect to the collective identity of both German states. In light of a strongly emphasized national heritage, the Federal Republic of Germany (as well as the GDR) may easily appear as an unloved provisional arrangement. There is an unresolved tension between German national identity and the legitimation of the Federal Republic.

Fifth, if there were a lack of collective identity, which I do not believe there is, it would not be the task of the historian to build and strengthen it. I doubt whether the honest and unprejudiced exploration of one's own history really creates consensus. Sometimes historical memory divides and builds up new confrontations. In addition, professional

historians deal with history as a science, and consequently it is their job to be critical of established beliefs and stereotypes. It is their obligation as scholars to question established collective identities, not build them.

IV.

Why are we having this debate today, and not ten years earlier or ten years from now? There are many reasons, including a specific generational situation. I should like to stress three underlying factors. First, interest in history has grown in the last decade or so, in many different forms ranging from local history workshops ("Dig where you are") and amateur family historians to the government initiatives already mentioned. Behind this broad demand for history is a demand for defining one's identity. People want to discover their origins, understand their present realities, and know what the future may hold for them. This demand for collective identification is not just a phenomenon on the intellectual and political right; rather it can be found in other parts of the political spectrum too. The general feeling, if I see it correctly, of those who discussed and joined movements in the sixties and early seventies was that they were surrounded by overly stable, petrified (verkrustete) relations which they wanted to ease. At some point in the seventies, this general mood changed. The perception of tremendously fast societal change and lack of control led to a certain yearning for stability. In this context, a renewed interest in history arose. This feeling has been expressed by the so-called Wertkonservativen (value conservatives) in the Green camp among others. Even the proposals

for a new SPD party program reflect this mood of conservative values. Secondly, the renewed interest in history has something to do with die Wende. One can see a connection between what I have described here, on the one hand, and projects in the cultural-political sphere, such as those of the Bonn government (particularly the museums) on the other. Thirdly, there is a revival of interest in the national phenomenon in both German states. Some participants in the debate seem to feel threatened by East Germany's most recent claims to the German national heritage. The "whole national heritage" has indeed become a major theme for East German historians, party ideologues, and government officials. They have attempted to show the GDR as the embodiment of all German progressive history. Thus there is an element of competition between East and West Germany.

In conclusion, the debate thus far has caused deep tensions within the profession and it seems to have caused a negative impact among intellectuals and colleagues abroad. But perhaps in this debate the strength of relatively critical positions has been demonstrated. Certainly Nolte has not carried the day, and certainly Habermas, who fought in a discipline not his own, did not lose out. Indeed, I noticed that Chancellor Helmut Kohl recently stressed the singularity of the Holocaust in a public speech, which suggests that the impact of the revisionists remains rather limited.

This is evident as well with respect to the German Historical Museum to be built in Berlin. The original motive of those who took the initiative, i.e., the Bonn government and Chancellor Kohl

personally, undoubtedly had something to do with this neo-conservative demand for history as I described it. But the eventual outcome may not be identical with this motive. A large group of historians, art historians, and other experts from different origins and with very different opinions have suggested that the museum's purpose should not be primarily an attempt to increase national identity, but rather it should be a relatively pluralistic and non-official approach to German history in a broad comparative framework with an emphasis on regional variations. The concept stresses political, social, cultural, and economic history on relatively equal grounds, and if it is realized in this way, I think it will compare well with other historical museums in other countries. Looking at the Historikerstreit from this perspective, one need not be too pessimistic in view of the results so far.

NOTES

1. I should like to stress that neither Joachim Fest nor any other serious historian has supported Nolte's further speculation that Chaim Weizmann, speaking for the Jewish Agency in 1939, produced "something like a declaration of war" against Germany and that this "might justify the consequential thesis that Hitler was allowed to treat the German Jews as prisoners of war and by this means to intern them." Cf. Historikerstreit, Munich: Piper, 1987, pp. 142, 136, 105f. Unqualified praise for Nolte has been expressed by K. Hildebrand in: Historische Zeitschrift, vol. 242, 1986, p. 466.

2. Cf. Stefan Merl, "Ausrottung der Bourgeoisie und der Kulaken in Sowjetrußland? Anmerkungen zu

einem fragwürdigen Vergleich mit Hitlers Judenvernichtung," in: Geschichte und Gesellschaft, vol. 13 (1987), pp. 368-381.

3. See my article, "German History before Hitler. The Debate about the 'German Sonderweg,'" Journal of Contemporary History, Jan 1988.