

THREE GENERATIONS OF GERMAN GELEHRTENPOLITIK

James J. Sheehan
Stanford University

In 1922, the *Historische Zeitschrift* published an article by its editor, Friedrich Meinecke, entitled “Drei Generationen deutscher Gelehrtenpolitik.”¹ *Gelehrtenpolitik* is one of those words that look easy to translate until one tries to do it: for our purposes, we can render it as “the relationship of scholars to politics.” The occasion for Meinecke’s essay was the nearly simultaneous appearance of three books: the collected critical essays of Friedrich Theodor Vischer (1807–1887), a philosopher and historian of art, and the political writings of Gustav Schmoller (1838–1917), an important economic historian and a founder of the Verein für Sozialpolitik, and of Max Weber (1864–1920), the great social theorist. Using these three works as his point of departure, Meinecke traced the shift from idealism to empiricism to realism, from Vischer’s slow reconciliation with a Prussian-dominated Germany to Schmoller’s unquestioning acceptance of the Kaiserreich to Weber’s critical and increasingly pessimistic nationalism. *Gelehrtenpolitik*, Meinecke wrote, can surely be found outside of Germany, but nowhere else is it so tightly wound up with decisive moments in national history.²

Gerhard Ritter’s richly informative and deeply moving paper also presents us with three generations of German scholars: first, there is Meinecke’s generation—he was born in 1862, two years before Weber, although he lived thirty-four years longer, until 1954; next, the generation of his protégés—born around the turn of the last century; and, finally, there is Professor Ritter’s own generation, that is the generation that was born at the end of the Weimar Republic, experienced Nazism as children and adolescents, and then came of age in the years after 1945. Following Meinecke’s model, I want to reflect on each of these generations and suggest what they can tell us about the changing character of German *Gelehrtenpolitik* in the twentieth century.

I begin with Meinecke himself. Meinecke’s discussion of Weber in his 1922 essay clearly had an autobiographical element. After all, Weber belonged to his own generation: both men were marked intellectually by what Meinecke once called a new appreciation for the fragmentary quality of life and politically by a growing concern for the political problems created by the Kaiser’s erratic personality and the nation’s unresolved social conflicts.³ Meinecke set these experiences against both Vischer’s idealism and the greater confidence—at once philosophical and political—that characterized Schmoller’s approach to scholarship and politics.

Just as the centerpiece of the section on Vischer is his reconciliation with Bismarck's Germany, so the center of the section on Weber is the disruptive power of war, military defeat, and political revolution.

From our perspective, however, the most striking characteristic of Meinecke's life is not disruption but connection. Part of this is simply chronological, a connection of past and present, the traditional and the modern: born four years before the battle of Königgrätz into what was a very old-fashioned social milieu, he died nine years after the battle of Berlin, in a world shaped by total war and shadowed by the danger of nuclear cataclysm. Intellectually, Meinecke bridged the evolution of German historiography from Ranke—whose funeral he attended as a student—and Droysen, through Nietzsche and Dilthey, to Weber and Troeltsch. Meinecke's politics also stretched across a broad span of historical experience: He lived in the Prussian monarchy, the German empire, republic, dictatorship, and finally in occupied and divided Berlin. Nevertheless, he remained, in many ways, a liberal nationalist,—small l, small n—whose values and attitudes were shaped by the patriotic Protestant *Bildungsbürgertum* to which he belonged. From his early biography of the military reformer, Hermann von Boyen, to the core chapters in his magisterial *Vom Weltbürgertum zum Nationalstaat*, Meinecke was drawn to the era of Prussian reforms and national revival in the early nineteenth century—the critical chapter in liberal nationalism's grand narrative of German history. He remained a monarchist at heart, but he became, as Professor Ritter shows us, a republican by conviction, which certainly was an important reason why he attracted the progressive young men and women who became his protégés. This political flexibility, combined with personal integrity, a deeply rooted tolerance, and remarkable generosity of spirit, made him—as Felix Gilbert wrote—"one of the very few whose work and voice helped to join present and future with the better traditions of German scholarship."⁴

These same qualities also make Meinecke a tragic figure, a representative of a lost Germany, one of those decent, well-meaning men who were unable to prevent or even fully to understand their nation's catastrophic course. There is something heroic about Meinecke's book on the German catastrophe, written under difficult circumstances in the deep winter of his own and his nation's life. But it is also, I think, a sad and disappointing book.⁵

Meinecke arrived in Berlin in 1914 to take up the most important chair in German history, but for obvious reasons his impact on the next scholarly generation was delayed by the war. Among his protégés, only Dietrich Gerhard was old enough to serve. The rest—born in the first years of the twentieth century—experienced the war vicariously, through newspapers and what they heard from their older contemporaries. In his

remarkable autobiography, Sebastian Haffner (born in 1907) has left us a vivid picture of what a wartime boyhood was like. Meinecke's protégés had, of course, scholarly temperaments. They were certainly committed to the Republic and attracted by the vibrant culture of Weimar Berlin, but they also did what young historians must do, spending more time in archives and libraries than in night clubs and cabarets. I am eager to read the letters Gerhard Ritter has assembled, but the autobiographical material I have seen is remarkably restrained about their emotional lives. Felix Gilbert's memoir, *A European Past*, for example, is a wonderful book in many ways, but it is also extraordinarily—one might say frustratingly—discreet. It is not easy to imagine these serious young scholars in the Weimar scene described, for example, by Klaus Mann (born 1906) in his memoirs.⁶

These scholars were, as Professor Ritter shows us, drawn to Meinecke not simply because of his political sympathies but also—perhaps mainly—because of his reputation as an innovative historian, someone who was not tied to the narrow forms of political history practiced by the neo-Rankean establishment. It is striking how much of their early work—Gilbert on Droysen, Rosenberg on Haym—remained within the liberal national tradition, even if its political tone was sharper and more critical. From the start, however, Meinecke's protégés were a diverse group, differing from one another in scholarly interests and in temperament. To quote Gilbert once again: Meinecke "was a great teacher because he urged his students to find their own way, the way most appropriate to their personality." His students, Gilbert went on, "have worked in the most varied areas of history: political, social, institutional, intellectual. It was Meinecke's concern for their finding in history both a strict discipline and creative expression that brought students close to him and generated veneration for him, even if in their life and work they went on different roads."⁷

This diversity increased during the protégés' time in the United States: Dietrich Gerhard, as Ritter has shown us, was intellectually closer to Otto Hintze than to Meinecke. Hans Rosenberg quickly abandoned intellectual biography, first for economic history, then for a politically shaped social history. In some ways, Holborn and Gilbert stayed closer to their teacher, in their continued concern for political ideas and the history of historiography. But they too moved far away from the grand intellectual history that represented Meinecke's most significant work.

But despite the differences among them, we should not lose sight of two important things that Meinecke's protégés shared. First, all of them were attracted by, and became part of, the American historical profession, absorbing many of its values, reading widely in its literature, and contributing to its common life. Gerhard and Gilbert both published impor-

tant works on American history. Holborn became president of the American Historical Association. And Rosenberg's scholarly development after 1933 was deeply influenced by his engagement with American contributions to history and the social sciences.⁸ And yet, while all four scholars flourished—not, it should be noted, without varying degrees of difficulty and at considerable cost—in their adopted homeland, all of them remained German. This is the second important thing they had in common: All of them returned to Germany—Rosenberg and Gerhard to spend the last years of their lives. After 1945, all of them resumed their ties to Meinecke and to other German friends. All of them had strong institutional connections to postwar German academic life. In the moving remarks he gave in 1977, on the occasion of being given an honorary degree at Bielefeld, Hans Rosenberg offered his listeners this description of himself: "Before you," he said, "stands an engaged historian, a non-Marxist, liberal-democratic, cosmopolitan German-American historian from the generation of 1904."⁹ In this self-definition, the three most important words are German, American, and historian.

Because they were all German and American historians, Meinecke's protégés served as living links between the world they had been forced to leave and the new one in which they found a place. This was their great contribution to the generation of German historians who began their careers in the wreckage of the postwar world. What Gilbert said about Meinecke was even more powerfully and significantly true of these émigrés: their work and characters "helped to join present and future with the better traditions of German scholarship." And equally important, they helped to join the postwar generation to the scholarly world outside of Germany, and especially to Britain and the United States. As teachers, mentors, colleagues, and friends, the émigrés enriched both their new homes and their old, weaving connections that transformed Americans' understanding of Germany and Germans' understanding of America. They were, therefore, one—among many others—thread from which the political and cultural fabric of transatlantic relationships was woven. Professor Ritter, I know, would agree that postwar German historiography is impossible to imagine without them.

A final word about generations: In his classic essay on the concept of generation, first published in 1928, Karl Mannheim wrote: "Were it not for the existence of social interaction between human beings—were there no definable social structure, no history based on a particular sort of continuity, the generation would not exist as a social phenomenon; there would be merely birth, aging and death."¹⁰

We historians are drawn to the concept of generation precisely because it helps us to understand both separation and connection, that

constant interplay of continuities and changes that gives history its peculiar form and endless fascination. In the three generations of German historians who have been our subject this evening, we can see the formative power of distinctive historical experiences: for Meinecke, the crisis and collapse of Bismarck's Reich; for his protégés, the failure of democracy and the anguish and opportunities of exile; and for the first postwar generation, the shadow of Nazism and the challenge of building a new democratic state. And yet spanning these great historical ruptures were powerful lines of continuity—lines of continuity woven from personal ties and also from a shared commitment to the scholar's calling. These lines of continuity unite our three very different generations and join them to the long and complex genealogy of German *Gelehrtenpolitik*.

We are all indebted to Gerhard Ritter for his splendid account of Meinecke and his protégés, in which he so eloquently portrayed the bonds of friendship and scholarly commitment that connect these generations to one another—and to many of us.

Notes

¹ Reprinted in Meinecke's *Werke*, vol. 9 (Stuttgart, 1979), 476–509.

² That this essay was the subject of Felix Gilbert's contribution to the *Festschrift* for Hajo Holborn links it even more closely to the subject of Gerhard Ritter's paper: "Political Power and Academic Responsibility: Reflections on Friedrich Meinecke's *Drei Generationen deutscher Gelehrtenpolitik*," *The Responsibility of Power: Historical Essays in Honor of Hajo Holborn*, edited by Leonard Krieger and Fritz Stern (Garden City, 1967), 402–15.

³ For Meinecke's own description of his generation's political and intellectual orientation, see his *Erlebtes*, reprinted in *Werke*, vol. 8 (Stuttgart, 1969), 100.

⁴ Gilbert, *History: Choice and Commitment* (Cambridge, MA, 1977), 67–68.

⁵ *Die deutsche Katastrophe* was written in the immediate aftermath of the war. It is reprinted in Meinecke's *Werke*, vol. 8, 323–447.

⁶ As Michael Wildt has shown, members of this generation—from a very different milieu than Meinecke's students—played key roles in Nazism's terror apparatus: *Generation des Unbedingten* (Hamburg, 2003).

⁷ Gilbert, *History*, 87.

⁸ On the role of the émigrés in the United States, see *An Interrupted Past: German-Speaking Refugee Historians in the United States after 1933*, ed. Hartmut Lehmann and James J. Sheehan (Cambridge, 1991).

⁹ "Rückblick auf ein Historikerleben zwischen zwei Kulturen," *Machteliten und Wirtschaftskonjunkturen: Studien zur neueren deutschen Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* (Göttingen, 1978), 12.

¹⁰ "The Problem of Generations," reprinted in *From Karl Mannheim*, edited by Kurt Wolff, 2d. ed. (New Brunswick, 1993), 366.