

THE FIVE GERMANYS HE HAS KNOWN: SYMPOSIUM IN HONOR OF FRITZ STERN

Symposium co-sponsored by the GHI, the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies, the BMW Center for German and European Studies at Georgetown University, the German Marshall Fund of the United States, the Goethe-Institut Washington, and Farrar, Straus and Giroux, held at the Westin Embassy Row Hotel, Washington DC, January 29, 2007. Conveners: Jackson Janes (AICGS) and Robert Gerald Livingston (GHI).

Participants: Roger Chickering (Georgetown University), Marion Deshmukh (George Mason University), Hope Harrison (George Washington University), Claudia Koonz (Duke University), Charles Maier (Harvard University), Jerry Z. Muller (Catholic University), Fritz Stern (Columbia University).

To conceptualize German history in the twentieth century is to consider multiple histories, including Imperial Germany, the Weimar Republic, the Nazi dictatorship, occupied Germany, East and West Germany, and today's unified Germany. The German-American historian Fritz Stern and his family represent a microcosm of that history. The January 29, 2007, symposium in honor of Stern aimed to explore that history through commentary on Stern's history-cum-memoir *The Five Germanys I Have Known* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006). Each panelist used one Germany as a basis for reflection on the man and his career, as well as on the complexities of modern German history. In his opening commentary, Chickering noted that Stern fits Weber's model of the public intellectual, in that he feels an obligation to comment on issues of public importance; his work has been pivotal in the multiple post-World War II reconciliations within Germany, within Europe, and across the Atlantic.

Marion Deshmukh, a former student of Stern's, commented on the Imperial German section of Stern's book, presenting the history of Stern's family as "a microcosm of the greater historical panorama." Typical German first names such as Fritz's own and that of his grandmother Hedwig bear testimony to the acculturation among German Jews, even though anti-Semitism and persecution eventually led to the family's emigration. Deshmukh pointed out the importance of family histories such as Stern's for Americans' understanding of how closely they are linked to the European drama. Jerry Z. Muller, another of Stern's former students, recalled Stern's remark that "capitalism is too important a topic to be left to

economic historians,” and commented on Stern’s role as an economic historian. Muller then turned to a humorous evaluation of Stern’s qualities as a historical researcher. The most important among them, according to Muller, comprise Stern’s capacity for benign self-deception (about the size of a research project, for instance), serendipity, *Sitzfleisch* [steadiness], *Gründlichkeit* [thoroughness], fortitude, and his aptitude to make good use of personal connections.

The third commentator, Claudia Koonz, looked at Stern’s person and work from the perspective of an “intellectual grandchild.” Koonz embraced Stern’s concerns for the moral problems faced by Germany and discussed “the Nazi Germany that Fritz knew,” focusing in particular on the legacy that it left on him and his family when they arrived in New York. This legacy sharpened Stern’s future vigilance and taught him contempt for elites who looked the other way when protective custody became a euphemism. Stern’s great capacity to draw analogies between past and present, Koonz argued, holds lessons for us all. Hope Harrison commented on Stern’s relation to postwar Germany, specifically the years between 1949 and the construction of the Berlin Wall. Stern became a key figure in German-American-Jewish relations, and played the role of both a German and a non-German in his efforts to examine German history.

Robert Gerald Livingston discussed Stern’s chapter on the German Democratic Republic. He challenged Stern’s argument that the West Germans neglected the East German state by arguing that the Bonn government’s buying out of political prisoners provided the East with monetary funds that were crucial for its survival. He also posed the question of whether the East German state was actually the “better” Germany, in that it broke more completely with the Nazi past than did its West German cousin. Charles Maier focused on Stern’s public role in postwar Germany and defined him as “the man of the second chance.” Through his “knowledgeable and revealing” writing, Stern reminds Germans that they have been given a second chance—namely, democracy—and that they should not squander the opportunities they have today. Democracy continues to remain a project, and Stern remains one of its chief ambassadors in both his role as teacher and advocate. At the symposium’s conclusion, Stern took to the podium to thank the speakers and to offer a few reflections on the roles of other German historians before him. The symposium ended with a short question-and-answer period, during which one audience member inquired as to Stern’s predictions for the next Germany of the future. Fritz Stern politely replied, “Five were enough for me!”

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