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**The Return to the Western Tradition:  
German Historiography since 1945**

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Preface

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Edited by Prof. Dr. Hartmut Lehmann,  
Dr. Manfred F. Boemeke, and Janine Micunek  
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## Preface

The establishment of the German Historical Institute in Washington, D.C., in 1987 served as an indication of two things: that the relationship between German and American historians had greatly improved from the 1950s to the 1980s; and that, by the mid-1980s, this relationship was in need of affirmation and invigoration. On the one hand, it is quite remarkable to observe how many German historians, since the 1950s, received part of their formal training in the United States; how many historians who were forced to emigrate from Germany to the United States in the 1930s became intermediaries between the historical professions of both countries after the Second World War, and how many topics and research findings that German historians obtained from their American colleagues were introduced into the historical dialogue in Germany. On the other hand, it is also true, however, that the field of American history at German universities remained very small even after 1945. The role of the refugee historians slowly faded as they entered retirement. Moreover, there always was a number of German historians who never pursued the possibility to study, teach, or do research in the United States.

As the German Historical Institute in Washington, D.C., celebrated the formal opening of its new building on October 2, 1991, the first phase of its history was completed. It was most appropriate that the *Vorsitzender des Verbandes der Historiker Deutschlands*, Professor Wolfgang J. Mommsen of the University of Düsseldorf, chose to deliver his dedicatory lecture on "The Return to the Western Tradition. German Historiography since 1945." We are grateful to Professor Mommsen for helping us define our place within the history of the relations between German and American historians and for reminding us of our task. We are proud to present his lecture as the fourth issue in our series of *Occasional Papers*.

Hartmut Lehmann  
Washington, D.C.  
October 1991

## **The Return to the Western Tradition: German Historiography since 1945**

*Wolfgang J. Mommsen*

The momentous events that we are experiencing these days mark the end of the post-World War II era, or perhaps even the era of two world wars associated with the rise and fall of totalitarian movements on the extreme Right as well as on the extreme Left. This is a suitable moment for an assessment of German historical thought in the last four decades. There is much to be said for the argument that, without the return of Germany into the mold of the political culture of the West, the great changes that took place during the last few years in Europe and in Germany itself would probably not have occurred, or, at any rate, not in the way they did. Since the late eighteenth century, the European political arena was divided into three great ideological camps: the authoritarian and economically backward region of Czarist Russia, including most of the Balkans; the liberal West, spearheaded by Great Britain and, initially somewhat less marked, by the United States; and the German states, Austria, and the Southern European countries, which represented a half-way position, both in political and economic respects. It is difficult to deny that the German states followed a different path from that of the West, regardless of whether it may be called a *Sonderweg* or not (although it is claimed nowadays that there were many *Sonderwege*, this argument is not a particularly illuminating).

Certainly the Central European ruling elites were deeply distrustful of the Western course of development, which was characterized by a slow but continuous liberalization of the political and social systems, helped along by a steady and successful industrial development. They were bent on maintaining a strong state as an independent force that was expected to keep in check the potentially dangerous forces from below. Yet, at the same time, they wished to keep clear of the autocratic path pursued by Czarist Russia and imposed upon the nations and territories it had forcibly annexed since the later eighteenth century. Until very recent times, Germany had always played the role of an "in-between" and, to some degree, of a mediator between those two antagonistic social-political systems with very different political cultures. The great attempt to reconstruct Europe after the First World War according to the Western

model first propagated in Woodrow Wilson's famous formula "to make the world"—more precisely, Europe—"safe for democracy" turned out a painful and costly failure, last but not least because of the collapse of the democratic Weimar Republic, which gave way to a National Socialist dictatorship in the center of Europe. The Fascist systems were the last great attempt to restore the old European order, though on a new, populist basis, in order to keep democracy at bay. The rise of Soviet communism in Russia significantly challenged the Western political system. However, the attempt to establish a modern industrial system by a tour de force through a communist dictatorship proved in the end an unmitigated disaster.

The last chapter in this history was opened in the aftermath of the Second World War. Now the two great world systems confronted each other directly and Germany was no longer an intermediary force; instead, it was divided between them, and the two new German states were integrated into entirely different socio-political systems with sharply contrasting political cultures. From a traditional point of view, this could not be seen but as a catastrophe for German historical scholarship, given the fact that the latter had long understood its own social role as a loyal supporter of Germany's national goals and a provider of political legitimacy to the nation-state. In 1949, on the occasion of the first German Historical Association Meeting after the Second World War, Gerhard Ritter remarked: "Germany is a defeated, heavily mutilated country, one might almost say a country cut into four segments. A country, powerless, without a common voice, almost a no man's land between the power spheres of two world powers threatening each other with extinction."<sup>1</sup> The traditional, independent role of Germany between East and West had gone for good. And the judgment of world opinion about German historiography seemed to be unanimously negative. Ritter instinctively felt it necessary to defend the German tradition against its adversaries in both the West and the East. He declared that, instead of joining in the universal condemnation of Germany's recent history, it ought to be the duty of German historians to regain Germany's own history, albeit in a new spirit.

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<sup>1</sup> Gerhard Ritter, "Gegenwärtige Lage und Zukunftsaufgaben deutscher Geschichtswissenschaft." Eröffnungsvortrag des 20. Deutschen Historikertages in München am 12. September 1949, *Historische Zeitschrift* 170 (1950): 15.

This was a fervent plea not simply to discard the great traditions of German historical scholarship. Accordingly, Ritter took exception to the suggestion by American scholars that German historiography—as Ritter put it in a somewhat misleading manner—be turned into a "political science," into a structural analysis of contemporary society with historical means. But Ritter also pleaded for a sober reassessment of the interpretations of Germany's history which had been current in Germany until then. Above all, he conceded that it was necessary for the Germans to get out of the intellectual ghetto in which they had confined themselves for so long. Personally, however, he hoped to do so by turning to universal history, not by taking up the Western tradition again.

These were very cautious, halfhearted attempts to carve out a new role for German historiography in the midst of the ruins of what used to be a widely respected, powerful nation-state. In the following four decades a remarkable development took place in Germany. not a restoration of traditional historical scholarship with just a few amendments here and there, as Gerhard Ritter would have had it, but a fundamental reorientation which implied the sacrifice of many of the most cherished notions that had been dominant in traditional German political thought.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, the Germans gradually rejoined the common stream of Western political culture from which they had gradually dissociated themselves since the Enlightenment. The return of West Germany into the mold of Western political culture, which Germany had left sometime in the later eighteenth century, over the last forty years is an essential precondition for the spectacular events that we are experiencing in our own day—events that may well be called a third Democratic Revolution, if it be permitted to take up a paradigm coined by R. R. Palmer some thirty years ago. This, however, has a good deal to do with historiography. For historiography has always been the spearhead of the ideology of the German *Sonderweg*, a peculiar German path toward modern society. This is not to argue that notions about the past are in and of themselves a determining factor in history; in a certain way, historiography only reflects the social

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. also Wolfgang J. Mommsen, "Between Revisionism and Neo-Historicism. Recent Trends in West German Historiography," *Storia della Storiografia* 11 (1987): 104–21.

forces at work on the deeper levels of society. Even so, images of the past are powerful agents of social change, precisely because they provide the patterns of orientation that guide the actions of men, whether consciously or, more often, subconsciously. It may well be argued that the fundamental change that took place in German historiographical thought in the last four decades must be seen as an important aspect of contemporary developments highlighted today by the liberation of East Central Europe from communist domination; the unification of Germany; and, above all, the disintegration of the Soviet empire, which a decade ago, though weakened, still seemed unassailable.

In 1948, Rudolf Stadelmann, a historian of high repute even though he had been involved in National Socialist policies, observed that there was a need for a fundamental reorientation of German historical thought. The Germans, he maintained, ought to embrace again intellectually the common heritage of Western culture. In Stadelmann's view, this required taking up the thread again in the late eighteenth century, the period in which Germany's developmental path forked off from that of her West European neighbors: "There is but one option open for us, namely, to return intellectually to the point where the revolutionary development in Western Europe and the German developmental path deviated. What had been common to the occidental world between 1770 and 1800 ought to become once again the basis of a common European way of thought in our own time."<sup>3</sup> This statement corresponds to an observation by Hajo Holborn in his *History of Modern Germany*<sup>4</sup> (which in a way represents Holborn's last intellectual message to the present generation) that in the early nineteenth century, a "deep cleavage was opened between Germany and Western Europe such as had never existed in any earlier century of European history."<sup>5</sup> During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this cleavage gradually widened, but it was never so deep as not to allow a considerable degree of interpenetration of German and Western cultures. It is only since the First World War that the gap between

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<sup>3</sup> *Deutschland und Westeuropa. 3 Aufsätze* (Laupheim, 1948), 33.

<sup>4</sup> Hajo Holborn, *A History of Modern Germany*, vol. 2: 1648–1840 (London, 1965), 510–11.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 515.

German and Western political cultures became really deep, and even more so with the rise of National Socialism. There were many German historians who realized that this development harbored long-term dangers to German culture. In 1919, Ernst Troeltsch, the great liberal theologian and historian, exhorted the German intellectual classes not to forget that Germany and its Western neighbors had their religious and cultural roots in a common history, and he warned that the widespread animosity against Western politics and the Western way of life current in Germany after the First World War must not get out of hand.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Max Weber pleaded for a symbiosis of German and Western political traditions. But this was of little avail. German intellectual life indulged more than ever in the uniqueness of German culture. Likewise, the Germans claimed that their semi-authoritarian system of government was superior to the allegedly materialistic mass democracies of the West. It was only a small minority of historians who objected to the narrow nationalism that took hold of the great majority of the historical profession and who looked beyond the narrow confines of German national interests. Not surprisingly, many of these had pursued their academic studies with Ernst Troeltsch and Friedrich Meinecke in Berlin; among them were scholars such as Dietrich Gerhard, Alfred Vagts, Hans Rosenberg, and Hajo Holborn, all of whom were later forced to emigrate.<sup>7</sup> During the reign of Adolf Hitler, the intellectual isolation from Western traditions and ideas reached its peak.

Accordingly, German historical scholarship was confined to an intellectual ghetto, although in part a self-made one. For it cannot be said that National Socialism succeeded in fully subjecting historical scholarship to its sway; historians resisted the demands of a stupid, uneducated National Socialist elite to create an entirely new, National Socialist image of Germany's past. But they nonetheless gradually succumbed to the temptation of writing history in accordance with the spirit of the times. As a result, in 1945 German

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Ernst Troeltsch, *Deutscher Geist und Westeuropa. Gesammelte kulturphilosophische Aufsätze und Reden*, ed. by Hans Baron (Tübingen, 1925).

<sup>7</sup> For an account of the role of the German émigré historians, see now Hartmut Lehmann and James J. Sheehan, eds., *German-Speaking Refugee Historians in the United States after 1933* (Washington, D.C., and Cambridge, 1991).

historical scholarship was entirely discredited; moreover, due to the emigration of many first-rate minds, its intellectual specter was seriously distorted in favor of conservative and traditionalist views.

Given this point of departure, German historiography has traveled a long way in the last forty years. Today it is again widely respected and its work is in line with the standards and values of the West. The deep gap which separated German scholarship from that of the West is a matter of the past, thanks to a large extent to the assistance by many Western historians.

However, this development was along a far more stony path than would appear at hindsight. As Winfried Schulze has shown recently, the intellectual reorientation of German scholarship after the Second World War did not proceed according to a linear pattern.<sup>8</sup> Initially, all the major spokesmen of the historical profession—notably Friedrich Meinecke in his famous book, *The German Catastrophe*, Percy Ernst Schramm, and Gerhard Ritter—agreed that an entirely new start was necessary. But soon the opposite tendency, that is to say, opposition to the demand for radical changes in the ways in which German history used to be written, gained influence. Indeed, its advocates pleaded for a restoration of German historical scholarship by returning to its roots, to be found above all in Ranke's allegedly objective historical scholarship and in Jacob Burckhardt's deliberate dissociation from all forms of historiography that are informed by day-to-day politics. Hans Rothfels came to the rescue of the traditionalists in the German historical profession. His studies on Bismarck as a European statesman who had fought against the explosive mixture of nationalism and mass democracy which had been undermining the social order in Europe long before the rise of Hitler gave a new lease on life to traditional scholarship, though on a new intellectual basis. Rothfels' famous study of the German resistance movement against Hitler must be considered an intellectual venture that not only tried to rescue the honor of the German nation by showing that there had been at least some Germans who had actively resisted the Hitler regime; it also

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<sup>8</sup> *Deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft nach 1945* (Munich, 1989). See also Ernst Schulz, ed., *Deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg (1945-1965)* (Munich, 1989).

exculpated the Prussian conservative ruling elite from the charge of having collaborated closely with the National Socialists.

Under such circumstances, traditional historiography managed, in the 1950s, to retain and stabilize its dominant position in the German academic system, despite considerable strands of opinion at home and abroad that demanded radical change. This was partly due to the fact that only very few of the historians who had been forced to emigrate in or after 1933 returned, even though in a few cases, as in Cologne for example, attempts were made to offer them again the chairs from which they had been dismissed. Admittedly, the members of the new generation of scholars who now took over the key positions in German historiography—men like Hans Rothfels at Tübingen, Theodor Schieder at Cologne, Werner Conze at Heidelberg, and, a few years later, Karl Dietrich Erdmann at Kiel—were far more open-minded than their predecessors and prepared to respond to new intellectual and methodological trends in historiography. However, the new intellectual initiatives which were to lead to a thorough change in the outlook of German history in the following decades, for the most part did not originate from the historical profession itself. Other disciplines, notably the political sciences, were much quicker than historiography in reacting to the ideas and intellectual developments in the West.

The impact of Western political culture upon German society in the first decade after the end of the Second World War was substantial. It was not so much the policy of "re-education," but the fact that Western democracy and the Western liberal market economy had proved so much more effective than their totalitarian rivals that convinced a new generation of Germans to commit themselves to the struggle for reconstructing German society according to the principles of Western democracy.

The neo-liberal doctrine, developed by American social philosophers and sociologists in the 1940s, proved an important point of departure. Neo-liberalism emphasized that totalitarianism—both in its fascist and its communist varieties—had been the beneficiary of a long-term process by which the principles of individual initiative and individual responsibility were undermined and replaced by the activity of a seemingly ever more omnipotent state. Post-fascist societies ought to be rebuilt in accordance with the principles of individual freedom and constitutional government, coupled with a free market economy and perhaps complemented by a net of social

security measures. Authors like Karl Joachim Friedrich and Hannah Arendt, who based their arguments upon this neo-liberal philosophy, were very influential. They were assisted by philosophers like Karl Jaspers and sociologists like Alfred Weber, who had never disconnected their links to the Western intellectual tradition. It was this stream of opinion that gradually pushed aside the influence of neo-conservative thinkers like Hans Freyer or Carl Schmitt; although Carl Schmitt, who had been a leading protagonist of National Socialism, was forced into retirement, he nevertheless continued to hold a considerable sway over important segments of the German intellectual elites. Besides, some eminent political scientists helped to implement the new democratic message in Germany. For many years, determined adherents of the democratic idea in Germany, such as Theodor Eschenburg and Dolf Sternberger, for instance, worked hard to convince the German people of the advantages of the democratic order. They had the support of political scientists who had returned from the United States, notably Ernst Fraenkel, who taught for many years at the Free University of Berlin. He became an important source of inspiration for a whole generation of younger scholars, among them many historians who later rose to prominence. It was Fraenkel in particular who opened the eyes of the younger generation to the deficiencies of the German variety of democratic government as practiced during the Weimar Republic. Fraenkel pointed out to his students the considerable differences between the German and the Western notions of parliamentary government, and he emphasized the fact that the former had never fully freed itself from the remnants of an authoritarian political tradition which believed above all in a strong state rather than in the advantages of a pluralist society. Besides, in the 1950s, a strong value-oriented notion of democracy gained universal recognition in West Germany, nourished by a fundamentalist interpretation of the American Constitution. The view was widespread that the Weimar Republic had failed because of its alleged value neutrality, which had given a free reign even to its most determined enemies.

It was these intellectual currents that impressed a younger generation of historians and instilled in them a feeling of impatience with their "intellectual fathers." They were no longer content with a kind of historiography—practiced, for example, by Fritz Ernst and, in a different way, Theodor Schieder—that remained aloof from the pressing needs of day-to-day politics and instead turned to the study

of universal history; they were equally dissatisfied with the approach of scholars like Werner Conze and Otto Brunner, who engaged in a new sort of social history that was not directly affected by politics, inasmuch as it inquired into the long-term processes of social change in which political decision-making played no significant role. Nor were they particularly attracted by the new breed of universalist historiography of a catholic connotation as represented by Friedrich Heer. On the other hand, Franz Schnabel's historiography, which had always sought to pay attention to the Western strands in German politics and culture, found a considerable audience among these young scholars. Least of all were they attracted, however, by the writings of those historians who, like Werner Frauendienst, Fritz Hartung, or Walther Hubatsch, merely carried on with political historiography by and large in the traditional, conservative fashion as if nothing had happened. Instead, Otto Hintze's works found high recognition in many quarters.

There was common ground among the generalists only insofar as many historians pleaded for transcending national historiography of the old style; their enthusiasm for a European rather than a national orientation was shared by many historians of the next generation. But the new enthusiasm for a European history also led away from what seemed urgently necessary, namely, a fresh departure in writing German history. It seemed impressive for younger historians to dissociate from the shibboleths of German historicism and follow the example offered by Western scholarship, both on the methodological level and in the actual process of history-writing itself. They were guided by the conviction that the new German parliamentary democracy could survive only if the conventional authoritarian and anti-liberal interpretation of German history were to give way to a new democratic interpretation of Germany's recent past. Among this generation, there was little doubt that historiography had a definite political function to fulfill, and that the option of taking refuge in objective historical scholarship that was aloof from present-day politics was not open to them. Besides, they gradually came to believe that traditional political historiography in the Rankean tradition was no longer sufficient to properly account for the manifold factors that had contributed to the unfortunate course of German history and had eventually culminated in the rise of National Socialism in a country with a rich, highly developed culture.

It is at this point that the influence of Western, particularly American and British, historical scholarship must be considered as having been of paramount importance. It was Geoffrey Barraclough who first challenged the compromise course propagated by Gerhard Ritter, who had sought to rescue as much as possible from the German historical tradition. But more important was to be the influence of thinkers like Ernst Fraenkel, Karl Löwenstein, and Karl Joachim Friedrich. In many ways, they set the standards that became imperative for a new sort of historiography that ideally centered on the question of why Germany had failed to develop a proper democratic system and had instead turned to the worst of all possible options, the dictatorship of Adolf Hitler. It was Ernst Fraenkel who encouraged Karl Dietrich Bracher to write his classic study on *The Decline of the Weimar Republic*, first published in 1955. By employing concepts of political theory, Bracher went beyond the confines of traditional historical scholarship; accordingly, his study was initially received with considerable hesitancy by the German historical profession. In 1959, my own book on *Max Weber and German Politics* caused quite a stir, since it exposed the nationalist elements in Max Weber's political thought and addressed the problematic aspects of his conception of plebiscitary "leadership democracy." In 1962, Kurt Sontheimer published his book on *Antidemocratic Thought in Weimar Germany*, which laid bare strands of authoritarian political thinking in Germany hitherto held to have been far removed from any association with National Socialism and considered entirely respectable. The guiding principle of these interpretations was a value-oriented notion of democracy that was strongly influenced by the Anglo-American model; likewise, the notion of "constitutional democracy" was used as a yardstick to judge German conditions.

Up to the early 1960s, the overdue revision of the traditional interpretations of German history had been restricted largely to the periods of National Socialism and the Weimar Republic. It came under way fully only in the wake of the so-called Fischer controversy. Not surprisingly, it centered on the origins of the First World War, an issue that had played a prominent role in German national-conservative historiography during the 1920s. It is significant that eventually French, English, and American scholars, notably, Fritz Stern, were asked on the occasion of the International Congress of the Historical Sciences at Vienna in 1965 to act as arbiters in this

debate. Yet they refused to join in a wholesale condemnation of Fritz Fischer's theses as had been expected *inter alia* by Gerhard Ritter. In fact, for some years English and American historians had already paved the way for a much more circumspect, essentially liberal, interpretation of modern German history that went beyond the positions of the older German school; a representative, albeit by no means complete, sample of the more important of these scholars includes Geoffrey Barraclough, Alan Bullock, A. J. P. Taylor, and James Joll from Great Britain; and Peter Gay, Carl Schorske, Hans Gatzke, Klemens von Klemperer, George Mosse, Gerhard L. Weinberg, Leonard Krieger, Hans Rosenberg, and Walter Simon from the United States. It could be said that the Fischer controversy would probably never have erupted at all had there not developed a considerable time lag between German and Western historical research. If German historical scholarship had kept on a par with Western research on the history of Imperial Germany, the First World War, and the war guilt question, Fischer's publications would not have evoked such a hostile, though largely emotional, response in West Germany.

The Fischer controversy encouraged a new generation of historians to find explanations for the mishaps of recent German history on a new, higher explanatory level than that of the deeds of statesmen or, for that matter, the dominant ideologies; these scholars increasingly sought to take into account the institutional structures which conditioned the decision-making processes, the social stratification, in particular the role of the dominant elites, and economic factors. In this effort, they received considerable support from English and American historians; scholars like Eric Hobsbawm, Alexander Gerschenkron, and Hans Rosenberg helped them to gradually widen the scope of their interpretations and integrate the social and economic spheres into their inquiries, whereas Carl Schorske and Leonard Krieger encouraged them to go beyond the primarily ideological analysis of political movements and parties.

An important go-between in these matters was Klaus Epstein. Between 1955 and 1967, Epstein regularly visited West Germany for longer periods. He sought to establish close contacts with many younger German scholars working on topics of nineteenth- and twentieth-century German history. He encouraged them to go ahead with a critical revision of German history from a thoroughly liberal viewpoint, even though this approach would not always recommend

them to their own professors. In his own book, *Matthias Erzberger and the Dilemma of German Democracy*, published in 1955, Epstein set a pattern for a new, penetrating analysis of Wilhelmine Germany and the early Weimar Republic. His many critical reviews of the latest German research likewise encouraged a thorough reassessment of Germany's recent past. One scholar who deserves particular attention is Hans Rosenberg, who, during his guest professorships at the Free University of Berlin in 1949/50 and at the University of Marburg in 1955, exercised considerable influence upon a whole group of young historians who later rose to distinction, among them Gerhard A. Ritter and Hans-Ulrich Wehler. Wehler later emphasized the major influence of Rosenberg on modern *Gesellschaftsgeschichte*.<sup>9</sup> Yet there were many others, although not quite as much in the limelight but perhaps just as influential, such as Felix Gilbert or Dietrich Gerhard, who, during their stays in Germany at Cologne and Göttingen, helped bridge the gap between German and Western scholarship and open up new avenues for historical research.

However, the influence of American and British scholars who went to teach for longer or shorter terms at German universities must not be overemphasized. Perhaps more important was the fact that a considerable number of younger German historians were asked to come to Great Britain or the United States for research and sometimes also for teaching. It was not only prestigious academic institutions like St. Antony's College, Oxford, the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, or the Hoover Library at Stanford, but many universities and other institutions that invited German historians, often at considerable expense. The story of academic exchange in the post-war era has not yet been written, at least not in quantitative terms, but its significance is beyond doubt. The familiarity with Western academic life and, more important, with Western political culture thereby acquired perhaps accounts for more than the direct contact with prominent scholars, although this factor should not at all be underestimated.

Personal acquaintance with historians such as Gordon Craig, Hajo Holborn, Alexander Gerschenkron, Felix Gilbert, or Hans Rosenberg, for example, was certainly a momentous factor in the

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<sup>9</sup> See Hans-Ulrich Wehler, "Vorwort," in id., ed., *Sozialgeschichte heute. Festschrift für Hans Rosenberg zum 70. Geburtstag* (Göttingen, 1974), 20.

intellectual development of many German historians who went to the United States or Great Britain in those years. In this respect, St. Antony's College, Oxford, played a special role. By establishing an exchange scholarship that by now has been in existence for thirty years, initially with the assistance of the Volkswagen Foundation, it enabled a considerable number of German historians to come to Oxford and get to know English research and English scholarship at close quarters.

Even more important in the long run, however, was the gradual interpenetration of a whole generation of younger scholars from Germany, Great Britain, and particularly the United States. In the last three decades, the number of Anglo-Saxon historians who came to Germany to pursue archival studies in German archives has been substantial. In the exploration of industrial archives, American scholars took the lead, and, as far as I can see, they still maintain a leading position. Naturally, these historians were inclined to meet with their German colleagues. In those years, many close friendships were established that were also fruitful for an intensive exchange of views on various scholarly matters. The precise scope of these informal contacts naturally escapes a scientific assessment, but their significance is hard to exaggerate. Numerous scholars of my generation immediately spring to my mind; I should just like to mention Gerald D. Feldman, George Iggers, James Joll, Arno J. Mayer, Charles Maier, Tim Mason, Anthony Nicholls, Peter Pulzer, and Henry A. Turner.

All in all, during the last four decades, a substantial cross-fertilization in historical research has taken place between West German and English and American scholarship, whereas the exchange with French and Italian scholars has been somewhat less marked. Yet in the initial stages, this exchange was asymmetrical, inasmuch as it benefitted primarily the Germans. The contact with their Western colleagues encouraged them to go ahead with their own work, even though in many ways it challenged the positions of previous historical research in Germany. This encouragement was of considerable importance at a time in which substantial uncertainty still prevailed in Germany. The traditional division between the German and the Western historical traditions was effectively overcome; indeed, gradually a constellation emerged in which rivaling schools of research and conflicting research opinions were no longer defined by national boundaries. On the contrary, the old

distinction between Germany and the West almost completely lost its momentum in the international community. In other words, the revisionist school that had strived to rewrite German history in accordance with the dominant values of the Western tradition had by and large succeeded over its traditional rivals.

One might go even further. This success was tantamount to the triumph of the liberal paradigm, which had emphasized throughout the relative backwardness of Germany's political and social structures in contrast to its great economic achievements. While the liberal paradigm had thus come to be recognized in German historical research, and notably in its more progressive varieties, as the key to the solution of Germany's more recent history, it is most significant to note that even the correction of this position was also initiated by Western scholarship. It was two British historians, David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, who argued persuasively that by now the liberal paradigm had, as it were, overreached itself and lost its usefulness.<sup>10</sup> Under its influence, the dominant role of the aristocratic elites in recent German history had been exaggerated; instead the forces "from below" deserved to be given equal, if not more, consideration. Indeed, Blackbourn and Eley maintained, the ideal yardstick by which recent German history used to be judged, the ideal-typical model of a continuous developmental path toward modern democracy with the ruling elites giving way in good time whenever necessary, proved to be fictitious, as neither British nor American history had ever followed such a harmonious course. It is now common to claim for each country its individual *Sonderweg* rather than to assign to Germany alone a special path that unnecessarily deviated from that of the Western countries. And now quite a few voices from American scholars plead for a more balanced interpretation of many aspects of German history, for instance—to mention just one recent example—Otto Pflanze in his new three-volume biography of Prince Bismarck.<sup>11</sup>

But even if the explanation for the disasters that befell German politics in the twentieth century is no longer accounted for simply

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<sup>10</sup> Geoff Eley and David Blackbourn, *The Peculiarities of German History. Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford, 1984).

<sup>11</sup> *Bismarck and the Development of Germany*, 3 vols. (Princeton, N.J., 1963–1990).

in terms of the country's deviation from the liberal path of its Western neighbors, it has nevertheless become clear that the semi-authoritarian political order of Germany, which praised the alleged advantages of a strong state and a strong political leadership beyond the control of political parties and free from the constraints of a competitive capitalist market economy, proved in the end disastrous. Rather, it has become part of the political consensus of the Germans that their future lies in a democratic system similar to that of their Western allies and a political culture based upon the same fundamental principles as theirs. This consensus, however, could not have been achieved without a thorough revision of the traditional image of the past that was current among Germans a generation ago. The respectability of the German people in the world is founded ultimately upon the fact that they have made an honest attempt to face their recent history squarely and to come to terms with it, however painful this may have been in view of the enormous atrocities perpetrated by National Socialism in the name of their country.

How important the close collaboration between West German historians and their colleagues from the major Western countries has been may be shown now by looking at the development of historical research in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). It will have to be admitted that, in the GDR, historical scholarship was initially subjected to a far more radical break with its traditions than in the West. The dissociation from National Socialism and the authoritarian traditions of Imperial Germany was far more marked, inasmuch as the establishment of the SED regime was justified, *inter alia*, by the argument that the roots of fascism had to be eliminated once and for all on German soil. But it soon became apparent that the GDR was not really interested in a thorough reassessment of recent German history as such; instead, the responsibility for the negative aspects of German history was laid on the doorstep of West Germany, and it was officially claimed that the citizens of the first German Socialist state had nothing to do with these matters. The Federal Republic was seen as the heir of all that had been bad in German history; it was portrayed as an imperialist and even semi-fascist system, whereas the new socialist state claimed to be the legitimate heir to the innovative and progressive traditions of German history going back as far as the Reformation. Furthermore, the Marxist-Leninist theory of history was forcefully imposed upon the

historical profession, regrettably with the voluntary cooperation of quite a few historians who were convinced that the creation of a socialist system was the only satisfactory way to prevent a recurrence of fascist rule. However, under the surface of the doctrinaire scheme of Marxist-Leninist history, traditional nationalist views lingered on, since a genuine discussion about Germany's recent past was not possible under the circumstances. Thus, we find in the so-called *neue Bundesländer* remnants of anachronistic notions about German history that are usually of a nationalistic variety going back as far as the 1920s.

It might also be pointed out that historical scholarship in the former GDR trailed far behind West German historiography, partly because it was not allowed a free, spontaneous development, partly because it was largely cut off from free access to Western research due to both ideological and financial reasons. However, in a variety of fields, East German scholarship participated indirectly in the opening of West German historiography to the West. Although this was never admitted, West German historical research was taken as a point of orientation by East German historians. The writings of West German historians used to be criticized more or less harshly according to whatever ideological preferences happened to be in fashion in official quarters (which, incidentally, often fluctuated a great deal, for example on the German Question), but even so, they were carefully studied. In actuality, East German historiography often took up itself the new approaches by West German historical scholarship, if only to maintain its reputation in the international academic community. Hence during the last fifteen to twenty years of communist rule, historiography in the former GDR silently absorbed many elements of Western historical thought, though often only partially and in a veiled manner.

It must be said that, for the most part, East German historians were not found in the forefront of the reform movement which in 1989 brought down the communist regime by a growing stream of mass protests; rather the opposite is true. The historical profession had been effectively integrated into the communist regime. Eventually, however, the superiority of the Western model of democratic government could no longer be successfully challenged by historical arguments of Marxist-Leninist origin; instead, Marxism-Leninism increasingly lost its credibility as a guiding principle for creative historical scholarship. Long since, other models of orientation had

silently found their way into the political debate in the former GDR, for instance Max Weber's democratic alternative to the bureaucratic system of "real socialism."

Besides, it was the very fact that the Federal Republic had successfully bridged the gap which for so long had separated German political culture from that of the West that made it so attractive to the East Germans and the Germans living elsewhere in East Central Europe. The Federal Republic had become a gateway to the West—not only in economic but also in political and cultural respects. It was not the old, tradition-bound, nationalist Germany for which the citizens in the former GDR opted first with their feet and later in free elections, but a new Germany which was an integral part of Western culture. It may be said that this could not have come about without the critical reassessment of Germany's recent past undertaken from the late 1950s onward by a generation of German historians who were convinced that German political culture had to find its way back to the Western tradition from which it had parted two centuries ago. This critical reassessment, in turn, could not have been achieved without the assistance of many scholars from Western countries, notably Great Britain and the United States. It is appropriate to express to them our gratitude on this occasion, which happens to take place on the eve of the first anniversary of the reunification of Germany.