THE SECOND GENERATION: HISTORIANS OF MODERN GERMANY IN POSTWAR AMERICA


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The second generation: what a heterogeneous crowd! Some became historians of modern Germany, some did not. Some hated Germany, some did not. Some identified as Jews, some did not. Some were on the left, some were not. Some spent the war years in the United States, some did not. Some began their careers as historians of Germany, some did not. Some wrote directly on the Holocaust, some did not. Can we say anything meaningful about these historians as a group? Let me try. My remarks, though, are limited to historians of modern Germany, broadly conceived.

What characterizes the second generation? A second generation refugee historian was born in Germany or what became Nazi-occupied Europe; he or she left due to Nazi persecution or opposition to the Third Reich; and he or she had his or her college and graduate education in the United States. These criteria are significant: they mean that these individuals came to the United States as children, adolescents, or young adults. Emigration and subsequent Americanization occurred at a life-stage in which these individuals were striving to forge their own identities.

As a rule, these historians came to think of themselves as Americans. They were also perceived as such by their refugee parents. In correspondence, for example, my grandfather (and first-generation refugee historian) Fritz Epstein wrote my father (and second-generation émigré historian) Klaus Epstein, using phrases such as “young Americans like you…” Unlike their parents, the second generation experienced a profound rupture in their identities. They had been Germans, but now they were Americans. Meanwhile, many of their parents remained pronounced “Bei-unskis”.

As a further Americanizing experience, many second-generation émigré historians served in the United States military, usually in Europe. Because of their native-language skills, many underwent training in intelligence operations at Camp Ritchie in Maryland. Tom Angress is featured in the documentary film Ritchie Boys, about

1 Fritz Epstein to Klaus Epstein, 18 October 1947, Epstein Family Papers, Box 5/1.
German-Jewish refugees who fought the Nazis as American soldiers. Some future historians also belonged to United States occupation forces in Germany. They now occupied the very country from which they had barely escaped just a few years earlier. This, however, only underscored the sense that they were no longer Germans, but rather Americans.

All of the second-generation historians, by my criteria at least, received their Ph.D.s after World War II. Most received their graduate educations at just three institutions, Harvard, Columbia, and the University of Chicago. A few each earned their degrees at Yale, Stanford, and Berkeley. Three had a Doktorvater who was a first-generation refugee historian: Walter Simon and Arno Mayer both studied with Hajo Holborn at Yale, and Gerhard Weinberg studied with Hans Rothfels at Chicago.

Why didn’t more beginning refugee historians choose to study with their older counterparts? Besides Holborn, only Hans Rothfels, who spent a decade at Chicago between 1946 and 1956, taught in a top graduate program. Hans Rosenberg didn’t get to Berkeley until 1959, when younger refugee historians had usually already launched their careers.

Second-generation émigré historians also studied history as it was then studied in the United States. Americans studied European history, not the national histories of the major European nation-states. Modern German history barely existed. Moreover, some second-generation refugee historians did not initially study German history at all. George Mosse first made his reputation as a historian of early modern British constitutional history. As he later wrote of his early books: “These were certainly respectable, indeed core subjects at the time ... That they were also far removed from my own origins may have played an unconscious role as I tried to dive into my new Anglo-Saxon environment.” Mosse chose a historical field that would allow him to “fit in” to his American environment.

Younger refugee historians may also have been reluctant to study with their older counterparts because that might have seemed to compromise their ability to write “objective” history. Worse still, by focusing on German history, they might be accused of navel-gazing. Klaus Epstein was allegedly told that as a refugee he would never get a job if he focused on German history. He wrote his dissertation on modern British constitutional history. Fritz Stern wrote his Ph.D.
thesis on a German topic, but he published *The Varieties of History* — an edited volume on great historians — before *The Politics of Cultural Despair*. In his memoirs, Stern questions the motives behind doing *The Varieties of History*: “Was I unconsciously taking a break from the Nazi past, returning to my old love of Europe itself?” I wonder whether Stern’s decision might also have been an unconscious attempt to first establish credentials in a field other than German history — in a field in which his motives and achievements would be less open to question.

Most of those who became historians of modern Germany did write their dissertations on German history topics. Many had a burning interest to understand what happened in their native country. But they did not study with historians of Germany *per se* — which was well-nigh impossible, given how few historians specialized in German history at the time. In the 1940s, for example, Hans Gatzke and Klemens von Klemperer wrote their theses at Harvard under the nominal supervision of William Langer.

Still, second-generation émigré historians had connections to their older counterparts. Hajo Holborn was key in this regard. While teaching at Yale, Holborn taught at least one seminar at Harvard and participated in others at Columbia. Von Klemperer recalls how Holborn was “helping us youngsters move into the profession ... We had to come to terms as scholars with our own experiences, and Hajo Holborn helped us in a masterful way to bring together history and political commitment.” Stern, too, developed a close relationship with Holborn, and eventually co-edited the *Festschrift* in his honor. Gatzke became Holborn’s colleague at Yale in 1964.

In the 1940s, several younger émigré historians came to know Fritz Epstein, then a librarian at Widener Library. Epstein was known for supplying graduate students with obscure bibliographical references. In the early 1950s, he was in charge of the War Documentation Project, the filming of captured German war documents. Gerhard Weinberg fondly recalls working under his direction. A number of younger historians such as Klaus Epstein and Georg Iggers also came to know Dietrich Gerhard, a first-generation refugee historian at Washington University in St. Louis. In 1960, Gerhard even extended a job offer to Klaus Epstein to become an associate professor at Washington University.

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3 Fritz Stern, *Five Germanys I Have Known* (New York, 2006), 221.
6 Informal conversations with author.
7 Dietrich Gerhard to Klaus Epstein, 7 November 1960, Epstein Family Papers, Box 1.
And then there were the not-so-good experiences. In his memoirs, Raul Hilberg recalled an encounter with Hans Rosenberg in an undergraduate class at Brooklyn College: “[Rosenberg] remarked, in parentheses, that Napoleonic atrocities in Spain had not been equaled since. At this point I raised my hand and asked, ‘What do you call six million dead Jews?’ Ah, said Rosenberg, that was an interesting problem, but one which was very complicated, and he was constrained by time and the outline of the course to forgo a discussion of my question.” Hilberg was deeply agitated by Rosenberg’s response — one perhaps typical of the older generation of refugee historians who didn’t quite know what to make of the Holocaust. Still, Hilberg remarked, “Although I perceived in Rosenberg’s remark about Napoleon a plain denial of Adolf Hitler’s Germany, I used everything he taught.”

Rosenberg may well have sparked Hilberg’s interest in the bureaucratic organization of the Holocaust.

By contrast, Hilberg was scathing about Fritz Epstein. Hilberg also worked on the War Documentation Project. In his memoirs, he complained of Epstein’s “limited analytical abilities,” quoted a Jewish refugee co-worker who hissed that Epstein “looks like a Jewish cattle dealer from Hesse,” and complained that Epstein fired him because he wanted to hire “men who would be totally beholden to him.” I suspect that Hilberg’s vituperation stemmed from his frustration that Epstein did not place the murder of Europe’s Jews front and center at the War Documentation Project.

Hilberg was not the only second-generation historian to have difficult interactions with older refugee historians. At Chicago, Iggers later wrote, “I found two small seminars by Hans Rothfels very useful … For the first time I was forced to study documents carefully, which I had not been required to do in my previous training. However, I had a very unpleasant exchange with him … Rothfels made no secret of his rightwing and nationalistic Prusso-German views and I challenged him … He called me in his office and told me, although he had given me As in both seminars, that with my views I had no understanding of history and should not pursue a doctorate.” Rothfels, dismayed that someone with Iggers’ views might write the history of his native country in the United States, hoped to cut short his career.

Refugee historians, of course, were not the only émigré academics that the younger historians encountered. Indeed, other refugee academics had an arguably much greater influence on them. This was particularly true at Columbia, where many future historians of

9  Hilberg, The Politics of Memory, 81.
Germany studied with the political scientist Franz Neumann, author of *Behemoth*. Similarly, at Chicago, Iggers studied with Arnold Bergstraesser, a refugee political scientist employed in the German Department. Younger émigré historians also came into contact with Erich Auerbach, Felix Gilbert, Erwin Panofsky, and a host of other notable refugees. In their memoirs, they repeatedly praise these scholars’ erudition and engagement.

The second generation of émigré historians had an American education. In the 1940s and 1950s, this meant that they received their graduate education in an educational environment in which the Western Civilization narrative dominated. For some, Western Civilization remained a lifelong passion. Karl Weintraub, for example, was a legendary lecturer in the core course on Western Civilization at the University of Chicago. Students spent nights in line waiting to register for his course. Even in later decades, when Western Civ had become a dinosaur, Weintraub tried to save the course. And he justified this with his biography. Recalling his time as a hidden child and adolescent in Nazi-occupied Holland, he told several people, “I had enough of life without civilization.”

As budding historians, the second generation wanted to fit into their American milieu. In keeping with prevailing trends in European history, they generally focused on intellectual history or the history of ideas. Their work solidified the *Sonderweg* paradigm — why Germany departed from the supposed norms of Western Civilization. While Hajo Holborn made the most dramatic statement about the importance of the *Sonderweg* thesis in a 1952 article — “The split between Germany and the West will of necessity always be an important theme for historians” — it became something of an article of faith among younger émigré historians. Fritz Stern, for example, later wrote about how this article inspired his own research.

What of their careers? Émigré historians came of age just when European history took off in the United States. Indeed, they were the first generation of American Europeanists who specialized in national subfields such as German history. As Stern describes in his memoirs, when he first taught German history, there were virtually no books available. “What a remarkable opportunity for my generation!” he exclaims. Émigré historians ran with the times, and wrote path-breaking books that defined the field of modern German history. In addition, they pioneered subfields of German and European history. Peter Loewenberg applied psychoanalytical methods to history.

Renate Bridenthal was among the first to write women’s history. Michael A. Meyer wrote landmark studies in modern German-Jewish history. But second-generation émigré historians did not have a monopoly on German history. While they shaped the field of modern German history, they did so in conjunction with non-refugee colleagues such as Gordon Craig, Leonard Krieger, Otto Pflanze, and Carl Schorske. I recently interviewed Tom Skidmore, eventually a leading historian of Latin America. Skidmore wrote a dissertation in German history, but jumped at the opportunity to retrain as a Latin Americanist. As he describes it now, he felt that it would be difficult to break into the German history crowd — to an outsider, refugees dominated the German history scene. But was there really a refugee historian cabal? I doubt it. True, the émigré historians had a network of sorts, but it spanned their American-born and other colleagues, too. In 1964, for example, when a group of twelve American historians wrote a letter to *Die Zeit* protesting the German Foreign Ministry’s cancellation of a lecture tour by Fritz Fischer, the group included quite a mix. Klaus Epstein, Hans Gatzke, Hans Kohn, Hans Rosenberg, and Fritz Stern were émigré historians; Leonard Krieger, William Langer, Otto Pflanze, Carl Schorske, and John Snell were American-born. In addition, Gordon Craig was born in Glasgow and Theodore Hamerow in Warsaw; both came to the United States before 1933.

But still, something differentiated the émigré historians from their American-born counterparts. For one, they were tireless mediators between the German and American historical professions. In the Fischer Controversy, it was Klaus Epstein and Fritz Stern who spearheaded the American campaign on behalf of Fischer. Epstein drafted the letter to *Die Zeit*, while Stern secured funding for Fischer’s subsequent lecture tour in the United States. In addition, some émigré historians felt themselves to be somehow “outsiders.” They were not quite part of mainstream American life. Tom Angress titled his memoirs *Immer etwas abseits* (Always Somewhat on the Margins). Peter Gay famously analyzed “The Outsider as Insider” in his study of Weimar Culture. Did a sense of “outsiderdom” shape these historians’ work? In his memoirs, Mosse repeatedly refers to the two qualities that made him an outsider: his homosexuality and his German-Jewish origins. For Mosse, “outsiderdom” perhaps influenced his pursuit of innovative topics and/or methodologies. The opposite, however, may have been true of someone like Gatzke. Perhaps because he was gay and German-born, Gatzke wrote very traditional diplomatic

15 Interview with Thomas Skidmore, 12 January 2012.
17 Mosse, *Confronting History*, 118.
history; he was eager to prove himself according to the accepted standards of his profession.

The childhood and adolescent experience of persecution in Germany also shaped these historians’ politics. Since political events had such a tangible impact on their early lives, many became avid followers of contemporary affairs at a very young age. Most were liberals to the core. They staunchly believed in the importance of civic engagement. Georg Iggers has suggested that his experiences in Nazi Germany inspired his work for racial equality in the United States. In the 1950s, when he taught at several historically black colleges, he worked hard to end segregation in Little Rock and New Orleans. Fritz Stern has written that “at decisive moments in cold-war America, the memory of German civic passivity sliding into complicity prodded me into action.” In the 1960s, he was deeply involved in the antiwar movement and student protest politics at Columbia. On a more leftist note, Bridenthal has written, “The direct personal experience of flight from fascism colors all my political vision, so much so that I must factor it out sometimes. When I read that the FBI has been surveilling groups to which I give regular contributions … then I hear the midnight knock on the door.” These historians, then, combined their passion for history with civic engagement: a reflection, perhaps, of both their personal experiences and their professional interests.

Finally, a few words on émigré historians and the Holocaust. In the past two decades, there has been a sea-change in German history. Earlier, historians of Germany were primarily preoccupied with 1933 (Hitler’s rise to power), but now they are preoccupied with 1941-42 (the Holocaust). The Sonderweg thesis, however, was focused on 1933 — and this is where second-generation historians made their biggest contribution. Given their life histories, this should not be surprising. Most second-generation émigré historians came to the United States between 1933 and 1941. Their lives were indelibly marked by Hitler’s rise to power. This was the seminal event that fundamentally changed their lives. In their later historical work, they thus wanted to know why National Socialism took root in Germany. Contrary to what others have argued, these historians were first and foremost preoccupied with the failure of liberalism, and only secondarily (and much later in their careers) with the Holocaust. In his memoirs, for example, Mosse lists his major historical concerns. First on his list is the demise of liberalism, last is the Holocaust.

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19 Stern, Five Germans, 198.


21 Mosse, Confronting History, 175-185.
Steven Aschheim and Jeffrey Herf have both argued that Stern and Mosse, along with Gay and Walter Laqueur, played a crucial role in shifting historians’ attention from 1933 to 1941. Aschheim insists that their early focus on German nationalism, racism, and anti-Semitism, showed that for them “the scandal in need of accounting, was 1941-42.” Perhaps. But while these émigré historians’ works were key for the analysis of the German cultural antecedents to the Holocaust, it is striking that none of them researched the details of the Holocaust per se. This was true even though captured German documents related to the nuts-and-bolts operations of the Holocaust were readily available in the National Archives. The liberal ethos for which these refugee historians are justly admired, along with their research topics, suggests that for much of their professional lives their primary historical concern was Germany’s inability to adhere to a liberal political order.

This is not intended as an indictment, only an attempt to document historians’ changing interests, in step with their times. Most second-generation refugee historians made their careers before anyone was much concerned with the Holocaust. There were, however, a few refugee historians who did make the Holocaust central to their professional concerns. They are just not usually mentioned in the same breath as Peter Gay, George Mosse, or Fritz Stern. Take Henry Friedlander. Unlike most refugee historians, Friedlander came to the United States only after harrowing experiences in ghettos and camps. He has always been much more focused on the Holocaust than most of those historians who came to the United States in the 1930s. Henry Huttenbach, who spent the war years in England but received his higher education in the United States, was a pioneer in placing the Holocaust in the broader framework of genocide studies. He is seldom grouped among historians of modern Germany — even though he wrote on the Jewish community in Worms. And although Raul Hilberg came to the United States in the 1930s, his preoccupation with the Holocaust made him a total outsider to the historical profession (and indeed, he was trained and taught as a political scientist).

There is no question, though, that the second-generation émigré historians trained many of the current scholars of the Holocaust. Gerhard Weinberg’s list of students reads as a veritable “Who’s Who of Holocaust Studies.” Students of Mosse and Stern have also made extraordinary contributions to the study of the Holocaust. But here, I wonder: was it the students who pushed the cart forwards? Many

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students of Mosse and Stern did graduate work in the 1960s and 1970s, just when widespread interest in the Shoah began to percolate. Is it possible that they taught their teachers in this regard?

To conclude: Second-generation émigré historians were American historians of Germany. They brought the intellectual concerns of their host country to bear on their native country’s past. Their careers, however, coincided with the extraordinary take-off and resulting specialization in European history that occurred in the quarter century following World War II. Together with American-born and other colleagues, they were able to define the field of German history for the postwar era. They did so, however, with a passion, commitment, insight and understanding that was born of their experience of persecution in, and emigration from, Nazi Germany.

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