THE TRANSATLANTIC RECONSTRUCTION OF “WESTERN” CULTURE: GEORGE MOSSE, PETER GAY, AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE GERMAN TRADITION OF GEISTESGESCHICHTE

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As the United States emerged from World War II a winner and a world power, it also became a part — more firmly than ever before — of the transatlantic West. History departments across the United States took on the task of tying Europe and the U.S. together both politically and culturally. During this period, European and American national identities underwent dramatic changes. As part of this process, American Cold War liberals and European émigrés sought to understand the lessons German history held for the United States. German history was now studied by a diverse group ranging from “New York intellectuals” to émigré scholars, academic supporters of the theory of exceptionalism, transatlanticists, and the founders of the American Studies Movement. In postwar America, historians of German history emerged as some of the most influential Europeanists of their generation.

German history and its lessons were hotly debated at the beginning of the Cold War. References to major events, like the Treaty of Munich, indicated its importance for the development of the American view of the Cold War. Naturally, the evaluation of the Allied victory in the Second World War shaped the debate about the new totalitarian enemy, the Soviet Union. Yet deep historical knowledge was often lacking, despite the pervasive presence of German history in American society. Before the war, American universities had focused on English and French history, and German history had not been a priority. It took until the 1960s for any important general or comparative works on fascism to appear.

This lack of a thorough historical understanding regarding the German past among Americans allowed émigré historians who had fled Nazi Germany to function as mediators between the two countries. During the Second World War, networks developed out of the cooperation between German and American intellectuals at the Office of Strategic Studies (OSS). This American intelligence service recruited former Weimar academicians, like Hajo Holborn, Franz Neumann, and Felix Gilbert, to provide background information about the German enemy. In 1965, American historian John Higham underlined the enduring significance of these networks: “The one identifiable group among American historians of Europe today is...
composed of those who applied their historical training to and nurtured it with the problems raised for the United States during the war. Although these German-American intellectual networks shaped much important historical scholarship after the war, they remain underexplored today.

Historians have long been an underresearched group in the examination of the intellectual emigration to the United States. Referring to the sophisticated position of American historical scholarship in the 1920s and 1930s, it has even been claimed that émigré historians had no “exciting message” to teach to Americans. Recent accounts on the development of intellectual history in the United States do not even mention them.

Collections of essays on the intellectual emigration like The Intellectual Migration: Europe and America, 1930–1960 (1969), edited by Bernard Bailyn, concentrate instead primarily on physicists, psychoanalysts, and sociologists. Existing scholarship on intellectual emigration consists mostly of short essays that focus on individual scholars, often written by former colleagues of the émigrés. Few essays discuss these historians’ lives thoroughly, based on their personal papers, and in relationship to their writings within the context of American history and scholarship.

Such an approach, however, is especially relevant in the case of two Jewish German-American cultural historians, George Mosse (1918–1999) and Peter Gay (b. 1923), who fled from Nazi Germany to the United States when they were still in their teens. Both born in Berlin, they came from acculturated Jewish backgrounds.
Although their experiences with Germany and the United States were very different from those of older émigré historians, including Hans Baron (1900-1988), Felix Gilbert (1905-1991), and Gerhard Masur (1901-1975), Mosse and Gay are seldom examined as part of a particular group of émigré historians. Their first development of a cultural approach to European history after the Second World War, I claim, cannot be understood outside the context of the debate on the relevance of European history in the United States. While after the war many American intellectuals perceived Weimar culture as the cause of the catastrophe, Steven Aschheim, a former student of Mosse’s, points to Mosse’s and Gay’s relevance for transatlantic perspectives on Weimar: “So much of the liberal Anglo-American image of that republic, the interrelated nature of its flaws and greatness, derives from their writings.” Influenced by their American education, contacts, and relationships to older German émigré scholars, Mosse and Gay took unique positions as mediators between German and American historical scholarship.

In the 1950s, Mosse and Gay’s mediating position was complicated by a widespread loss of belief in the power of historical explanations in the United States, fueled by an often incomplete understanding of German historical methodology. Many contemporary American historians called in the help of the social sciences to make history more “objective.” Peter Novick has stated that émigré historians were too busy trying to survive in their new country to concern themselves with mediating between German and American historiography. Mosse and Gay’s knowledge of and involvement in American historical scholarship, however, defined their dual challenge: to improve both the credibility of historical scholarship and the moral relevance of European history for an American public at the beginning of the Cold War.

In this essay, I argue that Mosse and Gay worked towards this goal by drawing on and further developing the German tradition of Geistesgeschichte in their first historical writings on National Socialism and the Enlightenment, respectively. Although other German-Jewish historians did promote German Geistesgeschichte in the United States, Mosse and Gay’s insider perspective on German and American culture, due to their relatively early emigration, allowed them to observe and assess the flaws and achievements of both countries. In order to determine the degree to which their...
transatlantic background shaped their postwar concept of Western culture, I first examine the development of Mosse and Gay’s comparative perspective on German and American history under the influence of their American education and contact with older German-American émigré scholars. Then I analyze the role of German history in American historical scholarship. By developing Geistesgeschichte in a critical way, they believed they could utilize the tradition to help prove to an American public that the European experience with ideology was relevant for American intellectuals who sought to redefine a more cosmopolitan America at the beginning of the Cold War. Finally, I will demonstrate that they became aware of the fundamental ambivalence of Weimar’s lessons, which not only inspired their analysis of irrationality but also prompted historians to break out of their isolated, elitist position.

Developing a Comparative Perspective: The Importance of Émigré Networks

The comparative German-American perspective — the belief that German history had certain lessons to offer the United States — shaped Mosse and Gay’s careers. Compared to older émigré scholars like Baron, Felix Gilbert (1905-1991), and Franz Neumann (1900-1954), Mosse and Gay did not leave established careers or networks behind, and they had never been part of Weimar’s intellectual and cultural life. Their experiences with Germany consisted largely of their confrontation with the rise of National Socialism, which, together with their early adoption of English, opened them up more easily to liberal American culture.

Mosse and Gay’s own transatlantic orientation paralleled a growing focus on Western culture at American universities, which benefited their academic careers as it provided them with ample teaching opportunities. At the end of the 1940s, Mosse took a job in the History Department of the University of Iowa, where he was assigned to teach the course “History of Western Civilization” in 1949. It soon attracted 800 students. As he wrote in the preface to its outline, his immensely popular “Western Civ” course aimed to “introduce the student to a body of thought with which he should be familiar if he is to become a useful citizen.” Gay, for his part, took up graduate studies in the Department of Public Government at Columbia University in 1946 and in 1947 began teaching the Western civilization course, as well as a course on the history of

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14 See Thomas Wheatland’s contribution to this volume.
political thought: the “from Plato to NATO” course. Through the exposition of ideologies, like Marxism, these courses aimed to make students less vulnerable to communist propaganda while teaching them the value of liberalism and encouraging their transatlantic understanding.\(^\text{17}\)

Although the young refugees’ gratitude to the country that had taken them in would remain a cornerstone of their political commitment, they did not hesitate to criticize issues like racial segregation and dogmatic anti-communism and began to do so early on. In a student paper, written just after the end of the war, Gay stated: “We cannot kid ourselves into believing that Fascism is gone, just because we have beaten the Nazis. It is still alive all over the world . . . we can understand our own home-grown Fascists better if we know just what the Fascist thinkers abroad have said and written.”\(^\text{18}\) Although the United States had just helped to save European democracy, Gay believed that the history of National Socialism was relevant to critiques of the new world power.

The intense contact Mosse and Gay established as American students with Weimar émigré scholars lent sophistication to their critical perspective on American liberal culture. Their growing connection to Weimar scholars increased Mosse and Gay’s recognition of the republic’s fate and fame. While Gay had first refused to read German literature, these Weimar émigrés — “good” Germans — broadened his knowledge of German culture. Gay began to meet German émigré intellectuals and read the works of many others, such as philosopher Ernst Cassirer (1874-1945) and art historian Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968), soon after he was admitted to Columbia University in 1946.\(^\text{19}\) German social scientist Franz Neumann even became the supervisor of his dissertation about the German Social Democrat and theorist Eduard Bernstein. Gay recalled that he and his fellow students turned to theorists like Max Weber and Wilhelm Dilthey because Neumann had recommended them, and his recommendations “had the force of a command.”\(^\text{20}\)

Mosse, too, met some émigrés in the Midwest, although New York remained the center of refugee culture. At Harvard, he encountered the famous political theorist C. J. Friedrich, for example. In his memoirs, Mosse highlighted the influence of the interdisciplinary circle of German-American refugees in Iowa, where he got his first job as a professor, crediting them with broadening his outlook on the arts.
public service, and politics. 21 Émigrés Hans von Hentig, one of the founders of criminology, and literary scholar René Wellek became close friends of his in Iowa. He became very friendly with German Renaissance historian Hans Baron, a student of the famous German historian Friedrich Meinecke, and frequently corresponded with him about German history.

The absence of a historical framework of interpretation for German history, however, becomes salient in assessing the American reception of the many European intellectual and cultural traditions that the intellectual emigration of the 1930s transmitted. There was hardly any scholarship at that time on the tradition of German Idealism, which had shaped the works of many émigré scholars. Although Americanists like James Harvey Robinson had already tried to include psychology and anthropology in historical research in the 1920s, the focus on the irrationality of the German tradition of Geistesgeschichte was initially not fully integrated in American historiography. American historians repeatedly bit only “half of the Teutonic apple,” unaware of the philosophical context in which German historical concepts had been developed. 22 Equally important was the fact that Ranke’s historiographical ideal was incompletely understood. The first “crisis” of modernity in historiography had occurred in 1920s, when German historians like Friedrich Meinecke and Ernst Troeltsch debated the loss of the meaning of man’s actions as a result of the process of secularization and doubt about the possibility of achieving objective historical knowledge. Although Ranke was very well aware of the relativity and subjectivity of knowledge, the American reception of his ideas for the most part served to confirm the American belief in objectivity. 23

This misunderstanding contributed to a “second crisis of modernity” in 1930s American historiography. 24 Having served first as a catalyst of the belief in objectivity, Idealism came to challenge this faith and spur the search for a balance between subjectivity and objectivity. Through his son-in-law, well-known German historian Alfred Vagts, Americanist Charles Beard was introduced to Karl Heussi’s Die Krise des Historismus (1932). Subsequently, Beard came to interpret the German “crisis” as prompting the abandonment of the goal of achieving objective, scientific knowledge. This resulted in his essay “Written History as an Act of Faith” (1933). At the end of the 1940s, émigré scholars like German historian Hajo Holborn, philosopher Ernst Cassirer, and Austrian historian Friedrich Engel-Janosi wrote

24  Krieger, “European History in America,” 225. See also Novick, Noble Dream, 416.
articles about German historicism published in the United States that aimed to revise the American reception of the field and Ranke’s ideas, in particular. Nevertheless, this revision proceeded slowly.  

Dismissing Beard’s relativism, one discipline after the other cut its ties to history in the 1950s. The humanities now tried to strengthen the “scientific” character of history by allying with the social sciences.

**The Development of a Rational Examination of Irrationality**

Not only the flawed reception of German *Geistesgeschichte* but also large polarizations within American historical scholarship complicated Mosse and Gay’s efforts to argue for the relevance of European history at the beginning of the Cold War. By the mid-1950s, the two historians gained tenure at universities that Peter Novick described as opposites in the spectrum of Cold War academia: the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Columbia University. While Madison emerged as a center of American leftist historical scholarship, historians at Columbia embarked on the writing of “consensus history,” which was characterized by its emphasis on national unity and superiority in the face of the communist threat. Compared to European culture, scholars of the Columbian stripe asserted, American culture was “beyond ideology,” as the sociologist Daniel Bell declared.

Mosse and Gay complained that the exclusive focus on rationality had led to America’s contempt for ideology. The prevalent view that American culture was “beyond ideology” did not stimulate much self-reflection or cultural comparison. Despite teaching the Western Civilization course since 1949, Mosse criticized the tendency these courses had to portray Europe as the ideological “other” that had gone morally bankrupt during the disastrous course of the twentieth century while upholding the United States as a model of rationality, pragmatism, and liberalism. He disparaged American historians’ exclusive focus on empiricism as it failed to stimulate an understanding of ideology but led to the impression that “the course of Western Civilization [was] fueled by political events and economic acquisitiveness.” Mosse further observed that these courses did not deal with abstract thought and political rationalizations: “Almost none of our texts show any realization that ideas can be weapons. But how men rationalize their actions often determines what action they take.” Yet the notion of ideology was important to examinations of the United States as well, and Mosse proposed that Americanists

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27 Ibid., 345.
29 Mosse, “Pragmatism of the Freshman History Course.”

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should use it and exchange their detailed analyses for summaries of broad American movements like nationalism and liberalism. In order to close the gap between Americanist views on European and American culture, Mosse actively tried to integrate “ideological questions” about American culture into the Western Civilization course that he was teaching: “in our introduction courses such ideological questions as the meaning of History can no longer go unanswered.”

Mosse and Gay found themselves engaging in a similar struggle: trying to develop a historical approach that would integrate an awareness of history’s irrational dimension without lapsing into (Beard’s) relativism. In the 1940s, Arthur Lovejoy founded the *Journal of Intellectual Ideas*, which reflected his conviction that historians should focus on ideas’ rational quality. Mosse noticed American intellectuals’ growing misunderstanding of the wider world:

Arthur Lovejoy wrote . . . that ideas are derived from philosophic systems and he adds that logic is one of the most important operative factors in the history of thought. He warned of giving the non-rational too much place in the new discipline. How strange and isolated even such intellectual Americans must have been in the 1930s! For most of the world was in the grip of irrational systems which had, to be sure, a logic of their own but not one opposed to irrationalism.

Like Lovejoy, Mosse had first concentrated on facts and “reality” in history in a reaction to German metaphysics, at the very beginning of his historical career. But in the course of the 1940s, his attitude began to change. While most historians tried to interpret totalitarianism in strictly political, social, or economic terms, Mosse regarded the mythic character of National Socialism as hostile to classical political theory: “that is why Anglo-Saxon scholars have such a difficult time discussing it. They’re always looking for logical, consistent political theory.” Gay agreed with Lovejoy’s stress on the autonomy of ideas: “ideas are a link in a procession, they have an inner logic, an intrinsic worth and individual character.” But while his dissertation was still a traditional intellectual biography, and he admired Arthur Lovejoy, he thought Lovejoy’s analysis of “unit ideas” too closely allied to the history of philosophy and too prone to treat ideas as independent, unchanging entities.
Mosse and Gay’s belief in the need to examine irrationality was invigorated by the early reception of German history in the United States. Only in their teens when they left Nazi Germany were Mosse and Gay in a position to grapple with the rise of National Socialism in an intellectual climate that was shaped more by the postwar historiography of German history in the United States. In 1947, historian Ferdinand Lilge’s *Abuse of Learning: The Failure of the German University* was the first historical account of the involvement of German elite culture in the rise of National Socialism. Mosse, in *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (1964), which made use of Lilge’s text, emphasized that the Nazis found their “greatest support among respectable, educated people.”³⁶ Mosse and Gay’s attitude towards Germany distinguished them from many older émigré historians, who had been more firmly rooted in Germany, because they saw its culture as playing a role in the rise of National Socialism whereas many other émigré and American scholars did not. Émigré intellectuals like Theodor Adorno and Hannah Arendt were convinced that German “high” culture was not implicated in the rise of National Socialism but that the Nazis were a product of the uneducated lower middle class.³⁷

By contrast, Weimar’s history convinced Mosse and Gay not only of the “guilt” and irrationality of the German elite but also of the unavoidability and even necessity of a degree of “populism” in a democracy. They attributed the fall of Weimar partially to a lack of democratic imagination that disconnected German liberals both rationally and emotionally from the republic. Gay stressed that it was precisely the “easy pessimism” and “cool rationalism” of the *Vernunftrepublikaner*, supporters of democracy by virtue of mere reason, that had doomed Weimar from the start.³⁸ Countering American attacks on ideology, Mosse agreed that the defeat of the Weimar Republic proved the importance of idealism: “In Germany an ideology based upon the contempt for facts, on sheer irrationalism, took over from a regime which was pragmatic, relativist and unable to produce the kind of idealistic realism which I have spoken.”³⁹ At a conference in 1955, Mosse made an effort “as a historian” to distinguish between totalitarianism and populism, arguing against “those who believed that power will not be a despotic power if it is a popular power.”⁴⁰ In sum, the lessons of “Weimar” were deeply ambivalent: although its defeat showed the danger of irrationality, it also indicated the importance of emotional attachment to a positive national identity.

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³⁷ Steven E. Aschheim, *Culture and Catastrophe: German and Jewish Confrontations with National Socialism and Other Crises* (New York, 1996), 111-12.
³⁹ George Mosse, “Speech,” August 24, 1951, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 30; folder 7; Leo Baeck Institute.
⁴⁰ Daily Cardinal, 31 March 1955, George L. Mosse Collection, AR 25137; box 16; folder 23; Leo Baeck Institute.
Exploring and Developing the Tradition of Geistesgeschichte

Émigré historian Hans Kohn has pointed out that the postwar interest in German Geistesgeschichte was rooted in the awareness of the “guilt” of Germany’s cultural elite: “The balance between ideas and a certain degree of ‘Verstehen,’ the shift from ideas and facts to ideology, was connected to the realization that the people who had been attracted to National Socialism were not barbarians or the lower classes, manipulated by National Socialist propaganda, but also intellectuals and, especially, academics.”41 Mosse and Gay believed that the historian’s own involvement in his work was unavoidable. The two historians never gave up the ideal of objective scholarship, but they stated that history should also be understood in a committed way. Thus, the writing of history, they understood, is always a political endeavor.42

The factor of irrationality in history, which emphasizes ideas’ fluctuating relationship to both form and content, perception and reality, now moved to the center of Mosse and Gay’s research. Gay’s transfer from the Department of Public Government to Columbia’s History Department underlined his high regard for this discipline. Both Mosse and Gay turned from a more theoretical focus to the research of ideology halfway through the 1950s. While the crisis of modernity had disconnected people’s thought from their actions, it was, according to Mosse and Gay, the task of the historian to examine these links and to restore a sense of moral responsibility.

Although Mosse’s appreciation of the works of intellectuals like the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce had acquainted him with the relationship between myth and reality before his “discovery” of Hegel, both historians’ embrace of this representative of German Idealist philosophy testified to their modified attitude towards the use of German cultural traditions in the development of their historical methodology in the 1950s. German Idealist thinkers like Hegel were often seen as predecessors of National Socialism. American intellectuals like Sidney Hook assumed that Hegel’s impact on American culture was too large.43 But the writings of the first generation of émigré scholars about Hegel advanced Mosse and Gay’s own understanding of the tradition of Geistesgeschichte. While some American professors claimed to have uncovered the Hegelian roots of fascism, Herbert Marcuse’s defense of the philosopher, Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory (1941), convinced Gay that Hegel had little to do with it but had been misunderstood:

“I, too, had badmouthed Hegel without really having labored through his writings, and now, reading Marcuse, I recognized how wrong I had been.”44 For his part, Mosse claimed in his autobiography that it was not Marcuse but the Marxist scholar George Lichtheim, a colleague at the University of Iowa, who taught him the Hegelian approach.45 Mosse mentioned that although Hegel came only late into his life, his influence was crucial, “not really until the end of the 1950s, but it has been determinant. . . . I consider myself a Hegelian.”46 Mosse himself claimed that the German philosopher had taught him to view history in a dynamic and dialectical fashion.47 Hegel’s stress on history as an ongoing dialectical process between myth and reality encouraged Mosse and Gay to use the German tradition of Geistesgeschichte to analyze man’s irrational needs and wishes as part of rational, historical research. Mosse and Gay’s understanding of the concept of mediation between perception and reality was further developed by German intellectuals like the German émigré philosopher and cultural historian Ernst Cassirer. Discussing Cassirer’s use of the symbol, Mosse praised “his conception of how men mediate between their own minds and reality, which is useful at all levels of historical analysis.”48 According to Mosse, symbols shaped the landscape in which connections between ideology and culture were made, creating forms of expression.49

But Mosse and Gay distanced themselves from the Idealist tradition by repudiating an exclusive focus on culture in their work. Following the example of émigré historians like Holborn, Mosse and Gay not only returned to Geistesgeschichte but also added to this German tradition. Gay criticized Cassirer’s “slighting of materialism” and advocated abandoning Cassirer’s “unpolitical Idealism — in the name, and by the light, of another aspect — his pragmatic functionalism.”50 Gay then developed a new approach he called the “social history of ideas,” a “kind of intellectual history . . . guided by a single, simple principle: ideas have many dimensions. They are expressed by individuals, but they are social products; they are conceived, elaborated, and modified amid a specific set of historical circumstances.”51 In their analyses of history, Mosse and Gay endeavored to explore the human mind within its social context and examined the complexity of ways in which man brings his beliefs into practice.

Mosse and Gay aimed to anchor their cultural explorations not only in social history but also in anthropology, with its focus on symbols and community building, and modern psychology to improve their scholarly validity. In the 1950s, many historians at Columbia and
elsewhere had taken up a psychological emphasis. In defense of his then very unusual focus on National Socialist ideology, Mosse stated that people confronted with several choices are subject to “ideological conditioning . . . as well as psychology, and the two go together.”52 Psychology examined the human subconscious, while anthropology perceived no differences between primitive and modern behavior. Their use of these disciplines enlarged the universal significance of Mosse and Gay’s writing of European history, while it made an effort to avoid parallels between the European past and the American present as well.

**Gay and the Liberal Imagination**

Informed and disciplined by anthropology, psychology, and historical research, Gay encouraged critical identification with the Enlightenment in the debate about Western culture. It was the historian’s task, Gay argued, to bring complexity back into the view on the Enlightenment, without making it irrelevant to the present. As in Mosse’s *The Crisis of German Ideology*, the examination of the relationship between man’s thinking and doing takes a central role in Gay’s first book on the Enlightenment, *Voltaire’s Politics: The Poet as Realist* (1959).

Contesting postwar attacks on the eighteenth century, Gay gave an overview of Voltaire’s many “reputations,” “most of them unjustified,”53 before he launched into his interpretation of the *philosophe* in *Voltaire’s Politics*. Selective interest in the abstract thought of the *philosophes* without regard for the cultural and political context in which they arose had led historians like the Israeli Jacob Talmon, who became very popular in the United States, to trace the paternity of twentieth-century dictatorships back to the French philosopher.54 Moreover, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in particular, who became the most popular *philosophe* among the revolutionary Jacobins, was often portrayed as the first totalitarian, most notably in Irving Babbitt’s *Rousseau and Romanticism* (1919). Such works expressed much of the criticism of the Enlightenment that Adorno and Max Horkheimer voiced in their *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (1944).

Gay, for his part, noticed scholars’ lack of awareness of the political campaign of the eighteenth-century *philosophes* and argued that it prevented them from appreciating the real attraction of the Enlightenment. Historian of the Enlightenment Robert Darnton


praised Gay’s reconstruction of the intellectual experience of the *philosophes*, noting that “[its] strength consists in its stress on the complex, human dimension of their philosophy.” In *Voltaire’s Politics*, Gay’s historical methodology created a portrait of this *philosophe* as a campaigner in the battle of ideas between two different trends: the Enlightenment and Romanticism. As the Romantic movement led the campaign against the Enlightenment, he argued, it deeply distorted Voltaire’s reputation: “The German *Stürmer und Dränger* [proto-Romantics] repudiated Voltaire as a son repudiates his father to gain maturity.” Gay revealed that the *philosophes* were “propagandists” who campaigned with witticisms and parables of which the historical meaning should not be literally understood.

But in spite of the *philosophe*’s participation in ideological battle, Voltaire distinguished himself from other campaigners: “Like all ideologists,” Gay concluded, “Voltaire exaggerated his disinterestedness; unlike many ideologists, Voltaire was sincere.” Voltaire’s “sincerity” rose from his feeling of responsibility for the practical dimension of his philosophy. In *Voltaire’s Politics*, Gay sought to dismiss the assumption that Voltaire was a “naïve” dreamer and emphasized the instructive nature of “the very defects of the Enlightenment history” as they shed light on “the position of intellectuals under absolutism. If the French Enlightenment historians used history as propaganda, this was part of their unrelenting struggle against the authorities.” Voltaire’s battling spirit was grounded in his empiricism and ability to learn from his own experience.

Like Voltaire’s writings, Gay’s defense of the Enlightenment can only be understood within the context of the intellectual battles of his own time. Gay consciously made himself part of contemporary controversy, contemplating the subjective dimension of historical scholarship that many other historians denied or ignored. Gay criticized the widespread pessimism in American scholarship brought about by the previously unimaginable horrors that had taken place. The postwar generation of American historians was largely molded by *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950) of the Frankfurt School and émigré Theodor Adorno. This study on mass communication, authoritarianism, anti-Semitism, and Freudian analysis was part of a broader collaborative project entitled “Studies in Prejudice,” which Neumann had started during the war. Adorno’s concept of European...
anti-Semitism profoundly shaped interpretations of McCarthyism as “American Fascism.” Gay strongly rejected such parallels between the German past and the American present. In his first article on the subject, “Light on the Enlightenment” (1954), he regretted that these scholars’ dismissed the legacy of the Enlightenment as a model of identification: “The last fifty years have been years of continuous disappointments — we have fought wars which we knew to be impossible, we have witnessed revolutions go sour and barbarisms brutal beyond imagination. Under these blows of reality many thoughtful people felt compelled to abandon the heritage of the eighteenth century.”

Some American historians, too, made efforts to strengthen Western culture after the war, reflecting the need for a positive national, democratic identity. American Studies scholars had argued as early as the 1930s that Beard and Becker’s relativism opened the door to Nazism. Gay was closely associated with students of American Studies even during his own student days. He admired their interdisciplinary efforts, which would increasingly characterize his own studies. Interest in myths and symbols often shaped their cultural approach to American history, which linked democratic ideology to the Second World War and the Cold War. Lionel Trilling, a literary critic who underscored the necessity of the imagination in inspiring national, democratic commitment in The Liberal Imagination (1950) was influential in these developments, according to Gay.

Yet Gay’s efforts to shore up American culture differed from those of American historians in one important respect: 1950s historians were frequently steeped in the theory of American exceptionalism, whereas Gay’s interpretation of the “liberal tradition” sought to point out European predecessors and models from whom Americans could learn. Based on the Weimar lesson about the danger of pessimism, Gay argued that it was not the Enlightenment that had seduced people into believing that everything would be better but that this belief was rooted “realistically” in the possibilities of human psychology. Learning from the “failure” of the enlightened tradition in the twentieth century, Gay concluded “that one must confront the world and dominate it, that the cure for the ills of modernity is more, and the right kind of modernity.”

Therefore, Gay denied that the Enlightenment was just another “myth.” Like Voltaire, Gay was a “sincere” ideologist, who thrived not on irrational optimism or fear but urged his audience to make hope,
informed by an awareness of competing cultural traditions, part of Western culture. He promoted the Enlightenment in his historical writings as “an age of hope, but not of optimism.” Gay pointed to Cassirer’s “liberal imagination” view of the Enlightenment, which saw it as a movement that “joined to a degree scarcely ever achieved before, the critical with the productive function and converted the one directly into the other.” Gay admired Cassirer for breaking through the traditional opposition between the “rational” Enlightenment and “creative” Romanticism. In Cassirer’s, and Gay’s, view, the philosophes were not only critical rebels but also imaginative builders of a better world.

Mosse’s Analysis of Popular Culture

Although Mosse’s attraction to cultural history opened up for him the works of cultural historians like Burckhardt and Huizinga, he shared Gay’s emphasis on intellectual elites to force social change less and less. His growing interest in irrationality shifted his focus halfway through the 1950s increasingly from the research of (German) intellectuals to the masses. Mosse started to publish on German history not long after his move to the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where American historians like William Ayedelotte and Merle Curti were conducting research on American popular culture. Curti had participated in a larger movement researching popular culture in the 1930s. In 1937, he had written the article “Dime Novels and the American Tradition,” in which he urged American historians to take the culture of working people seriously. A close friend of Mosse’s, who had already been attracted to socialism during his exile in England, and a prominent representative of the progressive tradition in Madison, Curti condemned the “elitist” and “anti-democratic” tone of his former student Hofstadter and accused him of having turned into a “neo-conservative.” Like Mosse, Curti criticized postwar liberalism for its obsession with the Cold War and its relative complacency about social issues. Instead of popularizing Enlightenment culture, Mosse turned to the analysis of popular culture. Similar to Gay’s it is necessary to understand Mosse’s position within the contemporary controversy about the meaning of German history for the United States to grasp the relationship between morality and reality in his research on the rise of National Socialism. Like Gay’s view on the contemporary significance of the Enlightenment, Mosse’s postulation of a German Sonderweg, which claimed that there was a special German path that led to National Socialism,
seems at first to suggest the superiority of liberal, Western cultural traditions. The Crisis of German Ideology, his first book about the rise of National Socialism, was an analysis of German völkisch culture from the age of the Napoleonic Wars to the Nazi seizure of power. He clearly stated the book’s aim: “to analyze the history of völkisch thought and through it to define Adolf Hitler’s German revolution.”73 In his view, the intellectual and ideological character of völkisch thought derived directly from the Romantic movement of the nineteenth century, showing a similar “distinct tendency toward the irrational and the emotional” and a focus “primarily on man and the world.”75 With people disappointed by Bismarck’s unification of Germany, and scared by the nation’s growing industrialization, new schools were established with völkisch thought as their foundations, so that such thought “became institutionalized where it mattered most: in the education of young and receptive minds.”76 Like Gay, Mosse aimed to demonstrate to an American public (at a time when rational liberalism and Western culture were too often equated) that ideas, expressed by means of symbols and established in cultural traditions, could be weapons and that history could easily be instrumentalized for political purposes.

Mosse’s construction of these continuities in German history was partly motivated by an effort to rebut German historians like Gerhard Ritter, who tried to portray National Socialism as a mishap of European modernity. “It is important to clarify this once again,” Mosse wrote in his first major work on National Socialism The Crisis of German Ideology (1964), challenging the widespread assertion that National Socialism was simply an “accident” in which the political will of the masses was manipulated,76 “since German historians, of late, have been happy to point out parallels with other Western nations.”77 Remarkably, Mosse also claimed that this environment, ripe for völkisch thought, was not meant “to provide an argument for a German Sonderweg, that there existed a peculiarly and uniquely German and anti-Western nationalism, racism and anti-Semitism.”78 From his position as a historian in a transatlantic historiographical context, Mosse aimed to undermine the simplistic “From-Luther-to-Hitler” thesis that became very popular in postwar America. By 1947, Mosse had rejected this version of the Sonderweg thesis and observed that the Romantics were concerned with the ideal of freedom: “I want to destroy the connection between the Romantic movement and fascist myth . . . . there is no connection between Romantic nationalism on the one hand and fascist myth on the other. For the Romantics were

74 Ibid., 13.
75 Ibid., 152.
76 Ibid., 27.
77 Ibid., 8.
concerned, first of all, with freedom as a concrete, outward thing, though that was never the ultimate good.”79 While they shared a focus on German culture, Mosse repudiated Hans Kohn’s perception that Germany had waged a “War against the West” by referring to Germany as the country of Marx as well and by pointing to aggressive policies that Western countries had frequently adopted themselves: “if the West had not been idealized in the name of liberalism and Enlightenment, Germany’s separation from Western thought would have been more convincing.”80 In other words, the Western view of Germany was not only shaped by a demonization of Romanticism but also by the idealization of the West.

Like Gay, Mosse pointed to a historical complexity in the connection between man’s thinking and doing, rationality and irrationality, which questioned historical determination as well. In The Crisis of German Ideology, Mosse set the ideological factor at the beginning of his interpretation of National Socialism, which he eventually defined as an “anti-Jewish revolution.” In three articles written from 1957-1961, he stressed the need to understand the content of the popular imagination through the analysis of literature in order to understand the intellectual foundations of German anti-Semitism. He examined popular literature from often obscure thinkers and novelists. Discussing the vagueness of thought of one German critic, Eugen Diedrichs (1867-1930), Mosse referred to Diedrichs’s “idealism of deeds” and his conclusion that “the adoption of an irrational, emotional and mystical view by each individual German would automatically produce the desired results.”81 Nonetheless, Mosse argued, this absence of any concrete scheme did not imply that the critics did not intend for their ideas to be realized. Contrary to the political realism of Gay’s Voltaire, Mosse exposed his German critics’ lack of political strategy in reconstructing them as part of their social environment.

The thinking of critics like Diedrichs, therefore, was often imperfectly represented by actual political developments. Mosse’s training in Church and religious history formed the background of his claim that the völkisch movement, like Gay’s Enlightenment, embodied a sense of hope for many people. Increasingly, he came to understand that the essence of fascism was not nihilism. In Nazi Culture: Intellectual, Cultural and Social Life in the Third Reich (1966), he claimed that the German movement was a religion; German nationalism was personalized through symbols, camaraderie, and liturgy.

79 Mosse, “Cultural History,” 1947, George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; box 6; folder 10; Leo Baeck Institute, 28.
80 Mosse, “Review of Hans Kohn’s Mind of Germany.”
81 Ibid., 55.
But in the examination of irrationality, Mosse criticized thinkers like Freud and Cassirer, Gay’s intellectual models, for their strong attachment to the power of rationality. At the beginning of the 1950s, Neumann first introduced Gay to the writings of Freud, which Gay called a “liberating invitation to explore directions that I had not anticipated taking.” But especially after Neumann’s death in 1954, Gay’s friendship with Columbia historian Richard Hofstadter became instrumental in the development of his interest in psychoanalysis. Hofstalter’s particular definition of history as a curious, intriguing mixture of the rational pursuit of self-interest and less well-understood, nonrational aims taught Gay how to conduct interdisciplinary research. In *The Culture of Western Europe: The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (1961), Georges Sorel, Gustave le Bon, and Ernst Jung (who had himself been attracted to National Socialism) taught him much more about the irrationality of the masses: “I think that more than anyone else Jung had a sense of what National Socialism was all about.” Jung inspired Mosse’s examination of myth both in relationship to the masses and the individual. He concluded that the need for security was basic to the conservatism of popular culture: “Symbols and myths help to overcome the anxiety that is caused by the changing pace of life of the modern, secularized world.” He now understood how Hitler “took the basic nationalism of the German tradition and the longing for the stable personal relationships of olden times, and built upon them the strongest belief of the group.”

In the course of the 1960s, Mosse’s support of the tradition of the Enlightenment became more conditional through the works of the Frankfurt School and student protests. While Gay sought to stimulate a positive, liberal identity resting on Enlightenment ideals, Mosse became more pessimistic in his analysis of history and less and less able to imagine himself at home in Western culture. Gay’s awareness of the battle between various European cultural traditions led him to look back to the eighteenth century and to the development of the Enlightenment. But in his effort to show Voltaire’s liberal tolerance, Gay did not once refer to Voltaire’s anti-Semitism in the first edition of *Voltaire’s Politics*. Whereas Gay did connect imagination and the Enlightenment, forcing a link between creativity and political rationality, Mosse came to point to the danger of “normality.” Mosse maintained that bourgeois society was held together by conformity and respectability that encouraged a dynamic between inclusion and exclusion. Perceiving both liberalism and racism to be the results of the tradition of the Enlightenment, Mosse considered it much more
problematic to put the same level of trust into this movement as Gay. Thus, while Gay called for more and better modernity, Mosse continued to dig deeper into the illiberal tradition, searching for a more complete understanding of the rise of National Socialism.

Conclusion

Mosse and Gay’s historical writings with their focus on Western culture sometimes seem to be relics of another era of historical scholarship. But this perception overlooks the ambiguity of their scholarly endeavor. Although the two historians ignored large parts of the world, it should be remembered that their use of Geistesgeschichte was part of their effort to make American historical scholarship more cosmopolitan. Mosse and Gay’s stance in the Cold War, and their critical support of both German and American intellectual and cultural traditions, set them apart from many older émigrés and transcended divisions between consensus and progressive history. Despite their “old-fashioned” conviction that an intellectual elite should bring about social change, they did try to enlarge the contemporary impact of historical scholarship.

The comparison between the two historians’ careers illustrates the entanglement of the postwar American historiography of National Socialism and the Enlightenment: these two historical periods formed the poles between which Western culture was defined. Mosse and Gay wrestled with many of the same questions and challenges in their attempts to relate European and American cultural traditions to each other. The analysis of their historical methodology within the context of American scholarship shows that their historical writings formed, in two different ways, strong reactions to contemporary interpretations of the relevance of the experience of National Socialism and the new position of the United States in the postwar world. Although American historical research on irrationality did exist, many American intellectuals used twentieth-century German history to reaffirm the cultivation of the rational, anti-ideological quality of the American national “character” at the beginning of the Cold War.

Mosse and Gay’s development of the German tradition of Geistesgeschichte contested traditional oppositions between the allegedly abstract rationality of the Enlightenment and irrationality of the predecessors of National Socialism through their focus on motives,
wishes, and dreams in European history. Moreover, the course of German history served as an inspirational-critical narrative at the beginning of the Cold War. Mosse and Gay’s use of psychology and social history strengthened the dynamic between universality and particularity of the tradition of Geistesgeschichte, which allowed them to rewrite the European confrontation with ideology. Naturally, American history contained many historical narratives to learn from. Still, some intellectuals continued to cultivate the “unspoiled,” “antitheoretical” character of the American nation that set it apart from European history. But American intellectuals could now identify with European history through Mosse and Gay’s writings, while they avoided too many parallels between the present and the often imperfect or even catastrophic past that would lead to excessive optimism or pessimism about American identity.

In spite of the differences between them, Mosse and Gay are part of the same refugee generation: their relatively late emigration from Nazi Germany was fundamental in shaping their positions as cultural mediators between European and American culture. Their contacts with Weimar historians provided them with an insider view, although they never overcame their initial mistrust of German culture completely. Moreover, contrary to many older émigré historians, their American education, contacts, and friendships with Americanists and American historians like Trilling, Hofstadter, and Curti made them sensitive to developments, achievements, and flaws in American culture and scholarship. Thus, in their central focus on the changing meaning of ideas, they were well able to connect their historical reconstructions to contemporary American debates about the role of European history in Western culture.

But while Mosse and Gay were both part of these networks of older émigré and American scholars, as younger émigrés they never presented themselves as part of the “refugee generation,” nor did they feel particularly close to one another. As Gay noted as recently as 2008: “Considering how close we were in age and academic orientation, it is astonishing that we were not closer to one another. . . . I felt particularly friendly towards George Mosse, but we never worked together, nor did we two . . . ever show one another each other’s manuscripts or co-operate on conferences. We did our work, but our close friends were others.”89 Maybe these two defenders of individual autonomy felt that their careful balance — between victimhood and “lucky” escape, between countries, experiences, and traditions, between the past and the present — could not, in the end, be captured by a simple label of generations or community.

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