The Future of the German Past

James J. Sheehan

All art is dialogue. So is all interest in the past. And one of the parties lives and comprehends in a contemporary way, by his very existence. It seems also to be inherent in human existence to turn and return to the past (much as powerful voices may urge us to give it up). The more precisely we listen and the more we become aware of its pastness, even of its near inaccessibility, the more meaningful the dialogue becomes. In the end, it can only be a dialogue in the present, about the present.—M.I. Finley, Aspects of Antiquity (1968)

It is a truth universally acknowledged that, as Moses Finley eloquently reminded us, our contemporary experience shapes our view of the past. “The historian,” Fritz Stern once wrote, “must serve two masters, the present and the past.”1 But, like so many universally acknowledged truths, this one turns out to be more complex than it initially appears. We know that the past is a vast storehouse filled with those imperfectly preserved relics of human experience with which we try to understand how people lived in another time and place. But what exactly is the present, that other master to whom we owe allegiance? The present, like Heraclitus’s proverbial river, is inherently elusive, always changing, never still. Our idea of the present is also oddly elastic: when exactly does the contemporary era begin? 1945? 1989? Yesterday? In this regard, it is worth noting that five years from now, the historical period that began in 1945 will have lasted as long as the period between the creation of a unified Germany in 1871 and its destruction seventy-four years later. Although the title of this essay refers to the past and the future, it is mainly concerned with the present—that is, with those aspects of the contemporary world that might shape the way historians will view their subject in the years ahead.

Until recently, German historians’ view of the past was not determined by the present in which they lived and worked, but rather by the shadow cast across the contemporary landscape by what we once agreed was a new version of “the German question,” i.e., the causes and consequences of National Socialism. Although the German question took many forms (its malleability was an important sources of its persistence) and could evoke many different answers, it characteristically involved at least three assumptions. First, there was something distinctly German about Nazism. And therefore historians debated Nazism’s connection to the German past, and how it should be understood, as they tried to plot this distinctive path, Germany’s Sonderweg, toward catastrophe. Second, the most significant answers to the German question had to do with Germany’s political failures. And once again, historians disagreed about the sources of this political pathology: was it, as the Bielefeld school insisted, an expression of social conflicts and class interests or, as their critics maintained, the result of Germany’s distinctive geographical situation—or, as was particularly prominent among American scholars, of the political consequences of Germany’s peculiar cultural traditions? Most historians did agree, however, that politics was—and this is the third key assumption—national politics, i.e., that it concerned the political fate of the German nation

created in 1871. As Hans-Ulrich Wehler once admitted, despite his generation’s skepticism about nationalism and the nation-state, “it was rare to transcend the analytical frame of national history.”

These three assumptions—the significance of the German question, the primacy of politics, and the centrality of the nation—provided the foundation for the master narrative of the German past that prevailed throughout much of the last half century. This narrative has by no means disappeared, but it has lost much of its integrating power and authority. As a result, German historians have become interested in a variety of new issues, open to the problems posed by contemporary politics, society, and culture, and increasingly engaged in a number of disconnected scholarly conversations.

There are symptoms of this disciplinary change all around us. One of them is the proliferation of articles and essays (like this one) that raise questions about the future direction of German history. Or, consider an exemplary volume like The Oxford Handbook of Modern German History, edited by Helmut Walser Smith, which covers many familiar themes but deliberately eschews a cohesive narrative structure. The Fall 2017 issue of the Bulletin of the German Historical Institute featured a forum titled “Diversity in German History,” a celebration of different approaches to the past and a vivid reflection of the discipline’s contemporary condition. And, to take one final example: the sessions sponsored by the Central European History Society at the American Historical Association’s 2018 meeting represented a variety of subjects that fit within several different narrative frames.

One result of German historiography’s present condition is the disappearance of those intense conflicts that erupted from the 1950s through the 1980s. The conventional view of postwar German historiography was given its canonical formulation by Georg Iggers, who stressed the discipline’s agonistic nature, which was supposed to have originated in a struggle between a reactionary older generation (usually left unnamed, but presumably everybody knew who they were) and the advocates of a new critical history; this was then elaborated in a series of debates, beginning with the controversy over Fritz Fischer’s interpretation of the origins of World War I and culminating in the Historikerstreit of the 1980s. These debates were, of course, an expression of important differences among historians, some of them political (although the range of ideological diversity was, in fact, rather

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4For the past decade, such articles, often in the form of reviews of recent works, have regularly appeared in Central European History (CEH) and in German History (GH), the journal of the German History Society in the United Kingdom. See, e.g., Andrew I. Port, “Central European History since 1989: Historiographical Trends and Post-Wende ‘Turns,’” CEH 48, no. 2 (2015): 238–48.


narrow), some methodological; perhaps most important of all, some were what William James would have called “temperamental”—that is to say, a reflection of differences in intellectual style and personality. But however deep and meaningful these differences sometimes appeared to be (especially to the participants themselves), it seems that German history was often so loud and contentious not because of what divided scholars, but because of how much they shared. It is precisely because the contestants share so much that family quarrels can be so bitter and prolonged. If there is a decline in contentious passion among contemporary German historians, it is because we have less in common, not because our views about what matters have become more alike.

An important reason for the erosion of historiographical consensus is a matter of institutional scale. Over the past half century, historiography’s institutional setting has not fundamentally changed, but the discipline has expanded significantly; historical research is going on in more places, involving more people, and producing more material. Based on the listing of faculty in the AHA Directory, Catherine Epstein calculated that the number of American historians specializing in Germany increased from 201 in 1975 to 592 in 2010. In Germany, disciplinary growth is even more striking. In 2005, Hans-Ulrich Wehler estimated that the number of history professors in Germany had gone from 170 to 1,300 over the past half-century. In 2016, the total number of full-time historians (including professors and other teachers and researchers) employed at German universities was 3,246—up from just over 2,000 ten years earlier. A significant aspect of this change in scale was the increasing number of women: female scholars were rare in the 1960s. In 2016, they made up more than a third of the historians at German universities, a number that had doubled over the preceding decade. Demography is not destiny, but surely this expansion and diversification of the discipline has encouraged the pursuit of new topics and the adoption of new approaches.

Another important cause of disciplinary change is generational. From the 1960s through the 1980s, scholars born around 1930 shaped German historiography. In Germany, this was the Hitler Youth generation, too young to have fought in the war, but old enough to have experienced the Third Reich and to have realized that, if it had lasted a little longer, they would have been actively involved. In the United States and Britain, among the most prominent historians of Germany were members of the “second generation” of refugees: young people, almost all of them Jews, who had been born in Germany but were educated and then employed in their new homelands. Demography is not destiny, but surely this expansion and diversification of the discipline has encouraged the pursuit of new topics and the adoption of new approaches.

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7 Catherine Epstein, “German Historians at the Back of the Pack: Hiring Patterns in Modern European History, 1945–2010,” CEH 46, no. 3 (2013): 601. The number of German specialists increased steadily until 2005 and then declined slightly five years later, suggesting that, in the future, there may well be fewer German historians (just as there will be fewer Germans).
8 Wehler, Notizen, 92.
9 Statistisches Bundesamt, Fachserie 11, Reihe 4.4 (2016): 24, 26. Also see the essay on gender by Donna Harsch and Karen Hagemann in this commemorative issue of CEH.
11 See Andreas Daum, Hartmut Lehmann, and James J. Sheehan, eds., The Second Generation: Émigrés from Nazi Germany as Historians (New York: Berghahn, 2016).
and 1989 encouraged scholars to pose different questions, rather than inspiring them to seek different answers to the same question.

Both the German and American members of the generation born around 1930 had strong transatlantic ties. In Germany, this was the exchange-student generation. In America, most of the second generation established personal and professional links to Germany, often with the aid of the older generation of refugees—scholars like Hajo Holborn, Felix Gilbert, and Hans Rosenberg—who were their teachers, mentors, and senior colleagues. International connections remain of great importance for German historians—in fact, no other national historiography is as open to outsiders or has a stronger international constituency. But these cosmopolitan connections do not have the same ideological and personal power that they did for either the former exchange students or the second generation of refugees. Here again we confront the question of scale and diversity: the discipline’s international ties have become wider and more extensive, but also more fragmentary and diffuse.

The primary characteristic of contemporary German historiography is its diversity. The German question remains important—National Socialism is still the most politically and morally fraught issue in modern European history. But the question has been reframed: historians are now less interested in the historical origins of Nazism—such as the weakness of German liberalism—than in the varied experiences of its victims and perpetrators, and in the public and private memories of its crimes. One result of this is a shift in scholarly emphasis from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries and from political to the “new” cultural and social history. The Holocaust remains what Andreas Wirsching called “the negative foundational myth” for postwar Europe, but historical research on the Holocaust, though more than ever the source of our persisting fascination with Nazism, has tended to drift away from a search for the German roots of mass murder and toward an exploration of the Holocaust’s larger meaning for modern society, its transnational dimensions, and its distinctive place in Jewish history.

German history remains more dominated by political issues than many other national historiographies, but the meaning of politics has broadened, in part because contemporary political problems pose different dangers and offer different opportunities from those surrounding the German question. Moreover, German historians are now increasingly concerned with topics—popular culture, gender, sexuality, and emotions—that expand and sometimes transcend the conventional definition of politics and the usual chronological frame. Similarly, nations, nationalism, and national history have not gone away, but global, international, and comparative history is now much more important than it was twenty years ago. The history of regions, borderlands, and transnational connections has become more prominent as well, reflecting broader changes on the European scene. And, not surprisingly, historians’ interest in issues like citizenship, identity, ethnicity, and emigration has taken on a new urgency as Germany, like the rest of Europe, becomes an increasingly multiethnic society.

12For example, at least twelve of the thirty-six contributors to the Oxford Handbook of German History (see note 5) do not teach in the countries in which they were born.

13Andreas Wirsching, Der Preis der Freiheit: Geschichte Europas in unserer Zeit (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2012), 385. The universal and particularistic dimensions of the Holocaust can be seen in the contrast between the two days on which it is commemorated: “International Holocaust Remembrance Day” on January 27, established by the United Nations; and Yom HaShoah, marked in Israel a week after the end of Passover.
None of these approaches to German history—cultural history in all its various forms, transnational history, gender history—has yet provided the basis for a new consensus. Perhaps this is why we have trouble understanding how our view of the German past has been transformed. As Francis Bacon wrote at the beginning of the seventeenth century, “On waxen tablets you cannot write anything new until you rub out the old. With the mind it is not so; there you cannot rub out the old until you have written in the new.” Thomas Kuhn had something similar in mind when he noted that scientific paradigms survive until they are replaced by something new, even if scholars are deeply aware of their limitations and internal contradictions.\(^{14}\)

We must consider the possibility that this situation is not, like Kuhn’s paradigmatic crisis in the natural sciences, a transitional interlude, but rather a permanent condition. It may well be that no new consensus will emerge, that that there will be no successor to the Sonderweg, the constantly contested but remarkably resilient grand narrative within which the postwar generation sought answers to the German question. Perhaps we should accept, even celebrate, the fragmented diversity of contemporary scholarship and eagerly await how changes in contemporary culture, politics, and society will lead to the posing of new questions about the past. After all, the inexhaustible richness of its subject matter is among our discipline’s most attractive attributes. That is why, as R. G. Collingwood once wrote, “The historian’s work is never finished; every historical subject, like the course of historical events itself, is open at the end, and however hard you work at it, the end always remains open.”\(^{15}\)
