

Forum: Gerhard L. Weinberg: Nicolas Berg, Der Holocaust und die westdeutschen Historiker. Comments

by Gerhard L. Weinberg

It is only appropriate to mention at the beginning of these comments some personal factors of relevance. First, I am a Jewish émigré from Germany who was the last student to take his doctorate under Professor Hans Rothfels at the University of Chicago. Second, numerous pieces by me appeared in the early issues of the *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* even though Berg claims that the *Institut für Zeitgeschichte* did not care to publish such works by people like myself. Third, the Institute in 1961 published my edition of *Hitlers Zweites Buch*, at the suggestion of Martin Broszat included a reprint of this with a revised introduction and additional notes in 1995 in its series *Hitler: Reden, Schriften, Anordnungen*, and authorized the publication of an English language edition that appeared in 2003.¹

While it is interesting to read an account of one aspect of West German historical writing in the years since 1945, Berg is too fixated on certain interpretations to examine either the context of the time or substantial evidence that runs counter to his interpretation. On the context of the time, two issues deserve mention: In the first place, the general disregard of the Holocaust as a central element in the history of National Socialism and of World War II was not a peculiarity of Germany. It is surely significant, and worthy of an examination that is not limited to one country that for the fifteen years after the end of the war this was a topic that attracted very little attention in any country.

¹Weinberg, Gerhard L., Die geheimen Abkommen zum Antikominternpakt, in: VfZ 2.2 (1954), S. 193-201; Ders., Deutsch-Japanische Verhandlungen über das Südseemandat 1937-1938, in: VfZ 4.4 (1956), 390-398; Ders., Schachts Besuch in den USA im Jahre 1933, in: VfZ 11 (1963), 166-180; Ders., Adolf Hitler und der NS-Führungsoffizier (NSFO), in: VfZ 12 (1964), 443-456; Hitlers Zweites Buch. Ein Dokument aus dem Jahr 1928. Eingeleitet und kommentiert von Gerhard L. Weinberg. Mit einem Geleitwort von Hans Rothfels (Quellen und Darstellungen zur Zeitgeschichte 7), Stuttgart 1961; Weinberg, Gerhard L. (Ed.), Hitler's Second Book. The unpublished sequel to Mein Kampf. Translated by Krista Smith. New York 2003. See also note 3.

Until a serious study of this issue is published, one should not forget that Raul Hilberg had a very difficult time getting his seminal book published. If as Berg complains it was not utilized by German scholars in the 1950s, as he does on page 218, that may be related to its having been published in 1961.

In this context, it should be noted that while Berg mentions that Rothfels published the Gerstein report on the mass murder of Jews in extermination centers, this item is not included in the lengthy listing of Rothfels' work in the bibliography. The other contribution by Rothfels on the subject of the Holocaust, a piece on the murder of Jews in occupied Poland that appeared in the *Vierteljahrshefte* in 1959, is simply omitted altogether.² Perhaps this interest of Rothfels in the subject would undermine Berg's thesis.

A second aspect of Rothfels' interest at the time is reviewed at great length, but one of its most important purposes is only mentioned incidentally. Having himself lived through the period when the stab-in-the-back legend had undermined the Weimar Republic, he was very much concerned about the possibility of a revival of such a concept in the Federal Republic, this time focusing on the opponents to Hitler's regime as responsible for Germany's defeat. A nationalist himself, he was very interested in showing that those who turned against the dictator and his government were motivated by patriotic, ethical, and religious concerns. This was very much an issue at the time and has by no means entirely disappeared in the interim.

The danger created by the spreading of one particular myth was very much a subject of Rothfels' interest then and is certainly still the subject of attempted myth-making today. This is the notion that the German invasion of the Soviet Union – which opened the door to the Holocaust and innumerable other crimes – was some sort of preventive move in anticipation of an imminent Soviet attack on Germany. Since he knew that the German decision to attack the Soviet Union had

²Rothfels, Hans, Zur „Umsiedlung“ der Juden im Generalgouvernement, in: VfZ 7 (1959), S. 333-336.

been included in my doctoral dissertation, he invited me to write an article on the topic; it appeared with an introduction by him in the first year of the *Vierteljahrshefte*. Hans-Günther Seraphim and Andreas Hillgruber wrote a reply to which I responded. Rothfels again wrote an introduction in which he referred to Seraphim's prior advocacy of the preventive war thesis; Hillgruber in his subsequent publications completely reversed himself on the subject of the controversy.³ On a related issue, it would surely have been appropriate for Berg to point out that the breakthrough on the treatment of Soviet prisoners of war by Christian Streit that he mentions was published by the Institute. (Berg, p. 354, n. 135).⁴

Closely related to the myth of a preventive war against the Soviet Union was that of the supposed British responsibility for the whole war, a piece of nonsense in the early 1960s identified with David Hoggan, an American whom Berg has transmuted into a British historian.⁵ The interest of the Institute and of Rothfels in countering such distortions must also be seen in the context of genuine concern for the future of democratic institutions. The review of Hoggan's book by Rothfels in the *American Historical Review* of July 1964 (Berg, p. 295, n. 95) is an invention of Berg's; what Rothfels did write was an explanation of the Nazi background of the organization that had awarded Hoggan a prize.⁶

While there is much of interest in Berg's account of the disappear-

³Weinberg, Gerhard L., Der deutsche Entschluß zum Angriff auf die Sowjetunion, in: VfZ 1.4 (1953), S. 301-318; Seraphim, Hans-Günther; Hillgruber, Andreas, Hitlers Entschluß zum Angriff auf Rußland. Eine Entgegnung (mit einem Schlußwort von G. Weinberg), in: VfZ 2.3 (1954), S. 240-254.

⁴Streit, Christian, Keine Kameraden. Die Wehrmacht und die sowjetischen Kriegsgefangenen 1941-1945 (Studien zur Zeitgeschichte 13), Stuttgart 1978.

⁵Hoggan, David L., Der erzwungene Krieg. Die Ursachen und Urheber des 2. Weltkriegs (Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Nachkriegsgeschichte), Tübingen 1961. An English version was published as recently as 1989 by the revisionist Institute for Historical Review in California that plays as much with names of reputable research institutions as Hoggan's German publication did.

⁶Rothfels, Hans, Letter to the Editor, *American Historical Review* 69 (1963/64), p. 1222.

ance of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust in the leftist gibberish about fascism in the 1960s and 1970s, the discussion of the arguments between intentionalists and structuralists leaves much to be desired. The supposed allocation of Jewish historians to the former and German historians to the latter category simply does not work. Both Andreas Hillgruber and Eberhard Jäckel fail to conform to Berg's analysis, as do numerous others. As one who as an intentionalist who is Jewish might be said to fit, I simply find his description of the functionalist position not only inadequate but also unfair. Just as there is the danger of overlooking the roles, motives, and responsibilities of specific individuals in any extreme functionalist position, so there is the risk of overlooking the factors of contingency and bureaucratic inertia in the intentionalist position.

A final point that needs to be made because it appears to be missing from the book in spite of its excessive length and non-existent index is the critical problem of establishing a new legal and functioning democratic order on the ruins of a system gone mad. This is a terribly difficult task – as the people of the former Soviet satellites have been finding out in recent years. Yes, the historians of the early years of the Federal Republic found this excruciatingly difficult, and their own preconceptions at times led them astray, as best – or worst – shown by the role of Rothfels in the disgraceful handling of the Riezler diary. (Berg, p. 147, n. 16). But, on the other hand, it would appear proper to allow some substantial credit to historians affiliated with and/or published by the Institute for a significant part in the reorientation of German society in a new direction after 1945. If one looks at the broader picture with this problem in mind, there is surely some credit to be allowed to men like Werner Präg and Wolfgang Jacobmeyer whose edition of the diary of Hans Frank published in 1975 as well as Helmut Krausnick and Hans-Heinrich Wilhelm whose study of the Einsatzgruppen published in 1981 were both issued by the Munich Institute.⁷ I have my own criticisms of the Institute, but a fair appraisal

⁷Präg, Werner; Jacobmeyer, Wolfgang (Hgg.), Das Diensttagebuch des deutschen

ought to include an appreciation of its role in the development of a historical consciousness in the Federal Republic that is an enormous improvement over that of the post-World War I era and that is so recognized in much of the world. The belief that it was not only legitimate but necessary for German historians to try to examine the recent past that history and its study and teaching should not end with 1871 or 1890 or 1918 was of major significance in the way in which Germans reoriented themselves after 1945. Not all participated in this process, not all who did so were entirely successful, and some were probably insincere; but a contribution to the world of historical consciousness of which Berg is a part certainly owes something to the efforts made by many of the very historians subjected to his harsh judgment.

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Generalgouverneurs in Polen 1939-1945 (Quellen und Darstellungen zur Zeitgeschichte 20), Stuttgart 1975; Krausnick, Helmut; Wilhelm, Hans-Heinrich, Die Truppen des Weltanschauungskrieges. Die Einsatzgruppen der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD 1938-1942, (Quellen und Darstellungen zur Zeitgeschichte 22), Stuttgart 1981.