

**Forum: Ian Kershaw: Beware the moral high ground**

*by Ian Kershaw*

Until the 1980s, German historians undertook relatively little research on the Holocaust, plainly so central to the history of Nazism. Nicolas Berg in *Der Holocaust und die westdeutschen Historiker* is keen to demonstrate that because memory and personal experience were inseparable from the way German historians viewed the Third Reich, even when they claimed to be writing detached and objective history, their attempts to explain „the German catastrophe“ were exculpatory and apologetic, the perspective of the perpetrators was given precedence over that of the victims, and German accounts were accorded objectivity while analysis undertaken by Jewish historians was ignored or criticized as un-scholarly and subjective. „Auschwitz“ (as the symbol of the Holocaust) was, indeed, Berg suggests, subliminally omnipresent in German historiography. But it was not centrally addressed. Defence of national values, a sense of national shame, the use of theoretical models of totalitarianism and Fascism, or conceptual devices („intentionalism“ and „functionalism“) to interpret the disaster of National Socialism all skirted round the issue itself.

The heart of this issue amounted, in Berg's perception, to acceptance of the personal culpability of countless Germans – through will, desire, intention and ideological motivation, not as involuntary cogs in the wheel of impersonal structures and processes – for the murder of the Jews. The question at stake is that of guilt – meaning direct blame of a wide range of perpetrators at all levels of society, not generalized „national guilt“ and impersonalized responsibility. Jewish historians had been concerned with this from the beginning. But in Berg's view it took a new generation of German historians (the present one), liberated from memory of the Nazi era, to shift the emphasis from anonymous „processes“ and „structures“ to those who actually perpetrated the Holocaust. Only recently, therefore, Berg claims, has it been possible to incorporate the perspective of the victims - to begin to approach the Holocaust in the way enlightened Jewish historians, long

neglected, ignored or even disparaged by their German counterparts, had done from the beginning.

Why the Holocaust remained for so long marginal to German historiography is the subject of Berg's voluminous study. A bibliography of ninety-eight pages indicates the breadth of the investigation. Berg deploys not just the published works but also the private papers of most of the historians under review to offer new insights into their thinking and writing. Complex in style, structure and content, often unwieldy in its prose, and - a serious drawback - lacking an index, the book is an intriguing, but flawed, piece of intellectual history. In Germany it has already stirred far more controversy than is usual for a doctoral thesis on account of its claim that an intrinsic apologia was embedded in the ways leading exponents of German „contemporary history“ approached the Nazi past.

The book's elaborate dissection of much early post-war historical writing would in itself have attracted little attention. The apologetic implications of Friedrich Meinecke (Nazism as German tragedy) and Gerhard Ritter (Nazism as Germany's misfortune) are well known. And the space devoted to the religiously imbued musings of Fritz Ernst, Reinhard Wittram and Hermann Heimpel is over-generous. But the assessment of Hans Rothfels, one of the great early figures of German contemporary history, stands out. Rothfels, staunch upholder of Prussian-German conservative values but Jewish (though converted to Protestantism), had returned after the war from exile in the United States to a chair at Tübingen. As Berg emphasizes, he served, most evidently through his emphasis on „the other Germany“ in his widely read book on conservative opposition to Hitler, as a useful legitimating figure for apologists.

But Berg does not do justice to Rothfels as the driving force on the editorial board of the newly founded *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, which rapidly established itself as the key journal on contemporary history. The very first issue of the journal in 1953 included Kurt Gerstein's sensational eyewitness account of the mass gassing of

Jews. Other crucial records on the fate of the Jews were also published in the journal during Rothfels's editorship.

The home of the *Vierteljahrshefte* is the *Institut für Zeitgeschichte* (Institute of Contemporary History) in Munich, founded in 1950 to undertake research into National Socialism. And it is in its attack on the Institut, and some of its most distinguished historians – notably Martin Broszat, Hans Buchheim, Helmut Krausnick and Hans Mommsen (who later left for the chair of Contemporary History at Bochum) – that Berg's book is both surprising and highly contentious. The Institut began its existence with the self-professed aim of breaking with the German historicist tradition and analysing the most recent, disastrous, past unemotionally and objectively. Much of its early work concentrated on bringing to light documentary evidence of the Nazi era. It soon also became involved in historical evaluations of institutions or individuals for use in legal cases. Most specialists, inside and outside Germany, have regarded the work of the Institut as the pinnacle of scholarship on the Third Reich. Its leading historians have gained a worldwide reputation for their expertise.

Based on his research into the early records of the Institut – minutes of meetings of its directorate, assessments of manuscripts, correspondence with authors or would-be authors in its publication series – Berg now fires a sheath of arrows at the heart of the Institut's research achievement and high standing. He suggests that, under the veneer of „objectivity“, the approach to the Nazi past of historians at the Institut was directly shaped by their subjective experiences (or „memory“). This in turn, he claims, led to an inbuilt, if unspoken, prejudice in favour of German accounts and documentary evidence and against historical accounts by Jews (presumed to be less objective). Not least, what later became known as the structuralist approach, which had been programmatically introduced at the beginning of the Institut's work in the 1950s, was implicitly apologetic in deflecting research from the personal (often ideological) motivation of perpetrators into anonymous and amorphous general responsibility rooted in the structures

of the Nazi system of rule.

Buchheim, untainted with membership of a Nazi organization and one the Institut's foremost researchers in the 1960s, who composed a chilling analysis of the SS as an instrument of rule for use in the Auschwitz trial of 1963, is seen as apologetic in his emphasis upon the ways in which, as the Nazi system corrupted and perverted social values, individuals could slide in moral confusion into complicity in a criminal totalitarian regime. Mommsen, internationally acclaimed as one of the greatest authorities on Nazism over the past decades (who in 1983 published a path-breaking essay on the emergence of the „Final Solution“), stands similarly accused of apologetics in a text written in 1962 portraying Wilhelm Kritzing, State Secretary in the Reich Chancellery, and present at the notorious Wannsee Conference in January 1942, as a functionary who had taken no personal initiative to support the criminal policies of the regime but had been sucked into its murderous actions by becoming inextricably tied up in its structures of rule.

But the most concerted attack is reserved for Broszat, who joined the Institut in the mid-1950s, was its Director from 1972 until his death in 1989, and was regarded in Germany and abroad as among the pre-eminent scholars of Nazism in the world.

Almost a year before the publication of his book, Berg had launched his attack in striking fashion with a full-page article in a leading German newspaper, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, highlighting what he called Broszat's „lifetime lie“ in concealing the fact that he had actually joined the Nazi Party in 1944. This startling information, which astonished Broszat's family, friends and colleagues, is limited in the book to a single sentence and a footnote. But the damage had already been done. The implication that Broszat had been a sympathizer, even an enthusiast, is present when Berg deals at length with his exchanges in the early 1960s with the Jewish historian Joseph Wulf, based on the archives of the Institut. Certainly, Broszat does not come out well from these exchanges concerning a prominent health official of the Nazi

regime in Poland, Dr Wilhelm Hagen, who later went on to enjoy a good career in the Federal Republic. Broszat accepted Hagen's claims that he had defended Poles against the SS and supported him against Wulf's findings that he had taken quite a different stance on Jews in the Warsaw ghetto (where Wulf had himself been confined, before deportation to Auschwitz). Even when Wulf found evidence that Hagen had advocated shooting Jews found „wandering around“, Broszat only retracted partially and, it seems, reluctantly. This exchange, in which Broszat was plainly at fault, is used to undermine his claim to objectivity, and widened to an assault on the „structuralist“ approach, of which Broszat was a prime exponent.

Here I need to disclose a personal interest. I worked closely with Broszat in the 1970s, and have had association with the *Institut für Zeitgeschichte* ever since. Hans Mommsen is a good personal friend. Broszat was my early inspirational mentor, Mommsen later an important further vital stimulus to my own work on Nazism. From close personal connection, the notion that there was a trace of apologetics, even unwitting, in their writing or their historical approach strikes me as absurd. Far from an apologia, an open and stringent criticism of the German social and political structures which produced the disaster of Nazism was fundamental to their thinking. Buchheim I did not know, and Krausnick only fleetingly, but my sense, based on their writing, is the same. Of course, mistakes were made. Broszat's handling of Wulf was one. But the sweeping conclusions Berg draws from the exchange are not convincing.

Broszat's presumed party membership is a red herring. Possibly, indeed, he was never formally admitted to the Party. The reverse of his membership card (which Berg did not consult) in the Berlin Document Centre implies that the entry ceremony never took place. Conceivably, Broszat never mentioned he was a party member because, though requesting entry, he had never actually joined. But his concealment even of the application to join is certainly a puzzle. He never hid the fact that he had been an enthusiastic member of the Hitler Youth.

To have admitted his membership of the party itself would have not damaged him in the Institut. After all, his predecessor as Director, Helmut Krausnick, openly acknowledged that he had joined the Party as early as 1932 (though he left it in 1934). This had not detracted from his later standing either in the Institut or among the community of historians. Nor did it affect his outstanding research on the Holocaust. Krausnick went on - a point which does not feature in Berg's book - to write a groundbreaking study on the murderous assault on Jews by the Nazi Einsatzgruppen in the wake of the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941.

Broszat's driving incentive was to help an understanding of how Germany could sink into barbarity. That he himself had succumbed to the elan of the Nazi Movement was central to his motivation to elucidate for later generations how it could have happened. And that the later murder of the Jews arose from Nazism's anti Jewish policies, but that these played so little part in the idealism of millions who had been drawn into support for the Nazi Movement (or in his own enthusiasm for the Hitler Youth), posed questions he always sought to answer. It amounted to a search for the pathological causes of the collapse of civilization in German society. But the attempt to find general causes in individual ideological intention and personal culpability seemed misplaced. This perspective pushed him, like Buchheim and others at the Institut, into looking to the structures of Nazi rule that implicated countless functionaries (and ordinary citizens) in the regime's inhumanity and criminality, even though they were far from sharing the ideological obsessions of the regime's leadership. And in his seminal essay on the „genesis of the Final Solution“, published in 1977, Broszat specifically deployed a structuralist approach to widen responsibility beyond Hitler and the narrow Nazi leadership.

Overall, Berg's analysis, though a work of history, has something ahistorical about it. It is as if he is asking why the historical questions of the 1990s were not those of the 1960s and 1970s, and why the legitimately differing perspectives of German and Jewish historians were

not identical. In judging the work of earlier generations solely from the perspective of the 1990s and after, Berg underrates their achievements by narrowing the focus to what seems central to historical research now. And for all its centrality and pivotal significance, the Holocaust does not exhaust all the issues that needed (and still need) to be addressed about Nazism. The overriding concern of research in Germany on how the Nazi system had been possible, then into how it functioned, was not simply in itself legitimate; it was crucial. The early consciously self-critical „contemporary history“ saw itself as engaged in vital work of clarification for a new, uncertain democracy still feeling its way. It was natural enough that the concentration on the Holocaust, which has only come to be the preoccupation of international scholarship in the past twenty years or so, would not manifest itself in early writing on Nazism. But only through the structural analysis of the Nazi system, leading into evaluation of the mentality and behaviour of varied social groups in Germany (which Broszat pioneered), was the later detailed understanding of how the Holocaust emerged from within that system of rule at all possible.

It took time. But the rewards in looking at the Nazi system as a whole, rather than narrowing the focus exclusively to the Holocaust, have been great. Within that broad spectrum, and made possible in good measure by the opening up of Russian and East European archives since 1990, the focus in recent research by German historians on the Holocaust, and biographical concern with those who planned and implemented it, is both justified and welcome. It takes the work of Broszat, Mommsen and other „structuralists“ further, and on to new levels of understanding through adopting different approaches. But it builds directly on their foundations. In fact, for all its merits, the new emphasis on the biography and ideological motivation of the perpetrators cannot answer the big questions on the Holocaust unless it is rooted in structural analysis. Research never stands still; perspectives change. Much of the recent German historical writing on the Holocaust has been outstanding (even if it continues to deal

hardly at all with the victims' perspective, something which Berg so criticizes in earlier German historiography). But less attractive is the apparent urge to disparage earlier work and even to impugn, directly or indirectly, the motives of those historians who produced it.

The arrows which Nicolas Berg fires at Broszat, Mommsen and the structuralist approaches adopted by the *Institut für Zeitgeschichte* are misdirected. And his sustained attack on German historians generally for their failings in research on the darkest stain on their country's history is too one-sided, as the merest glance at the omissions of historiography in most other countries in addressing sensitive issues from their past would indicate. Present-day historical perspectives, particularly when viewed from a moral high ground, are not always the best of guides by which to judge an earlier historiography - its merits, as well as its failings.

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