

**Forum: R. P. Ericksen: Nicolas Berg's reflections on Göttingen,
Siegfried Kaehler and Hermann Heimpel**
by Robert P. Ericksen

This work represents a recent, ambitious, lengthy and perhaps courageous effort by Nicolas Berg to explore the response of West German historians to the horrors of the Nazi regime, especially in terms of the single greatest horror, the persecution and murder of European Jews. It is an ambitious project, since it covers numerous historians and half a century. It is lengthy at nearly 800 pages, and it may be courageous in that German doctoral students in history have been very slow to look behind the closed doors of their forebears in the profession. The famous *Historikertag* at Frankfurt in 1998 pushed open those doors, and Berg's work is now one of several dealing with the behavior and ideas of German historians and their relationship to the Nazi state.

Berg brings to this effort three important qualities. First, he is conversant with the complex of issues that distinguish history from memory, but which also leave the two deeply intertwined. He rightly stresses the significance of his subtitle, „Erforschung und Erinnerung,“ for the two concepts cannot be easily separated. Research was conducted by the first two generations of historians writing about the Nazi past, but they were also remembering that past. Not only that, they were sharing in the nationwide tensions that grew out of defeat, deprivation, danger, personal guilt, national guilt, horror at the atrocities now widely exposed, and anxiety over questions of career and economic wellbeing represented by the Allied policy of denazification. Finally, they were emerging from the twelve-year experience of the thousand-year Reich, a time which had been intoxicating for some and frightening or oppressive for others. We should not be surprised if this complex of tensions produced complicated and even dysfunctional results. Any attempt to assume that historians were simply writing history — a questionable assumption at any time or place — must be especially suspect in the complex circumstances of post-war Germany.

Berg also brings to this study a useful exposure to Jewish points

of view, having worked in the *Simon-Dubnow-Institut für jüdische Geschichte und Kultur* in Leipzig and having published on questions dealing with the Shoah. As he illustrates in this book, German historians were hardly eager to listen to Jewish memories or analyses in the early aftermath of 1945. Yet, it seems a most obvious truism that the memories and analyses of German historians could not be entirely trusted, that they would be tempted to hide, distort and downplay the reality of the Shoah, both to protect their nation and to protect themselves. And it seems equally obvious that no one could describe the horrors with as much vigor and attention to detail as the victims. Berg quotes Gerhard Ritter in a letter of 1948 which bristles at the idea that foreigners should be allowed to enter the conversation. Ritter called it a scandal, „wenn die Deutschen von Fremden über ihre eigene Geschichte belehrt werden“ (p. 134). The real scandal occurred, of course, when German historians refused to listen to outsiders, whether Jewish or otherwise.

Berg also has the benefit of youth. The first two generations of postwar historians lived through the Nazi period, either as professors of history or as students and members of the Hitler Youth. The '60s generation studied under doctor fathers who had experienced Hitler, frequently with enthusiasm and with the result that skeletons remained in their closets. Berg's generation now studies with professors who could not have been Nazis. In that sense it is the first generation which can pursue questions without fear of drawing blood, and thus the freest generation to do the work represented by this book.

Now I will turn to Siegfried Kaehler, a student of Friedrich Meinecke who came to Göttingen University from Halle in 1936 at the age of fifty-one. Berg makes excellent use of Kaehler, both because his extensive Nachlass is available in the Universitätsbibliothek in Göttingen and because his correspondence with other major historians has recently been published.¹ Kaehler illustrates several important

¹Kaehler, Siegfried A., Briefe 1900-1963. Herausgegeben von Walter Bußmann und Günther Grünthal, (Deutsche Geschichtsquellen des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts 58), Boppard 1993.

characteristics for Berg. For example, when Friedrich Meinecke published *Die deutsche Katastrophe in 1946*, Kaehler was among those who pushed the ambiguity of the title in one particular direction, the catastrophe which happened to Germany, rather than the catastrophe unleashed by Germans (p. 90-97). Kaehler did not want to use the concept of *Irrweg* to understand the Nazi state, as if Germans had made a wrong turn. He did not want to accept any analysis which assumed continuity within German history. As he wrote to Meinecke, he thought the concept of *Weg* and *Irrweg* was „selbst ein grosser Irrweg“ (p. 107ff., especially n. 7). Rather than blame Germans for the crimes of the Nazi regime, he placed those crimes outside German history, crimes for which he and other Germans should not be held responsible.

Berg also describes Kaehler in his relationship to the „Jewish question“ and, in that context, his relationship to Hans Rothfels. They were students together, and then colleagues in the discipline; but their relationship collapsed when Rothfels left Germany. Though a Protestant from the age of nineteen and a conservative, patriotic German, Rothfels lost his position at Koenigsberg because of his Jewish parents. After being arrested during the pogrom of „Kristallnacht“, and then being allowed to slip through a back door out of respect for an injury from the Great War and his continuing use of crutches (p. 151), Rothfels fled Germany for England and America. He taught at Brown University and at the University of Chicago, before returning to teaching posts in Germany. He took up a guest position at Göttingen in 1949 and then moved to Tübingen, where he held a chair from 1951 until his retirement. Correspondence between Kaehler and Meinecke shows that they viewed Rothfels as just the right person to give credibility to their defense of Germany against its critics and enemies. For whatever reasons, he shared their desire to give German history a benign treatment, stressing the suffering of Germans rather than the suffering of Germany's victims, and claiming that the crimes must be attributed to a small number of criminals rather than a large number of the German

people.

Although Kaehler welcomed Rothfels back to Germany and the two of them gradually rekindled their friendship, Berg also shows that Kaehler did not easily leave behind the antisemitic stereotyping of the Nazi era. In May 1945, for example, Kaehler spoke of the need to defend Germany itself „gegen die bereits im Gang befindliche Verleumdung durch demokratisch jüdische Propaganda [...]“. In February 1946 he wrote to Gerhard Ritter about the problem of too many Jews teaching at German universities before 1933. When he arrived at Halle in 1932, he writes, „[daß] von den 17 Lehrstühlen nicht weniger als 5 [...] mit Volljuden besetzt waren; [...]“. He then describes a Jewish dean at Marburg who told authorities in Berlin that further Jewish appointments were „nicht tragbar.“ And Kaehler adds, „so kluge Juden hat es leider aber nicht immer gegeben, sonst würden die peinlichen Vorgänge von 1933 sich nicht ereignet haben“ [apparently in reference to the Aryan paragraph introduced in April that year]. (p. 183)

I quite agree with Berg's description of Kaehler. He was a patriotic, conservative historian who saw his role as defending German values, German pride, and the German nation against its critics. In the process, he and his colleagues did not want to look too closely at the crimes committed against Jews and others by the Nazi state. The crimes had to be acknowledged in general, of course, so that an argument of historical discontinuity had to be developed to remove the Nazi era from the normal historical threads of cause and effect.

It is interesting to compare Berg's picture of Kaehler after the collapse of Nazism with his earlier role at Göttingen. When he arrived in 1936, the university had been politicized. He had been appointed specifically with the belief that he would combine academic renown with political enthusiasm for the Nazi state. Already in 1937 he gave the *Festrede* on January 30, celebrating the fourth anniversary of Hitler's rise to power. Speaking on the topic of „Wehrverfassung und Volk,“ he praised Hitler for his overturning of the Versailles Treaty:

„Der unbeirrbaren Tatkraft des Führers und Reichskanzlers dankt das deutsche Volk die Wiederherstellung seiner Wehrhoheit ebenso wie die friedlich Ausserkraftsetzung des Versailler Diktats.“²

„Der unbeirrbaren Tatkraft des Führers“ certainly seems a phrase designed by Kaehler to show his allegiance to Hitler. However, he later claimed to have stood up against the Nazis and their politicization of the university. The one identifiable instance involves Kaehler's response to the intervention of Walter Frank, head of the *Reichsinstitut für die Geschichte des neuen Deutschlands*. The latter tried for several years to get his colleague, Erich Botzenhart, an appointment at Göttingen. Such an appointment would have to be based almost entirely upon Botzenhart's political enthusiasm for the regime, for, although he had finished a doctoral dissertation on Freiherr vom Stein, he was not *habilitiert* and did not appear on the list of finalists selected by the faculty. Kaehler protested this appointment, both in a faculty meeting and in a letter to the Rektor, but to no avail. He rarely had to work with Botzenhart, for the latter spent the war years in an eager search for activities which would keep him out of the military. When Botzenhart suffered removal from his chair by the British in July 1945, Kaehler vowed never to allow him back, and he succeeded.³

The Botzenhart episode almost certainly represented for Kaehler proof that he stood outside the Nazi enthusiasm. He considered himself a representative of that older, purer Germany, before the Nazi

²Kaehler, Siegfried A., Wehrverfassung und Volk in Deutschland von den Freiheitsskriegen bis zum Weltkriege. Rede zur Reichsfeier am 30. Januar 1937, gehalten in der Aula der Georgia Augusta, in: Mitteilungen des Universitätsbundes Göttingen, 18.2 (1937), p. 2.

³Kaehler to the Dekan, 28.05.45, Personalakte Botzenhart, Universitätsarchiv Göttingen. It is in this letter that Kaehler describes the contested circumstances of Botzenhart's arrival in Göttingen. See also Ericksen, Robert P., Kontinuitäten konservativer Geschichtsschreibung am Seminar für Mittlere und Neuere Geschichte. Von der Weimarer Zeit über die nationalsozialistische Ära bis in die Bundesrepublik, in: Becker, Heinrich; Dahms, Hans-Joachim; Wegeler, Cornelia (Eds.), Die Universität Göttingen unter dem Nationalsozialismus. Das verdrängte Kapitel ihrer 250jährigen Geschichte, zweite, erweiterte Ausgabe, München 1998, p. 427-53. One hesitates to criticize a 100-page bibliography for incompleteness, but this volume by Becker, Dahms and Wegeler and the chapter on historians might have been noted.

ruffians took over. Without doubt he valued academic standards and both resented and opposed the machinations of enthusiastic Nazis at Göttingen to fill vacancies with purely political appointees. He also spent time after the collapse of the Nazi state giving public lectures, despite ill health (stomach cancer) and the fact that he had carried much of the load of the history seminar practically by himself in the latter years of the war. He gave these lectures, on one occasion to an audience of 800, in order to establish for his German listeners the guilt of the Nazi state for the outbreak of the war and to avoid the development of any future stab-in-the-back legend. What Kaehler failed to do, however, despite his mostly quiet opposition to some of the more egregious manifestations of the Nazi state, was to confront his own past enthusiasm for important elements in the Nazi ideology. He and his colleagues had created an environment in which the „unbeirrbaren Tatkraft des Führers“ received too much praise and too little critique. Then, as Berg shows, this general stance of public enthusiasm, coupled – in some instances – with private doubt, gave way to a defensive stance on the right of Germans to be patriotic. This lingering patriotism might be understandable. However, it actively inhibited the wider historical analysis of the Nazi state which had to be left to subsequent generations. Kaehler's approach also incorporated an unwillingness to look closely at the experience of Jews. He seemed unable to accept the story of victims as anything more than an attack upon Germany by its enemies.

Hermann Heimpel arrived in Göttingen only after the war, but he then pursued an extraordinarily successful career as professor of history, Rektor of his university, head of the West German *Rektorenkonferenz* and the *Historikerverband*, Vice President of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, and director of the Max-Planck-Institut für Geschichte in Göttingen from 1957. Heimpel's complicity in the Nazi state seems greater than Kaehler's. At Freiburg in 1933 he joined in Heidegger's enthusiasm for the „rebirth“ of Germany. After an interim period of several years in Leipzig, his political avidity earned him a call

to the new *Reichsuniversität* created under high Nazi expectations in Straßburg, a city only recently reclaimed by military success in France.

Berg shows that Heimpel wrestled with his past in an effort to combine personal and group memory with historical *Wissenschaft*. In the 1950s he became the first to develop the concept of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (p. 248ff.). Speaking at a *Volkstrauertag* in 1955, he mentioned not only the death of German soldiers, but the suffering of Jewish and other victims, using words like „Vernichtung,“ „Liquidation,“ „Konzentrationslagern“ and „Todeskammern“ (p. 251). Four years later he told his audience: „Der Mensch hat die Neigung und die Fähigkeit, im Sinne seiner Lebenserhaltung, zu vergessen. Und besonders die Schuldigen — *wir Schuldigen* — denken nicht gern zurück.“ (p. 262, my emphasis added). Heimpel wrestled in particular with the fact that his mentor, Siegmund Hellmann, suffered removal as a Jew from his post in Leipzig, a position Heimpel then received, almost as his personal booty! Looking back nearly half a century later, on the occasion of his own eightieth birthday in 1981, Heimpel remembered that Hellmann „musste in Theresienstadt in einer Masse von Gequälten einsam sterben. In München war er mein Lehrer gewesen, und oft hatte ich ihm meine Verehrung gezeigt — solange das kein Risiko war“ (p. 246), the last phrase representing ironic awareness, unusual honesty, or both.

Berg describes Heimpel as an example of Protestant *Bußfertigkeit*, a characteristic he also ascribes to Reinhard Wittram, a postwar Göttingen colleague. Wittram's case indicates even more need for personal repentance, since he had joined the Nazi party, helped develop a *völkisch* rationale for German-occupied eastern Europe, and gave wartime lectures praising the Führer and damning „artfremden Bolschewismus“ (p. 233ff.). Both Wittram and Heimpel incorporated in their postwar reflections the Protestant idea that all are sinful and that honest reflection and repentance are necessary. The latter is said to have spent his last years making notes in the margins of his Bible and heavily underlining „forgive us our sins“ in his copy of Luther's catechism (p.

246f.).

Heimpel represents both intelligence and honesty in his attempt to combine memory of the recent past with his work as a German historian. Berg does not simplify the process, noting, for example: „Ein Blick auf verstreute Briefäusserungen Heimpels in der unmittelbaren Nachkriegszeit macht aber deutlich, dass die Versuche der intellektuellen Aufrichtigkeit in den 50er Jahren in der Deutung der eigenen Vergangenheit, die seine Nachkriegsberühmtheit begründeten, einen Lernprozess benötigten“ (p. 243). I would add one other comment, primarily as a suggestion for future research. The reliance of Heimpel and Wittram upon Protestant motifs, as stressed by Berg, might take into consideration recent critiques of the Protestant stance. Berg already describes the Protestant theologian, Helmut Thielecke, „als geradezu fanatische[n] Gegner der 'Entnazifizierung,'“ (p. 267) and the work of Clemens Vollnhals among others has raised questions about the willingness of Protestants to face the past honestly.⁴ In fact, the generally positive view of Protestants which emerged in the early postwar years has been increasingly exposed as a myth, a myth actively developed by postwar Protestants for self-serving purposes.⁵ Whether this should be taken into account in the analysis of Heimpel's Protestant *Bußfertigkeit* remains to be seen.

Robert P. Ericksen is Professor of History at Pacific Lutheran University, Tacoma, Washington. He has written about theologians within Nazi Germany and churches in relation to the Holocaust, with a recent edited volume in Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte, on Christian teachings about Jews and a research project dealing with the Nazi period at Göttingen University.

⁴Vollnhals, Clemens, *Evangelische Kirche und Entnazifizierung 1945-1949. Die Last der nationalsozialistischen Vergangenheit*, München 1989; Vollnhals, Clemens, *Die Hypothek des Nationalprotestantismus. Entnazifizierung und Strafverfolgung von NS-Verbrechern nach 1945*, in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 18 (1992), p. 51ff.

⁵See, for example Ericksen, Robert P.; Heschel, Susannah, „German Churches and the Holocaust,“ in: Stone, Dan (Ed.), *Historiography of the Holocaust*, London 2004.