

A Century of War, A Century of Debate: Historians debate German History

Veranstalter: The Richard Koebner Minerva Centre for German History; Hebrew University of Jerusalem; Rosa-Luxemburg Stiftung, Tel Aviv, Israel

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The debate concerning Germany's responsibility for the mass violence in the 20th century has been at the centre of academic and public discourse since 1914. German historians, particularly after the end of the Second World War, have played a central role in rebuilding the German national identity after defeat. Moreover, they have been active in the effort to criticize the continuity between the identities constructed during the Cold War and the nation which eagerly embarked on two world wars. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the need arose to redefine a unified German identity. Germany's violent past returned to take centre stage in the discussion on contemporary German identity. „A Century of Debates,“ a recently held conference at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem brought together the foremost experts on German history in the 20th century for an in-depth discussion on the various „historians' debates“ of the last one hundred years. Examining the manner in which historians have influenced public discourse, this conference examined how various conceptions about the imperial and Nazi past have crystallized in twentieth-century Germany, and how these conceptions have become the building blocks of contemporary German identity.

The first session dealt with the World Wars and their legacy. First to speak was MARTIN SABROW (Potsdam). The topic of the talk was „Changing Memories: The First World War in German Remembrance Culture.“ The lecture portrayed the changing roles and varying representations of WWI in German historical culture during the 20th century. Sabrow described the political exploitation of the war memory already during the war and in the post-1918 period which ranged from pacifist condemnation to bel-

ligerent myth creating. After having touched the national socialist cult of remembrance, he referred to the abstract and marginalised war memory after WWII, and the stunning change of public interest about the Great War on the occasion of its 100th anniversary.

The next speaker was MOSHE ZIMMERMANN (Jerusalem), who talked about „The Changing View of World War II in Germany's Vergangenheitsbewältigung since the German Unification“. Zimmermann discussed three discussions which changed the ways in which German society has perceived its past, thus bringing it to a reinterpretation of history. First was the book of Daniel Goldhagen, „Hitler's willing executioners“¹, which dealt with the active role many Germans willingly took in the Nazi war crimes. Albeit not being the first to discuss the issue, the provocative manner in which the book was written caused a general public debate in Germany. The second major topic under public debate was the discussion on the active role the Wehrmacht had in conducting the mass killings in the East, thus shattering the belief that the crimes were committed solemnly by the SS, while the military was portrayed as relatively clean handed. The most recent debate was concerned with the active role that the German Foreign Office took during the war; a debate that caused strong reactions from senior members of this office.

The Keynote of the conference was given by OTTO DOV KULKA (Jerusalem), who discussed „The Historikerstreit from a Personal Retrospective: On the Case Nolte and his Generation.“ In his lecture Kulka addressed his own involvement in the historical debate as well as his own private correspondence with Ernst Nolte between the years 1968 to 1987. He underscored the shift from the 1963 historical masterpiece, „Fascism in its epoch“², to the problematic and much controversial book from 1987 „The European civil war“³, which juxtaposed the Nazi war crimes

¹ Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler's willing executioners. Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, New York 1996.

² Ernst Nolte, *The Three Faces of Fascism*, London 1965. (German: *Der Faschismus in seiner Epoche*, München 1963).

³ Ernst Nolte, *Der europäische Bürgerkrieg 1917–1945. Nationalsozialismus und Bolschewismus*, Frankfurt am Main 1987.

with those done earlier by the Soviets, thus claiming that the fear of the Nazis from the Soviets, and the Jews who were perceived as their perpetrators, was real, and therefore making the Nazi crimes against the Jews on the same level with other war crimes that were committed during the war. In this context the question that rises is which of the two is the „right“ Nolte? Kulka claimed that the reason the 1963 book was so powerful was due to Nolte's understanding of the Nazis from within, being himself a contemporary of the war. He was not the only one to approach Nazism from „inside“, Martin Broszat is also an example, but he did not change his views as Nolte did. Kulka concluded that the best contribution to this debate, and generally against the arguments of Nolte, was from the British historian Ian Kershaw. Kulka believed that the reason for this could be due to him being neither German nor Jewish, allowing him to approach things on a more wholesome manner.

The topic of the second session of the conference was „Reconsidering the rise of Nazism and the Holocaust“. The first to talk was WOLFGANG SCHIEDER (Göttingen/Cologne), who dealt with the rise of Nazism and the problem of Fascism. In this lecture Schieder examined the rise of Nazism through the perspective of Italian Fascism, with focus on the influence of Mussolini's actions on Hitler in the 1920's. In the beginning he pointed out that in the early 1920's, as Mussolini took control of Italy, Hitler probably knew very little about the Italian dictator. He also claimed that in this period of time the Fascism did not yet crystallise into a coherent ideology, and that the main similarities between the Nazis and the Fascists were basically the use of violence through militias. After Mussolini was able to consolidate his regime in Italy, the Nazis gradually recognised his achievements and tried to imitate his moves, believing Mussolini's moves were planned in advance, which was not the case in reality, resulting in a failure in 1923. Mussolini himself did not take much notice of Hitler during the 1920's, and only recognised him as a potential ally after his electoral success in the early 1930's. The first meeting between the two was only in 1934. This new

German- Italian alliance reached its peak in the shape of an Italian silent acceptance to the annexation of Austria, and Hitler's unofficial acceptance of Italian control of South Tyrol.

Titled „Deforming the Holocaust: Ernst Nolte and the Aftermath of His Ideas,“ the second lecture in the session was given by HABBO KNOCH (Cologne). This presentation discussed whether and how Ernst Nolte's arguments from the mid-1980s have gained any influence or resonance in the field of contemporary history, in particular with regard to recent comparative or entangled approaches to connect the history of Nazism and Stalinism. At the same time, Nolte's own isolation and self-martyrdom was analyzed as a symptomatic German post-1945 intellectual discourse which reflects a far-reaching attitude to over-generalize the Nazi crimes to dispatch it from any detailed perpetrator analysis.

Under the title „From the Generation of 1968 to the *Historikertreit*,“ The Final session of the conference discussed the ways the discussion of the German past was affected by intellectuals and activists who were born either during WWII or in its immediate aftermath. BERND WEISBROD (Göttingen) talked about generations and wars in German historiography. He confronted the classical reading of political generations in German historiography, especially the „war youth generations“ of the First and Second World Wars; which reflected nostalgic ideas about the non-elite experience of belonging in time in modern German history. According to Weisbrod, generations are, after all, about the sharing of personal experience as a way of securing a „home in time.“ There is, he argues, a particular „anxiety“ about generational belonging in the context of modern German history which may provide an interface between the master narrative of political generations and the way in which people actually managed to construct their „social selves“ in the face of momentous disruptions of war and political upheaval.

The last talk of the conference was of OFER ASHKENAZI (Jerusalem), who presented the topic „Heimat, Violence and History: A Reconsideration.“ The talk offered a new reading for Edgar Reitz's renowned 1984 televi-

sion series, *Heimat*. This series coincided with a revisionist trend in German historiography, and it is often interpreted as part of the popular tendency to dissociate Nazism from the „real“ Germany and the „real“ Germans from Nazi crimes. Ashkenazi analyzed Reitz's popular show as a subversive work that undermines the concept of *Heimat* and its fundamental role in the formation of German identity. He located *Heimat* within an alternative German tradition, which was originated in the works of (mostly Jewish) filmmakers in 1920's Berlin and developed by (mostly Jewish) *rémigré* filmmakers in the 1950's and 1960's. In re-staging their imagery and narration, it was argued, Reitz did not replace the horrors of German history with a nostalgic concept of an apolitical *Heimat*; rather he melted German *Heimat* and history into an image of an ongoing German catastrophe.

There is an interesting symbolism not only to the topic of this conference, but also to its location and participants. In the event of the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War, one can only ponder on the immensity and intensity of all the social, political and cultural transformations Germany and its Jews endured in this century. The ability of historians to discuss this history is in itself a remarkable achievement. This achievement is even augmented by the fact that the discussion was shared by leading German and Israeli historians. This conference has not only enabled scholars to tackle openly some of the most sensitive and emotional issues in this discourse, such as the events of the „Historikerstreit“, but also allowed the examination of this discourse between Israel and Germany. It is worth mentioning that there was a remarkable affinity between the older generations of Israeli historians to the approaches of younger German scholars. It was a pleasure to all to witness the mutual appreciation and openness between the participants, as well as the friendly and professional environment during the conference.

Conference Overview:

Greetings:

Moshe Sluhovsky (Jerusalem) / Norbert Frei (Jena) / Ofer Ashkenazi (Jerusalem) / Angelika Timm (Tel-Aviv)

Session I: The World Wars and their Legacy: Chair: Zohar Shavit (Tel-Aviv)

Martin Sabrow (Potsdam), Changing Memories: The First World War in German Remembrance Culture

Moshe Zimmermann (Jerusalem), The Changing View of World War II in Germany's Vergangenheitsbewältigung since the German Unification

Discussion

Keynote:

Otto Dov Kulka (Jerusalem), The Historikerstreit from a Personal Retrospective. On the Case Nolte and his Generation

Moderation: Norbert Frei (Jena)

Session II: Reconsidering the Rise of Nazism and the Holocaust

Chair: Iris Rachamimov (Tel-Aviv)

Wolfgang Schieder (Cologne/Göttingen), The Rise of Nazism and the Problem of Fascism

Habbo Knoch (Cologne), Deforming the Holocaust: Ernst Nolte and the Aftermath of His Ideas

Discussion

Session III: From the Generation of '68 to the Historikerstreit

Chair: Aya Elyada (Jerusalem)

Bernd Weisbrod (Göttingen/Berlin), Generations and War in German Historiography

Ofer Ashkenazi (Jerusalem), *Heimat*, Violence and History: A Reconsideration

Discussion

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