

## FORUM

# Holocaust Scholarship and Politics in the Public Sphere: Reexamining the Causes, Consequences, and Controversy of the *Historikerstreit* and the Goldhagen Debate

A Forum with Gerrit Dworok, Richard J. Evans, Mary  
Fulbrook, Wendy Lower, A. Dirk Moses, Jeffrey K. Olick,  
and Timothy D. Snyder

*Annotated and with an Introduction by Andrew I. Port*

**L**AST year marked the thirtieth anniversary of the so-called *Historikerstreit* (historians' quarrel), as well as the twentieth anniversary of the lively debate sparked by the publication in 1996 of Daniel J. Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*. To mark the occasion, *Central European History* (CEH) has invited a group of seven specialists from Australia, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States to comment on the nature, stakes, and legacies of the two controversies, which attracted a great deal of both scholarly and popular attention at the time. To set the stage, the following introduction provides a brief overview of the two debates, followed by some personal reflections. But first a few words about the participants in the forum, who are, in alphabetical order:

**Gerrit Dworok**, a young German scholar who has recently published a book-length study titled "*Historikerstreit*" und *Nationswerdung: Ursprünge und Deutung eines bundesrepublikanischen Konflikts* (2015);

**Richard J. Evans**, a foremost scholar of modern German history and the author of a highly acclaimed, three-volume study of the Third Reich (2003–2008), as well as of a study of the *Historikerstreit* itself (*In Hitler's Shadow: West German Historians and the Attempt to Escape from the Nazi Past* [1989]);

**Mary Fulbrook**, a leading historian of modern Germany, especially of the German Democratic Republic, who has more recently turned her attention to National Socialism and its legacies with the publication of *A Small Town near Auschwitz: Ordinary Nazis and the Holocaust* (2012), and *Reckonings: Legacies of Nazi Persecution* (forthcoming);

**Wendy Lower**, the author of several important books on the so-called final solution, including *Hitler's Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields* (2013), as well as the acting director of the Jack, Joseph, and Morton Mandel Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum;

**A. Dirk Moses**, the author of a prize-winning study on the way in which West German intellectuals dealt with the legacy of the Third Reich (*German Intellectuals and the Nazi Past* [2007]), as well as of numerous publications since then about memory and genocide within but also *beyond* the German context;

**Jeffrey K. Olick**, a prolific sociologist and historian who has written extensively on collective memory, especially within the postwar German context (most recently, *The Sins of the Fathers: Germany, Memory, Method* [2016]);

**Timothy D. Snyder**, a renowned historian of Eastern Europe who has written two volumes specifically dealing with the Holocaust, both of which, besides appearing in dozens of translations, have received a great deal of popular attention beyond academe (*Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* [2010], and *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning* [2015]).

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The *Historikerstreit* erupted in July 1986 with the publication of an essay in the leading West German weekly *Die Zeit* by renowned sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas. The lengthy piece was a critical response to an article that historian and philosopher Ernst Nolte had published a month earlier in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (“Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will”), and to a short book released earlier that year by historian Andreas Hillgruber (*Zweierlei Untergang. Die Zerschlagung des deutschen Reiches und das Ende des europäischen Judentums*). The sharp exchange prompted a series of heated, sometimes vitriolic responses by Nolte, Habermas, and Hillgruber, as well as by other prominent West German historians, political scientists, and journalists, including Rudolf Augstein, Karl Dietrich Bracher, Martin Broszat, Joachim Fest, Klaus Hildebrand, Eberhard Jäckel, Jürgen Kocka, Hans and Wolfgang Mommsen, Michael Stürmer, Hans-Ulrich Wehler, and Heinrich August Winkler (in retrospect, the absence of female scholars involved in the fray is striking).<sup>1</sup>

Carried out in the pages of the national press in the form of articles and letters-to-the-editor, the debate centered on the nature of National Socialism and on its meaning and significance for contemporary (West) Germans, and seemed to pit, roughly speaking, the “conservative” right against the “progressive” left (terms that fail to capture the complexity of the positions presented on both sides). One of the main issues concerned the singularity of the Holocaust, with Nolte and others arguing that it was (and needed to be interpreted as) just one in a long series of state-sponsored atrocities that had punctuated the modern era, especially over the course of the twentieth century. An equally important point of contention was Nolte’s controversial claim that Nazi crimes had been a response to the perceived threat of Bolshevism in the East—“that the so-called annihilation of the Jews by the Third Reich was a reaction or a distorted copy and not a first act or an original.”<sup>2</sup> Hillgruber, for his part, was criticized (among other things) for his sympathetic portrayal in *Zweierlei*

<sup>1</sup>Most of the key early texts were reprinted in “*Historikerstreit*”: *Die Dokumentation der Kontroverse um die Einzigartigkeit der national-sozialistischen Judenvernichtung* (Munich: Piper, 1987); this appeared in English translation as *Forever In the Shadow of Hitler? Original documents of the Historikerstreit, the controversy concerning the singularity of the Holocaust*, trans. James Knowlton and Truett Cates (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1993). Also see Andreas Hillgruber, *Zweierlei Untergang. Die Zerschlagung des Deutschen Reiches und das Ende des europäischen Judentums* (Berlin: Corso bei Siedler, 1986).

<sup>2</sup>*Forever in the Shadow of Hitler*, 14.

*Untergang* of German soldiers fighting against the Soviet army in the East during the final stages of World War II. Rightly or wrongly, Habermas and other critics condemned Nolte, Hillgruber, and their supporters for trying to “trivialize” or “relativize” National Socialist crimes and, above all, the final solution—a topic that had become a source of intense interest and popular fascination in the Federal Republic, especially following the broadcast on West German television of the American miniseries *Holocaust* in early 1979.

Ten years—and German unification—separated the *Historikerstreit* from the Goldhagen “affair,” which some observers characterized as a continuation of the earlier dispute. The publication of Daniel Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* was a major media event, especially in Germany, where its deceptively simple—his detractors claimed simplistic—explanation for the Holocaust touched off a firestorm of criticism in the media and in academic circles. According to Goldhagen, most Germans had willingly gone along with Nazi plans to exterminate the Jews because of an especially virulent strain of what he termed “elimination antisemitism,” which had supposedly been festering in the German-speaking lands for centuries. Though frequently identified in the press as a historian, Goldhagen had been trained as a political scientist—an important distinction, I believe, given his focus on a single variable to explain a highly complex event. In any event, Goldhagen was highly critical of other scholars working in the field, especially of Christopher Browning, whose highly acclaimed book, *Ordinary Germans: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, had appeared four years earlier. Both studies focused on the brutal actions of paramilitary units involved in the mass killing of Jewish civilians following Germany’s invasion of Eastern Europe. But they differed drastically when it came to explaining the motivation of the “ordinary” Germans who made up these mobile killing units, with Goldhagen harshly criticizing Browning (and others) for supposedly neglecting the key role that antisemitism had played in the process.<sup>3</sup>

Most historians (this time regardless of their political affinities) roundly rejected Goldhagen’s thesis, but a number of prominent German journalists and public intellectuals, such as Volker Ulrich of *Die Zeit*, as well as many young Germans, eagerly embraced it—as well as the young and charismatic American political scientist himself. The German public flocked to see him, in fact, during a subsequent book tour across Germany that included (often televised) speaking engagements and public debates with prominent German scholars. In 1997, Goldhagen even received the Democracy Prize awarded by the *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik*—with none other than Jürgen Habermas, one of the main protagonists of the *Historikerstreit*, holding the *laudatio*.<sup>4</sup>

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CEH provided the participants in this forum with a series of prompts reproduced in full below. Though the latter often reach differing conclusions—above all with respect to the lasting significance of the *Historikerstreit* and the Goldhagen “affair”—their responses reveal some common ground (all essentially agree that Goldhagen “got it wrong,” but that his

<sup>3</sup>Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996); Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper, 1992).

<sup>4</sup>See, e.g., the essays in Geoff Eley, ed., *The “Goldhagen Effect”: History, Memory, Nazism—Facing the German Past* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000); also see Jürgen Habermas, “Warum ein Demokratiepreis für Daniel J. Goldhagen? Eine Laudatio,” *Die Zeit*, March 14, 1997.

book clearly spurred debate), while touching on some common themes: the importance of taking into account the scholarly prehistory and political context of the two debates; the role that generational affiliation and personal experience played in the reactions of both direct participants and more casual observers; the appropriateness (or lack thereof) of certain historical comparisons. At least two participants emphasize the need to extend the focus of research on the Holocaust (a term that one participant roundly rejects) beyond the national framework of “just” Germany, i.e., the need to take more systematically into consideration developments in, and the history of, other countries in Eastern Europe—which will, as they rightly note, require the mastery of languages besides German.

In closing, I would like to add a few personal observations as a non-expert in the field of National Socialism and the Holocaust, but as someone whose initial interest in the history of modern Germany coincided with the start of the *Historikerstreit*, and as someone who was in Germany at the time of the Goldhagen debate. (I managed to procure a ticket, in fact, to a memorably raucous, sold-out, standing-room-only roundtable discussion—held in the fall of 1996 at the former synagogue in the Fasanenstrasse in Berlin—with Goldhagen and several German historians earlier involved in the *Historikerstreit*.<sup>5</sup>) My initial exposure to Goldhagen’s thesis had been a lengthy excerpt published in translation as a “Dossier” in *Die Zeit* on April 11. I was highly skeptical of his arguments (not least because of what I considered to be sloppy source analysis), and I recall thinking that the focus on “national character” would only further alienate young Germans—a growing number of whom were already, in my experience, increasingly put off by what they considered to be an excessive focus on the Holocaust in school and in the media. In fact, just the opposite occurred, and Goldhagen became the darling of many, especially young, Germans. Why was that the case? The fact that Goldhagen condemned the older generations while more or less exonerating those born after the war—“eliminationist antisemitism” had, he suggested, somehow miraculously dissipated after 1945—must have been a welcome balm to young people who continued to feel pangs of guilt for sins they had not committed themselves. By embracing Goldhagen, I suspect, they tried, consciously or not, to distance themselves—while demonstrably *insisting* on distancing themselves—from the barbarous acts of their forebears. Whatever the reason, I am reminded in this context of an acerbic comment that Hannah Arendt, another target of Goldhagen’s wrath, had written three decades earlier in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* with regard to young Germans at the time: “It is quite gratifying to feel guilty if you haven’t done anything wrong: how noble!”<sup>6</sup>

My prediction about the reaction of German youths to Goldhagen’s study was largely mistaken, but it at least enjoyed good company: one historian remarked to me in a private conversation that Goldhagen’s work would have no lasting effects because it failed to pose new questions (*Fragstellungen*) that would drive scholarly discussion forward. Several of

<sup>5</sup>Goldhagen was joined onstage by a visibly agitated Hans Mommsen, as well as by Jürgen Kocka and Wolfgang Wippermann. At one point, a young couple sitting next to me loudly cried out in English—the language that Goldhagen, alone among the participants, used during the discussion—demanding to know why there were no women on the podium. For another description of this event, as well as of Goldhagen’s other speaking engagements at the time, see Amos Elon, “The Antagonist as Liberator,” *New York Times Magazine*, Jan. 26, 1997; also see Josef Joffe, “Goldhagen in Germany,” *New York Review of Books*, Nov. 28, 1996.

<sup>6</sup>Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 1994), 251. Goldhagen was highly critical of Arendt’s “banality of evil” thesis.

the participants in the present forum agree with that assessment, but I would argue that the controversy that swirled around Daniel Goldhagen's book did indeed have a lasting effect: it—along with the heated discussion that had begun a year earlier about the *Wehrmachtausstellung*, a traveling exhibition that drew *public* attention to the war crimes committed by the German military during World War II—led to a greater focus on the actual perpetrators of the Holocaust, not least with respect to the issue of motivation. Even if Goldhagen's book was not the first to address such issues, the publicity it generated and the debate it triggered clearly gave added momentum to that emerging focus.

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The *Historikerstreit* and the debate about *Hitler's Willing Executioners* were both highly emotional and created a great deal of bad blood within the profession. Yet, we undoubtedly know more now about the “mechanics” of the Holocaust than we did before these two controversies—even if some of the participants in the forum do not necessarily see a causal connection in that regard. That passions run high when it comes to the Holocaust is more than understandable, especially when it comes to the “why” and to the issue of uniqueness. Historians might never be able to answer in a “satisfactory” way the first question, which one is almost tempted to consign to philosophers or psychologists.<sup>7</sup> With regard to the question of singularity: one undeniably unique feature of the Holocaust—or, better said, its “reception”—is the outrage and emotion that the very act of *questioning* its uniqueness continues to engender. Why might that be the case? The sheer scale of death and destruction wrought by Germany over the past century has no doubt attracted so much attention *in the West* because it was death and destruction wrought by one of the world's most “advanced” and “civilized” nations against *other* civilized nations and groups. Is that not what most distinguishes German savagery from the barbarous acts committed by other Westerners, namely, those who instead chose to impose their will, not seldom with brute force, on the “racially inferior” living in, say, Africa, Asia, or the Americas? And if that is true, does what some consider to be a disproportional preoccupation with German crimes against humanity reflect a subconscious belief that some human lives are somehow more valuable than others? My intention is not to call into question the horror or unique nature of the Holocaust. But to be unique does not necessarily mean to be more horrible.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup>The most recent attempt by a historian to address that vexing question is Peter Hayes, *Why? Explaining the Holocaust* (New York: Norton, 2017).

<sup>8</sup>See Andrew I. Port, “Das Land der verpassten Geschichte(n), or Wie es eigentlich gewesen wäre,” *H-German* (June 2009). Also see A. Dirk Moses's comments on p. 393 of this forum.

*It has been claimed that the Historikerstreit was not a scholarly but rather a political struggle for cultural hegemony. Do you agree? Did the controversy have lasting political and cultural consequences? What do the Historikerstreit—and the Goldhagen debate—tell us about the evolving relationship among scholarship, politics, and the public sphere?*

**Wendy Lower:** The historians' debate in Germany was, in essence, an attempt by a few of the more senior scholars of Nazi Germany to orient the field in directions that would largely resist the shift to a popular and academic interest in the Holocaust as the central legacy of the Third Reich. For this wartime generation of German academics, that legacy was difficult to accept. In the waning years of the Cold War, scholars such as Ernst Nolte and Andreas Hillgruber, who had matured into eminent experts on fascism and German diplomatic-political history, respectively, became more outspoken in their defense of German national identity and a minimization of the uniqueness of the Holocaust. In Nolte's case, he asserted that the strength of German nationalism hinged on a distancing from the burden of guilt associated with the Holocaust; he supported Hillgruber's sympathetic view of the German army and German people who had resisted the Bolshevik enemy and suffered during the Allied bombings in Germany proper. Victim studies at this time did not focus on Jews, but on Germans. Once again history was deployed to serve a national cause. It smacked of similar currents as those at the turn of the century, when Heinrich Treitschke and others—whom Gordon Craig once characterized as the “intellectual bodyguard” of the kaiser—became champions of German nationalism.<sup>9</sup>

That said, the *Historikerstreit* was more than an academic debate about tendentious comparisons and patriotic modes of historicization. It was struggle over the dominant legacy of Nazism in German political culture. Academics, journalists, and public intellectuals were not the only ones engaged in this controversy. For example, Jacob Eder's recent study, *Holocaust Angst*, documents the resistance—indeed, the neuralgic reaction—of West German political leaders to the creation and opening of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM).<sup>10</sup>

**Gerrit Dworok:** The *Historikerstreit* may indeed be considered to be the climax of a struggle in West Germany for political and cultural hegemony. The chancellor at the time, Helmut Kohl, had received a doctorate in history before starting his nationwide political career, and Michael Stürmer, Kohl's political advisor in the 1980s, became one of the conservative protagonists in the historians' quarrel. Referring to the political conflict between left and right that had shaped the Federal Republic of Germany in the aftermath of “1968,” Kohl tried to use the politics of history (e.g., the sixtieth commemoration of the 1916 Battle of Verdun; US President Ronald Reagan's controversial visit in 1984 to a military cemetery in Bitburg, where members of the Schutzstaffel [SS] were interred; relations with Israel; plans for the new German Historical Museum) in order to overcome, in his words, an “intellectual

<sup>9</sup>Gordon Craig, *Germany, 1866–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 205. The engagement of West German intellectuals is thoroughly researched in A. Dirk Moses, *German Intellectuals in the Nazi Past* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Richard Evans, *In Hitler's Shadow: West German Historians and the Attempt to Escape from the Nazi Past* (New York: Pantheon, 1989).

<sup>10</sup>Jacob Eder, *Holocaust Angst: The Federal Republic of Germany and Holocaust Memory since the 1970s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

and moral crisis [geistig moralische Krise]” allegedly caused by leftist politics.<sup>11</sup> It was in this vein that Stürmer emphasized the political importance of gaining political power to define a dominant narrative of national history. Left-wing liberals, led by Jürgen Habermas and politically represented by Social Democratic (SPD) politicians like Freimut Duve and Renate Lepsius, had similar ideas as well, of course. It was former chancellor Willy Brandt who had asserted in 1983, after all, that the SPD had to fight conservatives in order to regain cultural hegemony in West Germany. The SPD was subsequently the only party in the Federal Republic that founded, later that year, an official Commission for Historical Issues (Historische Kommission).<sup>12</sup>

Habermas had, of course, already created a powerful image of the “enemy” by focusing his political and cultural criticism on so-called neoconservatives, including Kohl and Stürmer, as well as Nolte, Hillgruber, Klaus Hildebrandt, Joachim Fest, Franz Josef Strauß, the leader of the Christian Social Union (CSU), and others, who had all seemed to be influenced by politicians like Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. According to Habermas, this group of neoconservative apologists was a severe threat to liberal Western society, and it had to be defeated.<sup>13</sup> Both sides thus had in common a propensity to refer explicitly to German history in order to achieve their political aims. Conservatives affirmed the concept of a national narrative that stressed positive aspects of German history without denying the horror of the National Socialist era. By contrast, left-wing liberals criticized this kind of positive affirmation of the past. They postulated a *post-national* era and advocated a democratic system based on a critical commemoration of Auschwitz.

All of that said, the *Historikerstreit* clearly focused on strictly scholarly topics as well. It is obvious that key historic debates—including the relationship between totalitarianism and fascism, the narrative of a German *Sonderweg* (special path), the process of nation-building, and, in particular, a more scientific approach to an explanation for and interpretation of genocide (especially the Holocaust)—were all discussed and intensified during that debate.<sup>14</sup>

**Timothy Snyder:** This has to be a difficult set of questions for a scholar to answer, since the first impulse is always to extract what is scholarly from what is actually read. The *Historikerstreit* involved, in some sense, everything that its participants had written beforehand, thus an immense amount of scholarship. If we limit the discussion to the two participants most remembered, Nolte and Habermas, then we do indeed have before us an essentially normative political discussion. The Habermasian critique of Nolte was not that Nolte was wrong, as

<sup>11</sup>For a critical discussion of the terms *Wende* and *Krise*, see Peter Hoeres, “Von der ‘Tendenzwende’ zur ‘geistig-moralischen Wende’: Konstruktion und Kritik konservativer Signaturen in den 1970er und 1980er Jahren,” *Vierteljahresschrift für Zeitgeschichte* 61, no. 1 (2013): 93–119.

<sup>12</sup>See Gerrit Dworok, “*Historikerstreit*” und *Nationswerdung. Ursprünge und Deutung eines bundesrepublikanischen Konflikts* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2015), 437.

<sup>13</sup>Jürgen Habermas, “Leserbrief an die *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*,” in “*Historikerstreit*,” 95–96.

<sup>14</sup>[The so-called *Sonderweg* debate essentially focused on the claim that Germany’s historical development had diverged from that of Western nations because of the tenacity there of “premodern” social structures and undemocratic political practices; this, according to proponents of the *Sonderweg* thesis, eventually resulted in the rise of National Socialism. For a classic statement of that position, see Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *The German Empire, 1871–1918*, trans. Kim Traynor (Leamington Spa: Berg, 1985); for an obviously subjective but still helpful overview of the debate by two of the thesis’ most trenchant critics, see the introduction to David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 1–38—Ed.]

a thinker, to try to guide the historical discourse of the Federal Republic of Germany. It was that Nolte was proposing the *wrong* kind of historical discourse. Thus Habermas more or less explicitly claimed that the purpose of history is to provide the “right” sort of discourse, from which it follows that the judges of rightness need not be historians.

My problem with the Habermasian perspective is that it takes the national framework for granted. Nolte went beyond Germany and claimed to find causality; Habermas argued that the goal of any such search can only be exculpation. The consequence of accepting that proposition is that historiography itself becomes impossible, since almost no meaningful topic, and certainly not the Holocaust, can be understood within a framework of national history alone. If one accepts, then, that history is meant to be instructive, as Habermas does, there is no actual history from which to draw instruction.<sup>15</sup>

**Richard Evans:** The *Historikerstreit* was essentially a political debate. The backdrop was Reagan’s tough stance toward the Soviet bloc, which some labeled a “second cold war.”<sup>16</sup> In this view, West German confidence needed to be boosted in order to stiffen its backbone against a supposed threat from the East—among other things by making West Germans feel better about the German past. Thus Reagan, commenting on SS graves in the Bitburg cemetery during his visit to the Federal Republic, remarked that the SS were victims of the war in their own way. Right-wing historians in West Germany went along with this initiative by relativizing the Nazi past: Ernst Nolte not only blamed the Russian Bolsheviks for pioneering the kind of mass murder that was then followed by that of the Nazis, but suggested that the Jews had brought it upon themselves by “declaring war” on Germany in 1939 (a misreading of Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann’s declaration of support for the Allies in Palestine).<sup>17</sup> In different ways, Andreas Hillgruber, a far more serious historian than Nolte, and Michael Stürmer, one of the few academic historians in Germany who had crossed the line into popular historical writing, both backed the general drive to “draw a line (*Schlußstrich*) under the past.”

It did not work: only a short time after the *Historikerstreit*, the Berlin Wall fell—not as a result of Reagan’s pressure but as a consequence of the economic bankruptcy and unviability of the Soviet bloc—and the “normalizing” impulse behind the *Historikerstreit* was rendered irrelevant. Acceptance of responsibility for the crimes of Nazism became a cornerstone of the national identity of a united Germany, and, in the 1990s, a new wave of historical research into the active involvement in these crimes of the army, the medical profession, academics (including historians), and other key groups in German society was a consequence of generational change, rather than a result of the *Historikerstreit*—a topic we return to later in this forum.

**Dworok:** I agree with the idea that the “acceptance of the responsibility for the Nazi crimes became a cornerstone of the national identity of Germany.” Still, I strongly doubt that the historians whom Habermas and others attacked had intended to “draw a line” under the

<sup>15</sup>For a superb effort of historical contextualization, see Charles S. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); also see Peter Baldwin, ed., *Reworking the Past: Hitler, the Holocaust, and the Historians’ Debate* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990).

<sup>16</sup>Fred Halliday, *The Making of the Second Cold War* (London: Verso, 1988).

<sup>17</sup>[On this episode, see, e.g., Berel Lang, “The Jewish ‘Declaration of War’ against the Nazis,” *The Antioch Review* 64, no. 2 (2006): esp. 369–70—Ed.]



past. Whereas politicians like Brandt, Strauß, and the CDU's Alfred Dregger publicly debated the idea of a *Schlußstrich*, this would have been a disaster for Hillgruber, Stürmer, Hildebrandt, and Fest, since the historiography of Hitler's dictatorship represented a significant aspect of their primary scholarly and journalistic output. They did not demand a *Schlußstrich*, then, but instead revisited Germany's role in the history of twentieth-century Europe. That is a significant, and well-documented, difference.<sup>18</sup>

Nolte was a special case. His turn-of-phrase "Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will" (a past that does not pass away) contained two ideas. On the one hand, it meant that the German way of commemorating the Nazi past could be compared with pseudo-religious mythology. According to Nolte, such black-and-white commemoration should cease and be replaced instead by a more critical historiography.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand—and this is something often overlooked—Nolte used this terminology to point to the ideological effects of Bolshevik terror. Given the delusion of "Jewish Bolshevism" at the core of Hitler's political thinking, Nolte stressed the fact that Bolshevik crimes during the Russian civil war had scared many people in Germany and elsewhere in Europe. For many Germans, Nolte suggests, the Bolshevik danger was *also* a past that would not go away—and thus a threat to their lives. Both hypotheses are based on shaky argumentation and thus may be harshly criticized. But to suggest that Nolte supported a general *Schlußstrich* under Germany's fraught past is simply incorrect.

**Jeffrey Olick:** A cliché about the *Historikerstreit* has been that it produced no new historical knowledge about the German past. But that is precisely the point, for neither it nor the Goldhagen debate was, in fact, really about history as such; rather, both were about memory. Was earlier memory appropriate, repressive, or inadequate? Habermas's story was the standard one put forth by the left, according to which the early leaders of West Germany had repressed the past, and only the so-called sixty-eighters had finally worked through it properly. By contrast, Nolte's was one according to which that silence had been—in the words of another prominent conservative thinker (and yet another forerunner of the *Historikerstreit*), Hermann Lübbe—"communicative," and thus fully justified, and in which the public discourse of guilt was a sort of "nose ring" by which German leaders were led around like cattle.<sup>20</sup> In both cases, the argument was again about the adequacy and appropriateness of earlier memory, not about the facts of the past.

It is also worth mentioning in this context that the *Historikerstreit* took place at a point in time when memory had become central to both scholarly and political debates in both Germany and elsewhere. In the first regard, it is now hard to remember how little good work there had been on the history of memory (German or otherwise) in the mid-1980s; in many respects, then, the disputants had little to rely on in their arguments about the

<sup>18</sup>See Dworok, "Historikerstreit und Nationswerdung," 235–36. [Alfred Dregger (1920–2002) was a staunch conservative politician who led the CDU/CSU faction in the German Bundestag from 1982 to 1991; he was later an outspoken critic of the Wehrmachtausstellung—Ed.]

<sup>19</sup>Ernst Nolte, "Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will," in "Historikerstreit," 46.

<sup>20</sup>This was the title of a 1991 book on German memory by a former secretary to Ernst Jünger who later served as a speechwriter for Franz-Josef Strauß, and whose earlier formulations may have influenced Nolte; see Armin Mohler, *Der Nasenring: Die Vergangenheitsbewältigung vor und nach dem Fall der Mauer* (Munich: Langen-Müller, 1991); also see Hermann Lübbe, "Der Nationalsozialismus im deutschen Nachkriegsbewusstsein," *Historische Zeitschrift* 236, no. 3 (1983): 579–99.

history of memory—other than anecdote and polemic. More broadly, however, the rise of the so-called memory boom was both a cause and a consequence of the *Historikerstreit* and other similar debates elsewhere (e.g., over the legacies of authoritarianism in Latin America, of apartheid in South Africa, of communism in Central and Eastern Europe; over genocide in Rwanda, and over ethnic cleansing in former Yugoslavia). The questions raised in the historians' dispute, and some of the answers given, thus became emblematic of a wider discourse. There is no question that this wider discourse has been conducted in a language first conceived, and worked out in its most explicit and lasting form, in this crucial debate about memory in Germany. It is for this reason, rather than its historical arguments, that the *Historikerstreit* remains of decisive importance.

**Mary Fulbrook:** All historical accounts are situated in a web of relationships between past and present, and *among* differing political positions in both past and present. In a sense, whether intentionally or otherwise, all historical accounts contribute to cultural understandings of the past that have implications for a later present. In the case of the *Historikerstreit*, the relationship in particular between Stürmer and Kohl made quite clear the explicit desire to find a “usable past” that would have political impact—a past with which Germans could identify, of which they could be proud, one that would help to define national strategies and aspirations for the future. In this sense, it was more obviously and explicitly part of a “political struggle for cultural hegemony” than many historical controversies are, and certainly more than the Goldhagen debate was.

Both the *Historikerstreit* and the Goldhagen debate nevertheless brought to attention more subtle ways in which all historical works have contemporary significance. First is the question of language. The simple choice of words, concepts, and terminology inescapably indicates and transmits a position. This was often pointed out with respect to Andreas Hillgruber's telling use—in the title of his two contiguous essays published as one book—of the emotive and active word *destruction* (*Zerschlagung*) with respect to the defeat of the German Reich, and the more neutral word *end* (*Ende*), with its lacking implication of agency or perpetration, for the willed extermination of the European Jews. Similarly, Goldhagen's construction of a supposedly persistent German mentality of “eliminationist antisemitism” conveyed a particular understanding that went way beyond the empirical evidence that he explored.

Related to the use of words is a second issue, that of empathy as a historical tool. The question of “with whom to empathize” seems to have quite explicitly exercised Hillgruber, and it is clear that his own choice—the soldiers engaged in the “historic fight against Bolshevism” on the Eastern front—related very closely to his sense of connection with his brother, who had been among those soldiers. Similarly, Goldhagen's evident empathy with the victims, inflecting his work's focus on the perpetrators, directly arose from his close relationship with his own father, Erich Goldhagen, a survivor of Nazi persecution. In both cases it is more a question of personal sympathy than professional empathy in the Weberian sense of “interpretive understanding.” The relative failure, in different ways, on the part of both Hillgruber and Goldhagen to explore the relevant empirical evidence on all sides comprehensively and analytically—particularly ironic in the case of Goldhagen's work on perpetrator mentalities—simply points up the significance of this aspect of historical research.

But it raises, too, the third aspect of significance here: the relative accessibility and appeal of historical accounts to a wider audience, and the resonance of scholarly works in the public sphere in changing contexts. Both sets of debates had wide impact. The *Historikerstreit* was indeed constituted and largely fought out in the public sphere, in newspaper articles and related publications, whereas Goldhagen's scholarly work (originating in a Harvard University PhD thesis) was—unlike many historical monographs—written in a highly readable style, which allowed it to gain a mass market and readily become the subject of televised debates and public discussion.

In some respects, Goldhagen's work broke with traditional disciplinary boundaries—using, for example, the novelistic technique of free indirect speech (what the Germans term *erlebte Rede*) when there was little or no empirical evidence to substantiate what was being conveyed in that way. It had, in consequence, a far wider readership than the drier academic style of one of his most notable interlocutors and critics, Hans Mommsen (also a key voice in the *Historikerstreit*), and not all lay readers would be able to identify the problematic issues with the construction of Goldhagen's account that were evident to specialists in the field.

To make a larger point: all historical knowledge is inevitably situated in a distinctive field of forces, defined in terms of three key relationships: those between dominant voices in a later present and selected issues rooted in a relevant past; between a particular historian and the elements of the past in which he or she is interested; and between the historian and the contemporary audiences for which he or she is writing.<sup>21</sup> Issues of generation and character, of personal connection or identification with selected aspects of the past, will color both the production and reception of historical accounts. The two controversies sharply highlighted patterns that can be observed more broadly. By the 1990s, the so-called Hitler Youth generation (including people on both sides of the *Historikerstreit*, notably again Hans Mommsen as a vocal opponent of the Nolte/Hillgruber group) was gradually giving way to—or at least increasingly being challenged by—younger scholars and younger audiences. Mommsen's own views and, in particular, his attempt to defend a structural-functionalist version of Third Reich history in which there was little place for the kinds of individual actions and ideology made so vivid in Goldhagen's writing, were, by then, far less well received by a wider public.<sup>22</sup>

The circumstances of reception also differed markedly. In the 1980s, a generation that had itself lived through the Third Reich continued to have a personal stake in the way the regime was interpreted and signified (even if many were supposedly blessed, as Kohl claimed to be, with the “grace of late birth”).<sup>23</sup> The Cold War was as yet unresolved, the fight against Communism continuing. The apparent breaking of taboos and expressions of desire to

<sup>21</sup> See Mary Fulbrook, “Writing Significant History: Reflections on a Relational Approach,” in *Erfahrung, Erinnerung, Geschichtsschreibung. Neue Perspektiven auf die deutschen Diktaturen* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2016), 167–96.

<sup>22</sup> [The terms intentionalism and functionalism refer to a historiographical debate about the origins of the Holocaust. So-called intentionalists believe that Hitler had long intended (hence the term) to murder the Jews, i.e., that he had had a master plan of sorts. Critics of this thesis argue that the origins of the final solution are to be found in bureaucratic procedures and developments closer to the ground. For an early overview of the debate, see Timothy Mason, “Intention and explanation. A current controversy about the interpretation of National Socialism,” in *Nazism, Fascism, and the Working Class: Essays by Tim Mason, ed. Jane Caplan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 212–30—Ed.]

<sup>23</sup> [Kohl first used this term in 1983; see “Späte Geburt,” *Der Spiegel*, Sept. 5, 1983—Ed.]

construct a past of which Germans could be proud was also part of a context in which heated debates were still being fought—from the courtroom to cultural representations—about “overcoming the past.” But, by the mid-1990s, a significant percentage of the, by then, adult population had little or no personal memory of the war; the questions of a younger generation tended to circle instead around the suspected guilt or hoped-for innocence of their parents and grandparents—as evidenced, for example, in public responses to the exhibition on the “Crimes of the Wehrmacht” that took place at much the same time as the Goldhagen controversy. Communism had collapsed, and many West Germans felt a desire to expiate national guilt through identification with victims. This was visible, too, in the heated debates at the time over the founding of a national Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe.<sup>24</sup>

**A. Dirk Moses:** The political domain, on the one hand, and the social scientific and humanistic domain, on the other, have always overlapped when truth claims about national traditions are made—in Germany as elsewhere. Such claims are particularly acute when academics make them in the public sphere—e.g., in newspapers—to influence public opinion. As we know, and as Wendy Lower suggests, academic-political disputes had saturated Germany well before the *Historikerstreit* and the Goldhagen debate. In *The Decline of the German Mandarins*, Fritz Ringer showed that German academics were already arguing about major political stakes in the nineteenth century.<sup>25</sup> Ten years before him, in 1959, Wolfgang Mommsen had laid bare Max Weber’s political advocacy in *Max Weber und die deutsche Politik*.<sup>26</sup> This book was itself an intervention in postwar German discourses—one thinks of the Fritz Fischer Controversy—by demonstrating how a liberal icon like Weber could have been implicated in chauvinist, frankly racist, politics.<sup>27</sup>

German professors were thus continuing a venerable practice of political advocacy during the 1980s and 1990s in the *Historikerstreit* and the Goldhagen debate. The former had lasting consequences because it brought debates that had been simmering in academic circles since the 1960s, if not before, to the surface. Those issues now had to be resolved because all players thought the future of the republic was at stake. Some think that the dispute was little more than a victory for the left-liberal camp in the republican *Kulturkampf*, yet the effects were more complicated than such a cultural/intellectual, civil-war perspective allows.<sup>28</sup> The Federal Republic’s founding “forty-fiver” generation—born in the 1920s and growing up in the Nazi regime—had to come to terms after the war with their varying experiences. They did so in two ways, and their political emotions were the key driver. Members of

<sup>24</sup>[On the heated debate over the memorial, see, e.g., Jan-Holger Kirsch, *Nationaler Mythos oder historische Trauer? Der Streit um ein zentrales “Holocaust-Mahnmahl” für die Berliner Republik* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2003)—Ed.]

<sup>25</sup>Fritz Ringer, *The Decline of the German Mandarins: The German Academic Community, 1890–1933* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969).

<sup>26</sup>Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *Max Weber and German Politics, 1890–1920*, trans. Michael Steinberg (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

<sup>27</sup>See, e.g., John A. Moses, *The Politics of Illusion: The Fischer Controversy in German Historiography* (London: Prior, 1975). [This historiographical controversy erupted in the early 1960s and was triggered by the works of the Hamburg historian Fritz Fischer, who assigned primary blame for the outbreak of World War I to Germany; he later linked this to an aggressive foreign policy supposedly adopted by German elites in an effort to distract attention from growing domestic demands for greater democracy—Ed.]

<sup>28</sup>C.f. Dworok, “*Historikerstreit*” und *Nationswerdung*.

one generational unit, whose members I have previously called “non-German Germans” (think of “non-Jewish Jews,” to invoke Isaac Deutscher’s term), were so disgusted by the Nazi regime and its crimes that they resolved to refound the republic on the universalist principles of the Enlightenment, which German Counter-Enlightenment traditions had traduced.<sup>29</sup> Jürgen Habermas, who was born in 1929 and was the unit’s most articulate spokesperson, called this ideal “postnational.” Germans in the other generational unit, whom I clumsily refer to as “German Germans,” rejected the stigma that the victorious Allies had imposed and laid the blame for Nazism on the Enlightenment, on the corrosive effects of modernity, and on Bolshevism (this was especially true of Nolte, who was born in 1923). Because German traditions were not uniquely compromised, they further argued, the theory of totalitarianism demonstrated the equivalence of evil in the twentieth century. These debates culminated (again) in the debate about the Holocaust memorial in Berlin and, of course, in Martin Walser’s notorious speech about the Holocaust as a “moral cudgel.”<sup>30</sup> No more should he and other Germans have to wear a perpetual hair shirt of inferiority, he declared. Many agreed with him then, as they do now. It is easy to forget how much talk there had been, since the 1980s, of German identity and collective emotions like guilt, shame, and pride.

Even so, the political class, including its center-right wing in the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), understood that the Atlantic consensus demanded adherence to the thesis that the Holocaust was uniquely evil. In fact, learning from the “non-German Germans,” its members gradually understood that positive political, even national, emotions like pride could be reengaged by proclaiming that Germany was the best at overcoming terrible pasts: “world champions” at *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Since there was no escaping the stigma imposed from without, it could be converted into stigmata by intense identification with the murdered Jews, even rendering the Holocaust into a sort of sacrificial drama in which the Jews died for the rebirth of a new, better Germany. I don’t think this subjectivity is widespread beyond the political class, but it influences education curricula and is clearly hegemonic in the public sphere.

To turn to more recent developments: the effusive, if naive, welcome of Syrian refugees by so many Germans in the summer of 2015 was a classic “non-German German” gesture that purported to apply the lessons of history and show other Europeans how to resist the ugly ethno-nationalism gripping Hungary and England at the time. By contrast, one can perhaps estimate how many “German-Germans” remain in the country by examining the debate within and about *Alternative für Deutschland* with regard to Syrian refugees—and Holocaust memory. The fact that Thuringian party leader Björn Höcke was expelled for his criticisms of Germany’s public Holocaust remembrance attests both to the powerful hold of this remembrance even on an anti-system party, as well as to the alienation of the party base from it: Höcke remained popular in the ranks.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup>A. Dirk Moses, *German Intellectuals and the Nazi Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); also see Isaac Deutscher, *The Non-Jewish Jew and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968).

<sup>30</sup>See, e.g., Thomas A. Kovach and Martin Walser, *The Burden of the Past: Martin Walser on German Identity: Texts, Contexts, Commentary* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2008); Frank Schirrmacher, *Die Walser-Bubis Debatte* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2010).

<sup>31</sup>Justin Huggler, “Alternative for Germany Party Expels Björn Höcke for Calling for End to National Guilt over Nazis,” *The Telegraph*, Feb. 13, 2017.

**Dworok:** What were the intentions of the participants in the *Historikerstreit*? To answer this question, Dirk Moses proposes categories that divide the opposed factions into “non-German Germans” (like Habermas and Wehler) and “German Germans” (like Hillgruber and Nolte). That is useful, but I do not agree with the idea that “German Germans” laid the blame for Nazism on the Enlightenment and should therefore be classified as anti-modern. I would prefer to put it this way: conservatives such as Nolte, Hillgruber, Hildebrandt, Fest, and Stürmer resolutely criticized historiographic approaches based on an ideological perception of the Enlightenment.<sup>32</sup> Conservatives indeed attacked narratives that intended to illustrate the negative outcome of the German *Sonderweg* or that emphasized a need to overcome the idea of nations and the nation-state. But when Hildebrandt called Habermas and his supporters “Verwalter der Aufklärung” (administrators of the Enlightenment), he was assuming that left-wing intellectuals and politicians would try to monopolize the ideas of the Enlightenment in order to delegitimize conservative approaches in general.<sup>33</sup> The members of the so-called *Viererbande* (gang of four) certainly did not deny modernity and the values of the Enlightenment more generally, but rather the idea of a teleologic course of history based on the values of equality and universalism.

This argument carries weight if one takes into account one of the most disturbing aspects of the *Historikerstreit*, namely, the neglect of Central Europe and the strong desire of East Germans, Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Hungarians, and others to achieve political freedom through national sovereignty. To a certain extent, it was Habermas’s faction in particular that ignored the fact that the concept of the nation-state was a means for the peoples of Central Europe to escape from political and economic oppression. As the Hungarian philosopher Mihály Vajda complained about Habermas in 1988, “The unreserved opening of the Federal Republic to the political culture of the West has, on the flipside, the unreserved opening of the GDR to the political culture of the East. And that concerns not only the GDR, but also all the countries of eastern Central Europe.”<sup>34</sup>

In the mid-1980s, no one could have anticipated, of course, what would transpire in 1989–1990. Still, it is obvious that leading left-wing intellectuals involved in the *Historikerstreit* simply denied the notion of freedom embraced by their neighbors in the East. By contrast, Hillgruber and Stürmer, but even Social Democrats like politician Egon Bahr and journalist Peter Bender, at least broached the idea of a united Germany existing within a peaceful and united Europe.<sup>35</sup> Which attitude conforms more to the values of the Enlightenment and the needs of modernity is open to debate.

**Olick:** Let’s step back for a moment and turn to a different issue raised by Wendy Lower and Dirk Moses. It is still necessary to make the case for singling out the *Historikerstreit*, and the Goldhagen affair ten years later, for commemoration from the long series of scandals in

<sup>32</sup>Dworok, “*Historikerstreit*” und *Nationswerdung*, 11.

<sup>33</sup>Klaus Hildebrandt, “Das Zeitalter der Tyrannen,” in “*Historikerstreit*,” 84–92.

<sup>34</sup>Mihály Vajda, “Mitteleuropa. Nostalgie oder Projekt?,” in *Der deutsche Historikerstreit aus mitteleuropäischer Sicht*, ed. Philippe Despoix und Barbara Hahn (Hamburg: Junius, 1989), 50.

<sup>35</sup>Andreas Hillgruber, “Zerbricht die Nation,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ)*, Nov. 27, 1976; Michael Stürmer, “Die deutsche Frage in der europäischen Geschichte,” in *Aspekte der deutschen Frage*, ed. Klaus Lange (Herford: Busse Seewald, 1986), 32–34; Egon Bahr, *In Verantwortung für Deutschland* (Bonn: Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, 1981); Peter Bender, *Das Ende des ideologischen Zeitalters. Die Europäisierung Europas* (Berlin: Severin und Siedler, 1981).

the history of German memory—for that history provides a rich series of commemorable scandals, as well as a continuous discourse among them. Within the debate itself and in commentary on it, many discussants made explicit reference to earlier controversies, perhaps most notably the debate about German responsibility for World War I (and arguably about German national character) begun by Fritz Fischer in 1961. And, in many ways, the Goldhagen controversy was seen—and perhaps even promoted—as a *Historikerstreit redux*, though this time for a more popular rather than scholarly audience (one is tempted here to quote Karl Marx on tragedy and farce).<sup>36</sup>

The point is that commemoration is always an ongoing dialogical process, with each moment responding to prior ones, whether explicitly or implicitly, consciously or not. No commemoration is an island in time, so to speak, and it is indeed a mistake to prize the historians' controversy from the extremely dense commemorative period in which it was but a single moment. Did this period begin with the alleged "Tendenzwende" of the late 1970s and early 1980s, which included the first controversy involving playwright Rainer Werner Fassbinder in 1976, the broadcast of the *Holocaust* miniseries in 1978–1979, the rise of Helmut Kohl and the CDU/CSU to power in 1982, the debate between Saul Friedländer and Martin Broszat about the *Historisierung* of Nazism, Reagan's visit to Bitburg, as well as Federal President Richard von Weizsäcker's famous speech of May 8, 1985, commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the end of World War II?<sup>37</sup> Or were these events merely late entries in a very long history of German memory?

It is, of course, easier to mark an event or controversy than it is to mark an entire epoch—to say nothing of overstating the clarity of epochal transitions: not all ruptures, after all, are as literal as November 9, 1989, the day the Berlin Wall fell. The point is that singling out particular events for commemoration entails not only a valuation of that event, but, in a sense, the forgetting of others as well. The history of German memory is rife with such forgettings, as it has continually forged and reformed the memory of its memory itself.

It is nevertheless clear that there is something tangible about the temporal structure of the *Historikerstreit* and the Goldhagen affair, and about the epochal transformations they shaped—and that shaped them. As Charles Maier noted many years ago, the historians' controversy was "a last reveille for those whose lives might have turned out otherwise."<sup>38</sup> And herein lies one crux of the difference between the *Historikerstreit* and the Goldhagen debate:

<sup>36</sup> [The reference here is, of course, to the famous opening passage of Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, first published in 1852. It is worth noting that both debates played out in front of popular and scholarly audiences—Ed.]

<sup>37</sup> [The allusions here are to 1) the controversy around Fassbinder's 1974 play *Der Müll, die Stadt und der Tod*: critics accused the playwright of antisemitism because of his negative portrayal of a Jewish real estate speculator (many thought that Fassbinder had modeled the character on Ignatz Bubis, who later chaired the Central Council of Jews in Germany from 1992 to 1999); and 2) an acclaimed speech given in May 1985, by Richard von Weizsäcker, the president of the Federal Republic at the time, to mark the fortieth anniversary of the end of World War II; the speech was widely praised at home and especially abroad for calling into question some of the more self-exculpatory characterizations of Germany's role in the war common in the Federal Republic up to that point; the full text of the speech can be found at [http://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Reden/2015/02/150202-RvW-Rede-8-Mai-1985.pdf;jsessionid=0D07C5D8261844AB0B9B1FACAD8D3F8F.2\\_cid371?\\_\\_blob=publicationFile](http://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Reden/2015/02/150202-RvW-Rede-8-Mai-1985.pdf;jsessionid=0D07C5D8261844AB0B9B1FACAD8D3F8F.2_cid371?__blob=publicationFile). For a recent analysis of the speech and its importance, see Cornelia Siebeck, "Einzug ins verheissene Land": Richard von Weizsäcker's Rede zum 40. Jahrestag des Kriegsendes am 8. Mai 1985," *Zeithistorische Forschungen* 12, no. 1 (2015): 161–69. The exchange between Broszat and Friedländer is reprinted in Baldwin, *Reworking the Past*, 64–134—Ed.]

<sup>38</sup> Maier, *Unmasterable Past*, 7.

whereas the participants in the *Historikerstreit* had existential “skin in the game,” neither Goldhagen nor his audiences did—at least not in the same way. In a similar regard to that in which the generation that came before Goldhagen’s main audience, sixty-eighters, were able to claim that they were finally “mastering” the past in the appropriate manner, they were, in part, only able to do so because it was not really their own pasts that they were mastering. Of course, the complexities of these self-righteous claims were demonstrated decades later when, for example, Günter Grass revealed his own suppressed memory of complicity, or when Jörg Friedrich, who had earlier written in outrage against what he called the “cold amnesty” for the Nazi perpetrators of the 1950s, made a much bigger name for himself by writing in even more vivid outrage against German victimization in Dresden and elsewhere.<sup>39</sup>

The enthusiasm of Goldhagen’s young supporters was surely based, in part, on the fact that Goldhagen was not an old man lecturing them, but was himself a young man trying to make sense of something incomprehensible—not only sociologically, as it might have been to the older generations whose members had lived through it, but historically to those for whom the Nazi period was just that, history, and which thereby posed different challenges. The pathos of the *Tätergeneration* (perpetrator generation) and of their rebellious children thus contrasted with the bathos of their grandchildren, whose moral engagement can produce a kind of pride in repentance (*Sühnestolz*). With respect to that pride, these generational considerations cannot be separated from the changed political context in which, in the decades since 1989, a widespread “politics of regret” has taken hold.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, it has been easy to forget—or misconstrue—the extent to which even extreme alternatives have persisted in the Federal Republic of Germany. This is why it is somewhat misleading to highlight the Fritz Fischer controversy as the most salient predecessor to the *Historikerstreit*. It is also why it is misleading to take *The Black Book of Communism* as its most significant successor.<sup>41</sup> As important as these comparisons are, it is the moral question of how to respond to one’s own crimes—whether unique or comparable—that is more important.

Indeed, if one must identify models for and from the *Historikerstreit*, Karl Jaspers is a much more relevant intellectual spirit, and the debate between Martin Walser and Ignaz Bubis a much clearer after-image, than either Fischer or the *Black Book*. That Jaspers was a key referent for Jürgen Habermas is well documented. But Jaspers’s position on the need to acknowledge shame for Germany to avoid becoming a “pariah nation” (itself a complex turn of phrase, given that this was the term Max Weber had used to refer to the Jews) was

<sup>39</sup>[Günter Grass revealed in the summer of 2006, shortly before the publication of his memoir, *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*, that he had been a member of the *Waffen-SS* during World War II; see “Ich war Mitglied der *Waffen-SS*,” *FAZ*, Aug. 11, 2006. In the mid-1980s, the independent historian and publicist Jörg Friedrich published a best-selling study about denazification, *Die kalte Amnestie: NS-Täter in der Bundesrepublik* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer Taschenbuch, 1984); his searing condemnation two decades later of the aerial bombing of Germany as an instance of mass murder became a cause célèbre; see *Der Brand: Deutschland im Bombenkrieg 1940–1945* (Berlin: Propyläen, 2002)—Ed.]

<sup>40</sup>Jeffrey K. Olick, *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>41</sup>Stéphane Courtois et al., eds., *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*, trans. Jonathan Murphy and Mark Kramer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). [This compendium, which originally appeared in France in 1997 as *Le Livre noir du communisme: Crimes, terreur, répression*, documents the history of repression under Communist regimes, which, the authors claim, were responsible for the deaths of almost one hundred million people, i.e., more than any other type of political movement or system—Ed.]



forged in opposition to—and was vigorously rejected by—other figures in the postwar discourse, most prominently Carl Schmitt, Martin Heidegger, and Ernst Jünger.<sup>42</sup> The persistent power of that alternative view has not, in my view, received as much attention as it deserves. One example is how Schmitt put it in his diaries: “If you want to make a confession, go find a priest and do it there.”<sup>43</sup> An echo of this can be seen in the Walser–Bubis debate, in which Walser maintained that a key problem of the culture of guilt was its very publicness. The demand for more public rituals of repentance as a yardstick of political suitability was, he infamously suggested, a “moral cudgel.”

While the “politics of regret” has seemed dominant in recent years—manifest, for instance, at a 2000 conference in Stockholm, where leaders of nations *not* complicit in the Holocaust sought to demonstrate their righteousness by assuming a guilt that was not truly theirs—that dominance has never been total. As Jan-Werner Mueller has written, “Two cultures opposed each other in early postwar Germany. On the one side, there was an official public culture of guilt .... On the other side stood an obstinate culture of silence, in which honor was preserved by taboos ...”<sup>44</sup> But this was true not only of the early postwar period, up to and following the *Historikerstreit*. In this light, Nolte’s claim during that debate to have been breaking a taboo was not all that novel, nor was the line of continuity in his thought from that of perhaps the greatest avatar of silence, Martin Heidegger. By the same token, Habermas’s claim that something indisputable was now under attack was not completely accurate: the debate was merely one instantiation of a difference that had underlain the political culture of the Federal Republic of Germany for its entire history, from the time of Jaspers, and that arguably still does.

***Leaving aside his more controversial claims that sparked the controversy, Ernst Nolte advanced during the Historikerstreit what some consider to be a stimulating concept: the idea of a “European Civil War” as an analytical narrative. What is your take on this comparative, transnational concept, seen against the backdrop of the twentieth century as a whole—especially given the revelations brought to light by Stephane Courtois’s Black Book of Communism and other research on mass murder under authoritarian states? More generally, did the debate contribute to a questioning of the dominant, “normative” narrative of the West—if such a thing exists?***

**Dworok:** Is there a connection between the *Historikerstreit* and the development of comparative and transnational approaches to the history of dictatorship and mass murder? The answer is ambivalent. Ernst Nolte was harshly attacked for his hyperthesis of a “causal nexus” between Bolshevik mass murders (during the revolution, the civil war, and the so-called *Holodomor* in Ukraine) and the Holocaust. In the aftermath of the quarrel, historians like Tony Judt and Eric Hobsbawm argued that members of the scholarly community should

<sup>42</sup>[Max Weber referred to Jews as a “pariah people” in *Ancient Judaism*, trans. and ed. Hans H. Gerth and Don Martindale (New York: Free Press, 1952)—Ed.]

<sup>43</sup>Quoted in Jeffrey K. Olick, *In the House of the Hangman: The Agonies of German Defeat, 1943–1949* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 311.

<sup>44</sup>Quoted in *ibid.*, 274; also see *The Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust: A Conference on Education, Remembrance and Research, Stockholm, Sweden, 26–28 January 2000—Proceedings* (Stockholm: Svensk Information, 2000).

no longer cite Nolte.<sup>45</sup> Be that as it may, Nolte's thesis about a "European Civil War" was part of the comeback that studies on totalitarianism enjoyed; this field of research regained importance in the 1990s, underscored by the appearance of Courtois's *Black Book of Communism* in 1997. Still, Nolte's studies were hardly considered in comparative surveys of mass murder and genocide.<sup>46</sup> This is interesting, given that Nolte had underlined both, namely, the comparative aspects of totalitarian rule, as well as the "scientific" comparability of Bolshevik and National Socialist mass murders. One reason for his subsequent isolation might be that Nolte did not take a black-and-white approach to Bolshevism, National Socialism, and the West, but instead considered Bolshevik Russia, Fascist Germany, and liberal Western states such as the United States and Great Britain as protagonists in a civil war of ideologies—moreover, as protagonists who had national motives *and*, as Nolte put it, historical rights. This approach was apparently regarded as a provocation to the dominant narrative of the West, which, among other reasons, such as Nolte's questionable terminology and his interpretation of the Holocaust, is why it met with so much scorn.

**Moses:** It is great pity that the more interesting ideas in Nolte's work were overshadowed by his apologetic intentions. That said, those ideas were not his alone. Zygmunt Bauman was making similar arguments about modernity and the Holocaust at the time, and the European Civil War analytic was widespread.<sup>47</sup> Most recently, Enzo Traverso has used it in his 2016 book, *Fire and Blood: The European Civil War, 1914–1945*.

I am more interested in whether the debate contributed to a questioning of the dominant, normative narrative of the West. If that narrative is taken to mean a liberal understanding about German deviance from a positive, Western modernization project, then the answer is that the *Historikerstreit* compounded it. Even if the *Sonderweg* debate in German historiography largely discredited among professional historians the notion of unique German deviance, the proposition has nevertheless become a foundational identity of the European Union—not to mention, as Dan Diner has observed, of the German political class. The issue is what one makes of this. Diner appears to believe that the skepticism of many non-Europeans about the Holocaust's monumental status in Western memory culture demonstrates their blindness to this truth because of resentments about Western colonialism.<sup>48</sup>

I would be more cautious about dismissing the epistemological vantage point of people who continued to chafe under Western colonial rule after the war. I recently coedited a book about the violence that the Dutch unleashed to win back their former East Indies possessions from Indonesian nationalists, whom they accused of fascism for flirting with the Japanese during the war. Having suffered under German occupation, the young Dutch men who signed up to fight for the imperial cause in Indonesia could not imagine that they themselves would engage in counterinsurgency tactics that Indonesians would regard as fascist.<sup>49</sup> And, as

<sup>45</sup>François Furet, "Brief an Ernst Nolte," in Ernst Nolte, *Der europäische Bürgerkrieg 1917–1945. Bolschewismus und Nationalsozialismus* (Munich: Herbig, 1997), 548.

<sup>46</sup>See, e.g., Ben Kiernan, *Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Dafur* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).

<sup>47</sup>Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

<sup>48</sup>Dan Diner, *Gegenläufige Gedächtnisse: Über Geltung und Wirkung des Holocaust* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007).

<sup>49</sup>A. Dirk Moses and Bart Luttikhuis, eds., *Colonial Counterinsurgency and Mass Violence: The Dutch Empire in Indonesia* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014).

others have reminded us, critics made comparisons at the time between the French and the Gestapo in response to the former's repression of the Algerian independence movement in the 1950s.<sup>50</sup>

The most current—and troubling—effect of this narrative reinscription is the German political class' reluctance to recognize the ruthless crushing of the Herero-Nama revolt in German Southwest Africa between 1904 and 1907 as genocide. As Jürgen Zimmerer has observed, the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has a point when he accuses the German parliament of hypocrisy for recognizing the Armenian genocide—but not the one committed by imperial Germany in Africa.<sup>51</sup> The German state is currently locked in apparently fruitless negotiations with the Namibian state, while refusing to deal directly with Herero groups who do not feel that their interests are being adequately represented. They have consequently launched their own legal action against Germany in the courts of New York. In a particularly unfortunate incident, the German ambassador in Namibia told Herero delegates that, while he regretted what had occurred in the past, he could not place African victims of Germans on the same plane as Jewish ones. As might be expected, this statement was interpreted as suggesting that African lives were worth less than European ones.<sup>52</sup> If this is the outcome to which Germany's vaunted *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* has come, then it is time to question its varied emotional appeals and functions.

**Lower:** The historians' debate reminds us that historical analysis is almost always comparative, and that comparisons of genocide can easily serve political and ideological agendas. Historians try to discern uniqueness as well as parallels by comparing specific events and common phenomena across time and space. There are various methods of comparative analysis; yet, it is ultimately up to the historian, of course, to choose what subjects to compare, and to what end. In the historiography of the Holocaust and in public discourse first in Germany and now across post-Soviet Europe, we have seen how ill-conceived historical comparisons about the Holocaust have been deployed to promote false moral equivalencies, and a political culture of national pride or victimization. In Poland, Hungary, Ukraine, and elsewhere in Europe, scholars who refuse to promote the national agenda by exposing the shameful history of collaboration have been ostracized and threatened.

**Evans:** I'm not sure what the "dominant, 'normative' narrative of the West" is or was; historians have always been divided on most aspects of the past, including how to categorize the mass murders committed in the name of Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin.<sup>53</sup> The concept of a

<sup>50</sup>See, e.g., William B. Cohen, "The Algerian War and the Revision of France's Overseas Mission," *French Colonial History* 4 (2003): 228.

<sup>51</sup>Jürgen Zimmerer, "Erdogan hat einen Nerv getroffen," *Frankfurter Rundschau*, June 24, 2016.

<sup>52</sup>See Ida Hoffmann, Media Conference Statement on Nama-Herero Genocide (<http://genocide-namibia.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/PRESS-RELEASE-NOV-2016.pdf>); Deutsche Botschaft Windhuk, Presseerklärung in englischer Sprache: Meeting of the German Special Envoy, Mr. Ruprecht Polenz, with the Chairperson of the "Nama Genocide Technical Committee," the honorable Mrs. Ida Hoffmann (<http://www.windhuk.diplo.de/Vertretung/windhuk/de/03/pr-treffen-polenz-hoffmann-en.html>); "Genocide Meeting Turns Ugly," *New Era*, Nov. 25, 2016 (<https://www.newera.com.na/2016/11/25/genocide-meeting-turns-ugly>).

<sup>53</sup>[For a discussion of this conceptual narrative, especially in the German context, see the essays in Riccardo Bavaj and Martina Steber, eds., *Germany and "The West": The History of a Modern Concept* (New York: Berghahn, 2017)—Ed.]

“European civil war” is an absurdity: a civil war takes place by definition within a state, while both World War I and World War II were wars between states. Blurring the distinction between the two just leads to confusion and misunderstanding. Beyond this, the notion of the period 1914–1945 as a “Thirty Years War of the Twentieth Century” is equally obfuscating: there were twenty years of general peace in Europe between the two wars, and there were huge differences between the two wars as well—including, for example, the much greater victimization of civilians in World War II, the far more prominent role of ideology in that conflict, the hugely increased level of death and destruction, and so on. Thinking of the two world wars as a single conflict just makes it more difficult to unravel the tangled web of causal (and other) connections between them. Finally, as many historians have pointed out, there were vast differences between the racially driven genocide of European Jews by the Nazis, and the socio-politically grounded mass murders perpetrated by the Soviet Union under Stalin. Attempts to equate the two are motivated by politics, not by a concern to understand them.

**Fulbrook:** I agree that the notion of a “dominant, ‘normative’ narrative of the West” is deeply problematic. Nor was Nolte by any means original in suggesting a “comparative, transnational” approach—a method that lies at the heart of historical work, whether or not historians make this explicit. Pointing to instability in the interwar European state system, the clash of competing ideologies, and the prevalence of political violence beyond (and contesting) state borders, is central to any understanding of this period, as has been evident for decades. But conceptually, smaller-scale concepts—“collective violence,” for a start—will take us a great deal further than a blanket label with little analytic precision.

*Let’s turn to a different topic, then. One criticism of the Goldhagen thesis at the time was that its claims would fail to advance the research agenda in any substantive way. In fact, one could argue that it has indeed done just that—for instance, in the greater attention given over the past two decades to “ordinary Täter (perpetrators)” and their motivations. In what ways, if at all, have the Historikerstreit and the Goldhagen debate enriched our research by giving rise to new questions or approaches?*

**Lower:** Although Goldhagen’s book on the Holocaust appeared in a different, more fertile context than the *Historikerstreit* did—namely, one in which Holocaust studies were on the rise—it was also checked for its provocative stance, and, according to his critics, egregious assertions. German exceptionalism was again at stake as a national story. The debate about uniqueness took on an added dimension. Not only did Germany’s “special path” of history diverge from the Western, liberal, democratic model into fascism, but it also led to the Holocaust, a unique case of genocide in its scale and scope. Goldhagen argued for a negative German exceptionalism in the form of a unique, eliminationist antisemitism rooted in medieval anti-Judaism but most evident at the start of the nineteenth century. During the Nazi era, Goldhagen concluded, “the vast majority of ordinary Germans during the Nazi period were prepared to kill Jews.”<sup>54</sup> In 1939, the population of ordinary adult Germans (men and women)

<sup>54</sup>Daniel J. Goldhagen, Christopher R. Browning, and Leon Wieseltier, *The “Willing Executioners”/“Ordinary Men” Debate* (Washington, DC: Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies and the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1996), 6.

was about eighty million (not including ethnic Germans abroad). Were some forty million prepared to kill Jews? (Goldhagen refers to ordinary Germans without clear distinctions between men and women.) His conclusion is based on one case study of Order Police Battalion 101, one of the many order police battalions whose approximately twelve thousand men were deployed in the Eastern territories. It was a faulty argument—not because members of Order Police Battalion 101 were not documented mass murderers. Rather, as Christopher Browning had shown in his earlier study, this cohort was of an older generation and not fully “Nazified,” which meant that its members were neither socially nor ideologically predisposed to become mass murderers prior to their arrival in wartime Poland. Browning had convincingly concluded that the men in the unit were “ordinary” Germans who committed extraordinary crimes. This chilling discovery pointed to the capacity of all men, and not exclusively aberrant Germans, to commit murder under certain circumstances and pressures.<sup>55</sup>

Despite its empirical flaws, Goldhagen’s study was popular and resonated in Germany with a new generation of Holocaust researchers who had been discouraged from working in the field and were sometimes even maligned in German academia.<sup>56</sup> His book was a slap in the face, a condemnation of ordinary Germans, whom it depicted as zealous, blood-thirsty antisemites. As genocidaire, he stripped them of their “civilized” European status by comparing them to the Khmer Rouge and to the Hutus. There was no “twisted road” to Auschwitz.<sup>57</sup> Goldhagen instead presented Germany’s special path as a straight dirt road leading to the mass shooting pits in Nazi-occupied Poland.

In any event, the decade that spanned the start of the *Historikerstreit* in 1986 and the appearance of Daniel Goldhagen’s book *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* in 1996 witnessed a steep rise in popular and academic discourse about the Holocaust, and, with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, a dramatic shift in the political landscape. The boom in Holocaust research was precipitated by the post-Soviet explosion in archival access, coupled with the emergence of a new generation of scholars in the 1990s. Perhaps most striking, in retrospect, is that the *Historikerstreit* predated the establishment of “Holocaust studies” in Germany. Only in the past few years has a center for Holocaust studies been established there, based at the Institute for Contemporary Studies in Munich.<sup>58</sup> One scholar of the 1990s generation, Sybille Steinbacher, recently took up the first chair in Holocaust studies at the University of Frankfurt, one that is associated with the Fritz Bauer Institute. As Steinbacher has observed, in the decades following World War II, prosecutors had been much more knowledgeable about the details of the Holocaust than historians were.<sup>59</sup> Outside Germany, the field emerged in the 1980s and focused on perpetrator studies (as an outgrowth of scholarship on Nazi Germany). It was this community of scholars, led by Browning, Raul Hilberg,

<sup>55</sup>Browning, *Ordinary Men*. In an expanded twenty-fifth anniversary edition, which appeared in 2017, Browning’s further substantiates the unit’s extreme rate of killing by comparing it to other battalions that have been studied since 1992.

<sup>56</sup>See Dieter Pohl, “Die Holocaust-Forschung und Goldhagens Thesen,” *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 45, no. 1 (1997): 1–48.

<sup>57</sup>[This is a reference to Karl A. Schleunes, *The Twisted Road to Auschwitz: Nazi Policy Toward German Jews 1933–1939* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970)—Ed.]

<sup>58</sup>For more information, see <http://www.ifz-muenchen.de/aktuelles/themen/zentrum-fuer-holocaust-studien/>.

<sup>59</sup>Hannes Hintermeier and Jürgen Kaube, “Wie war der Massenmord überhaupt möglich? Die Historikerin Sybille Steinbacher übernimmt die erste Holocaust-Professur und die Leitung des Fritz-Bauer Instituts. Ein Gespräch über die Lage des Faches,” *FAZ*, May 3, 2017.

Richard Breitman, and, in Germany, Hans-Heinrich Wilhelm, Eberhard Jäckel, and Götz Aly, among others, which Goldhagen sought to challenge.<sup>60</sup>

In retrospect, we can connect some dots from the *Historikerstreit* to the popular response to Goldhagen's work as features of Germany's ongoing confrontation with its dark past. Though Goldhagen did not write his book in response to the *Historikerstreit*, he composed it to counter a trend in the historiography that had minimized ideology. Placing antisemitism at the center of his thesis as a monocausal explanation—or at least as the core cause from which other motives and actions sprang (greed, peer pressure, sadism)—was an oversimplification, as well as an important corrective. Previous studies had focused on the “final solution” and on German decision-making at the highest echelons. They had gone too far in portraying the killers as either aberrant Nazis (i.e., not ordinary Germans), or as modern automatons who did not bloody their hands (Hannah Arendt's “banality of evil”). Goldhagen took issue with these bland, Eurocentric portraits. Moreover, even as social history made inroads into the field, few historians integrated the Jews as a subject of study. Displaying a distinct lack of sensitivity, many presented them as death tolls, not as diverse individuals and communities.

“Perpetrator studies” took off in the 1990s (followed by “victim studies” in the early twenty-first century), not because of Goldhagen but because of others who had pioneered the field in the 1980s, and whose graduate students were also active in the archives, alongside Goldhagen, in the early 1990s. Scholars (including me) wrote regional studies on the former Soviet Union that bridged the functionalist-intentionalist divide by stressing multicausality, the importance of local settings, as well as non-German collaborators.<sup>61</sup> To return to a point made earlier by Mary Fulbrook: the historians' debate and the Goldhagen affair echo not so much as methodological breakthroughs or as theses that have empirically stood the test of time, but as examples of what one should *not* do as a historian. Historical reconstructions and interpretations are inherently multifaceted and incomplete. There are no straight or single paths in explanatory theories of genocide—not in the biography of one perpetrator, in the actions of one killing unit, or in the history of one country. No scholar in his or her lifetime will be able to write a complete history of the Holocaust or explain it in its entirety. One would have to start by acquiring more than a dozen European languages. The USHMM, which actively collects material in fifty-eight countries, has in its archives more than two hundred million pages of documents, more than fifty thousand oral histories, some twenty thousand artifacts, and countless photographs. Just last year, the French Ministry of Defense declassified its vast holdings on German war criminals and French collaborators who have been investigated and tried—a move that may very well shift the theme of collaboration back to France, where it all arguably started. Scholarly interaction involving an exchange of materials and ideas, as well as collaborative work, is necessary for grasping the entirety of the Holocaust as it occurred and was experienced across Europe, and indeed across the globe. We each deal with facets of the phenomenon that throw light on yet other features of what happened, and that, in some ways, reflect back on what it means to

<sup>60</sup>On the emergence of Holocaust studies from Nazi Germany studies, see Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation*, 4th edition (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

<sup>61</sup>For a sampling of earlier regional studies, see Ulrich Herbert, ed., *National Socialist Extermination Policies: Contemporary German Perspectives and Controversies* (New York: Berghahn, 2000). Also see Wendy Lower, *Nazi Empire-Building and the Holocaust in Ukraine* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

us today. Besides collegiality, research on the Holocaust and genocide studies more broadly requires infrastructural investment and support—such as the German commitment to funding memorials, the new center in Munich, and the chair at the University of Frankfurt.

**Snyder:** The Goldhagen debate was mostly about the possibility of a kind of atavistic, centuries-old German antisemitism as the cause of events that took place in the course of three years on lands beyond prewar Germany. Most scholars rejected that argument—rightly, I think. In a sense, Goldhagen was repeating the basic nationalist error of the *Historikerstreit* that he believed he was transcending: all the causality was somehow, in some tortured way, located within an isolated, “vertical” German national history. That said, in the book and very vividly in the subsequent discussions, Goldhagen purposefully emphasized mass murder beyond the death facilities. He did so in order to claim that people who could organize shooting actions and death marches must have done so because of antisemitism, an argument that is simplistic and unconvincing. But he did succeed in moving what we now call “the Holocaust by bullets” (i.e., the mass killings initiated by the so-called *Einsatzgruppen*) away from the margins and toward the center of the discussion. This proved to be important, later on, for scholars who actually sought to make sense of the Holocaust by looking at its development in chronological order, and by taking the killings that began in 1941 in the East not simply as part of a plan (which they were not) or as a prelude to something more familiar (which is a negative teleology), but as the thing that itself needed to be explained. These were mostly German scholars who were very young at the time of the *Historikerstreit*, and who accepted its moral urgency while rejecting its national finality.

The *Historikerstreit* had, by contrast, two contradictory consequences. On the one hand, it spread the conviction, for the most part, that the Holocaust had been researched and understood, which was simply not the case. It confirmed the drowsy assumption of most historians in—and of—Germany that understanding the murder of the Jews could be achieved within available frameworks of German national history and on the basis of German sources, which is also simply not the case. When, in 1989, the lands where the Holocaust took place were suddenly open to research, no historian of the Holocaust stopped to learn any of the relevant languages—of the vast majority of the victims, of the vast majority of the witnesses, and of the non-German perpetrators. This includes Yiddish, and I have tried to explain the consequences of this in a longer article entitled “Commemorative Causality.”<sup>62</sup>

On the other hand, that handful of younger German historians, the ones who accepted the moral urgency but saw the need for greater methodological profundity, undertook studies that both queried German sources in new ways and placed important decisions and precedents beyond the bounds of prewar Germany. In very rough terms (and I would not at all insist on imposing this quick formulation on colleagues who think in other terms), they understood that the discovery of any synthesis between the otherwise sterile positions of “intentionalism” and “functionalism” would involve conducting research beyond Germany. This began the serious debates that are still underway about the relationship between chronology and causality, between Germans and those whom they encountered, as well as between the roles played by resources and ideology.

<sup>62</sup>Timothy Snyder, “Commemorative Causality,” *Eurozine*, June 6, 2013 (<http://www.eurozine.com/commemorative-causality/>).

Thanks to these exceptional individuals, the level of research on and argument about the Holocaust is unmistakably higher since the mid-1990s than that carried out in the generation before the *Historikerstreit*. The best histories of the Holocaust are being written now; in my opinion, the current standard is Christoph Dieckmann's two-volume study of the German occupation of Lithuania, which addresses—using a staggeringly broad reading of primary sources in the relevant languages—the classic debates of the 1970s and 1980s, as well as the new arguments about resources and the course of the war that arose in the 1990s and 2000s.<sup>63</sup>

In terms of historiographical approach, the *Historikerstreit* debate was, then, conservative. In general, historians took for granted that existing approaches to the history of Nazi Germany were adequate (and it was only a matter of choosing which one); that those approaches were also adequate for the Holocaust; and, implicitly, that there was not much to be gained from conducting research in the countries where the Holocaust had taken place, or from learning the languages of those countries. Saul Friedländer argued that including Jewish perspectives was a prerequisite for the kind of discussion that the *Historikerstreit* purported to be, and I believe that his position was entirely correct.<sup>64</sup> This might have led to the argument that understanding the languages spoken by the victims (beyond German, the language of only 3 percent) was necessary, but it did not.

The linguistic isolation of the German participants generates an insular sense that the relevant perspectives have already been assimilated, when that has not been the case. Nolte made matters worse by making a series of implausible claims about East European and Soviet history without access to the relevant sources, thereby providing an excuse for those who, for other reasons (usually of convenience masking itself as conviction), found transnational arguments taboo. It is indeed the case that the history of National Socialism and the Holocaust makes no sense without, for example, considering the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of August 1939; but Nolte made it harder rather than easier for German historians to acknowledge such things.

All that said, it is still worth mentioning Raul Hilberg. Although his overall institutional argument about the causes and course of the Holocaust cannot be sustained in light of what we now know, Hilberg suggested, in one place or another in his pioneering synthetic work, almost all the later interpretive arguments, both before and after the *Historikerstreit*.<sup>65</sup> Hilberg—not the *Historikerstreit*—is the standard for substantive argument based upon available sources, and Dieckmann's work meets that standard. Both books are too little read and, sadly, Dieckmann's remains untranslated.

**Lower:** The Europeanization of Holocaust studies, above all its “spatial turn,” has indeed been an important recent trend that challenges scholars to become transnational comparativists. It entails paradigm shifts that disrupt ethno-national narratives, the learning of multiple languages and cultures, and the application of interdisciplinary methodologies (e.g.,

<sup>63</sup>Christoph Dieckmann, *Deutsche Besatzungspolitik in Litauen 1941–1944* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2011). Also see the review of this and related titles in Timothy Snyder, “Hitler's Logical Holocaust,” *New York Review of Books*, Dec. 20, 2012 (<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2012/12/20/hitlers-logical-holocaust/>).

<sup>64</sup>Saul Friedländer, “Some Reflections on the Historicization of National Socialism,” in Baldwin, *Reworking the Past*, 88–101.

<sup>65</sup>Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 3 vols. (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985).



anthropological and forensic ones). It also forces a rethinking of agency and causality as a complicated dynamic imperial structure of occupier and occupied. Comparative analysis has also broken down typologies of victims and perpetrators, which have expanded to include non-Jews and non-Germans. The camps and sites of detention across Europe numbered in the tens of thousands, and among them were hundreds established by non-Germans, leading to comparisons of national infrastructures of persecution in Romania, Hungary, Croatia, Slovakia, and Italy. In short, as research on the Holocaust grows, it becomes more comparative but also more fragmented. No single explanation suffices—be it antisemitism, Nazi colonialism, Nazi culture, Adolf Hitler, or the idea of “working toward the Führer.” There were many causes and outcomes, all of which are still being researched, identified, explained, and compared.

**Evans:** The Goldhagen debate turned out, in the end, to be more fruitful than the *Historikerstreit*, though, at the time, I did not think it would. The thesis that the entire German people supported the crimes of the Third Reich fueled a great deal of research in the area of coercion (which it became fashionable not to mention) and consent (which, it was increasingly argued, the German people gave freely to Hitler). The reality of the *Volksgemeinschaft* (“people’s community”) became almost a dogma. Much of the new work, particularly in specific areas (e.g., work on the place of the concentration camps in local communities), was important and pioneering. But there was also a drastic underestimation of the degree of coercion under which people in Nazi Germany had to live. It was, after all, a brutal and murderous dictatorship in which basic civil rights did not exist, and it’s important to remember that.<sup>66</sup>

**Dworok:** Both controversies have enriched historical research. The theses put forth by Nolte and Goldhagen were rejected, of course, but they provided important impulses for new approaches. After all, it is not only acceptance that spurs research, but also opposition. As a result, the number of studies on the Holocaust, particularly on victims and perpetrators, has increased significantly. Terms such as *uniqueness*, *causal nexus*, and *Tätervolk* certainly stimulated historians to study further National Socialist mass murder and to examine how (many) and why Germans participated. Moreover, one could argue that the *Historikerstreit* and the Goldhagen debate contributed to the further development of the history of memory, as Jeffrey Olick suggests in this forum. In Germany, in any event, the terms *Erinnerungskultur* and *politische Kultur* remain closely connected to the *Historikerstreit*—not least because one of its consequences was that the commemoration of Auschwitz became a kind of civic duty (a way of critically commemorating the past promoted by leading members of the executive and legislative branches, as well as by educational institutions) in the Federal Republic.

**Fulbrook:** I think the significance of both was more in the wider methodological issues they raised than in the extent to which they raised new substantive questions. As Wendy Lower

<sup>66</sup> [For the latest debates and research on the so-called people’s community, see, e.g., Frank Bajohr and Michael Wildt, eds., *Volksgemeinschaft. Neue Forschungen zur Gesellschaft des Nationalsozialismus* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer Taschenbuch, 2009); on the issue of coercion and consent, see Richard J. Evans’s *Raleigh Lecture on History, “Coercion and Consent in Nazi Germany,”* printed in *British Academy Review* 10 (2007): 26–27 (<https://www.britac.ac.uk/sites/default/files/09-evans.pdf>); also see Robert Gellately, *Backing Hitler: Coercion and Consent in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001)—Ed.]

notes, research on “ordinary perpetrators” was already well underway before the publication of Goldhagen’s book—notably, of course, in the form of Browning’s prior work on Police Battalion 101, which Goldhagen explicitly sought to criticize. In some respects, Goldhagen’s emphases on ideology and a modified form of “collective guilt” were far from new, harking back to early postwar interpretations of the role of Germans in National Socialism. More broadly, perpetrator research had already begun to complement—rather than move away from—the other early concerns with top-level perpetrators (“Hitler-and-his-henchmen”) and with repressive institutions or organizations (such as the SS and Gestapo) that had characterized the historiography of previous decades.

Since the 1990s, research on “ordinary perpetrators” has increasingly focused on social processes and contexts—with debates over, for example, brutalization in wartime, peer-group pressures, role behaviors in organizations, as well as the distinctive socialization of a key generation under Nazism. None of this was attributable to or directly stimulated by the Goldhagen thesis about a mentality alleged to persist across centuries—regardless of whether there was any empirical evidence in support of it. (As even Goldhagen conceded, there was not—at least not during the decades of the eighteenth century when, he claims, his reified mentality of eliminationist antisemitism supposedly lay “dormant.”) Nor, in my view, did the *Historikerstreit* really give rise to new substantive questions or approaches.

In terms of the broader lessons deriving from the *Historikerstreit* and the Goldhagen debate, I would say, returning to my earlier remarks, that three points are significant. First, they raise to attention the significance of empathy or interpretive understanding as a historical tool—but this needs to be distinguished sharply from sympathy arising from personal connections or from identification with one side or another in the field of forces about which the historian is writing, as well as the context in which they are writing. Second, the importance of accessibility and readability becomes very clear in these debates—but only if the historian does not stray too far from what can be empirically accessed or is well supported in the available evidence. Finally, they underline the need not only to understand and convey historical experiences, but also to situate the material within an adequate, broader, historical, and explanatory context. The very weaknesses of the key protagonists in each debate helped define more sharply the principal features of *good* historical writing.

**Moses:** Then as now, I was struck by the political emotions that the Goldhagen debate provoked in the United States and in Germany. “Non-German Germans” identified with Goldhagen, who articulated the narrative of exceptional German barbarism with shocking imagery. As Ulrich Herbert noted soon after, Goldhagen’s study undoubtedly drew scholarly and public attention to everyday Nazi perpetrators, their motivations, and the role of antisemitism. Whatever its many flaws—Paul Roth has rebutted Goldhagen’s social psychological apparatus, for instance—the book’s effects were thus positive.<sup>67</sup> Also significant at the time, of course, was the equally intense debate about the *Wehrmachtsausstellung* on the “war of extermination” on the Eastern front.<sup>68</sup> It would be excessive, therefore, to attribute the turn to perpetrator history to Goldhagen alone. After all, as Wendy Lower and Mary

<sup>67</sup> Herbert, *National Socialist Extermination Policies*; Paul Roth, “Hearts of Darkness: ‘Perpetrator History’ and Why There is No Why,” *History of the Human Sciences* 17, no. 2/3 (2004): 211–51.

<sup>68</sup> Hannes Heer and Klaus Naumann, eds., *War of Extermination: The German Military in World War II* (New York: Berghahn, 2000).

Fulbrook rightly note, Browning had written a justly famous study on a German police battalion before Goldhagen. At any rate, a major trend in the literature has since been to attend to the voices and experiences of victims—even though Goldhagen’s book invoked victims to condemn perpetrators, not to study them in their own right.

**Olick:** In 1997, a mere eleven years after the *Historikerstreit* itself but eight years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Charles Maier declared in a new preface to *The Unmasterable Past*, his 1988 intellectual history of the debate, that the historians’ dispute already seemed to have been a long time ago, and that it belonged to a past that hardly reached into the present anymore.<sup>69</sup> Given the epochal nature of the transformations of 1989, one might be tempted to make the case, especially thirty rather than eleven years on, that the *Historikerstreit* is indeed of only antiquarian interest: as important a moment as it might have been in the history of West Germany, that state no longer exists, and for many today—even intellectuals and politicians—the memory-political challenges of the 1980s are but a distant and irrelevant memory. Yet, Maier clearly implies, a view of the *Historikerstreit* as relevant only—or not even—to professional historians may perhaps be understandable, but it was clearly wrong.

That is still true after another twenty years have passed. In the first place, even if the carrier of the memory being debated ceased to exist, or continued on under only radically different circumstances, as the Federal Republic did, the historians’ dispute was clearly a key moment in shaping the political culture that received and reacted to those new circumstances—and thus shaped the ways in which it did so. Beyond this, the historians’ dispute still provides a uniquely powerful prism for getting at issues of collective memory and the politics of history specific to Germany but also more generally. Its role in the memory of history may have diminished, but its importance for the history of memory still burns bright.

***Have historians been able to explain what the Holocaust “really was”—wie es eigentlich gewesen? And have the two debates had any substantive effect on the search for answers to that question?***

**Evans:** The *Holocaust* is itself a politically motivated concept that I’ve always followed Walter Laqueur in considering inappropriate for the Nazis’ mass extermination of European Jews: it was not a sacrifice or burnt-offering, the original meaning of the term.<sup>70</sup> You will search for it in the two thousand pages of my trilogy on the Third Reich in vain. Arguments about which victims can be subsumed under the term are pointless and do not lead to any academic gains; their political motivation is thoroughly dissected in the illuminating book *The Holocaust and Collective Memory*, by the late Peter Novick.<sup>71</sup>

At the same time, it is important to make clear that the Nazi extermination of the Jews was, leaving aside the question of the numbers involved, qualitatively different from other genocides. The Soviet Union’s mass extermination of Ukrainians in the famine of the

<sup>69</sup>Charles S. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 7.

<sup>70</sup>Walter Laqueur, *The Terrible Secret: Suppression of the Truth about Hitler’s “Final Solution”* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988), 7.

<sup>71</sup>Peter Novick, *The Holocaust and Collective Memory* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001) [*This is the British edition of The Holocaust in American Life* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999)—Ed.]

early 1930s, for example, was driven by the imperatives of collectivization; those killed were killed because Stalin defined them as *kulaks*, i.e., capitalist peasants, and the mass murder also took place, for the same reason, in other areas such as Kazakhstan. The millions of “Slavs” murdered by the Nazis were, like the mentally ill, homosexuals, “Gypsies,” and other victims, killed because they were seen as obstacles to the creation of a racially pure Germany, as well as to its expansion across East-Central and much of Eastern Europe. The Jews were killed, by contrast, because the Nazis regarded them as the “world-enemy”: all of them, everywhere, engaged in a global conspiracy to destroy Germany and the German race, and hence not only to be exterminated without exception—and, in the process, to be humiliated and degraded, with a horrifying and deliberate sadism that was seldom, if ever, applied to other groups of victims. Unless we grasp these fundamental distinctions we can’t even begin to understand the imperatives behind these different varieties of mass murder. Whereas Nolte tried to obliterate such differences, coming close to a denial of Nazi exterminism in the process, Goldhagen tried to argue that a desire to kill Jews was a basic part of German national identity from the moment of its creation in the nineteenth century, a claim that not only lacked any convincing basis in the evidence, but also failed to explain how German identity after 1945, and especially after 1990, did not include anti-semitism among its basic constituents at all.

**Fulbrook:** As far as the question about understanding the Holocaust more generally is concerned, any aim of portraying it “as it really was” is, for theoretical reasons, misguided and unachievable in principle. But we can certainly try to understand, explain, and represent it more adequately, depending on specific questions and the focus of inquiry. In the late 1980s, an impetus more significant than the *Historikerstreit* for current understandings and representations was, perhaps, the far less widely noted debate between Friedländer and Broszat about approaches to this past. In the course of that debate, Friedländer proposed what he called an “integrated” history that would combine the perspectives of both perpetrators and victims, eventuating in Friedländer’s acclaimed two-volume analysis of the Nazi persecution of the Jews.<sup>72</sup> This approach, too, has its own distinctive characteristics and could, in some ways, be seen as a conventional narrative of policies and practices, but one that is enhanced, punctuated, and disrupted by the voices of victims, illuminating experiences of the abyss in which they were being engulfed and the severe constraints on any adequately informed action. It has served, in some ways, to bring together different strands of the historiography—the sorts of accounts prevalent since the war among Jewish historians, from which victims’ voices and perspectives were never absent, as well as the drier accounts of policy formation and practice characteristic of much would-be “objective” German historiography—in an increasingly transnational set of debates.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>72</sup>See his contributions in Baldwin, *Reworking the Past*; also see Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, vol. 1, *The Years of Persecution, 1933–1939* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997); idem, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, vol. 2, *The Years of Extermination, 1939–1945* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).

<sup>73</sup>One thinks of Emmanuel Ringelblum, *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto*, ed. and trans. Jacob Sloan (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1958), Lucjan Dobroszycki, ed., *The Chronicle of the Łódź Ghetto 1941–1944*, trans. Richard Lourie (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), as well as the postwar writings of Léon Poliakov, Joseph Wulf, Yitzhak Arad, Jehuda Bauer, Israel Gutman, and many others.

**Dworok:** Has the increase of research led to an “explanation” of the Holocaust? On the one hand, we certainly know more now about the motives, system, and structure of the Holocaust than had been the case in the 1980s and 1990s. On the other hand, as Mary Fulbrook rightly suggests, explaining this horror would mean to comprehend it. And that still seems to be impossible. As the German novelist Iris Hanika has insightfully written about this discrepancy, the bottom line remains “our helplessness in the face of the all-embracing great crime once committed in our name.”<sup>74</sup>

<sup>74</sup>“Denn da wäre noch ein Eigentliches: unsere Hilflosigkeit angesichts des allumfassend großen Verbrechens, das einst in unserem Namen verübt wurde.” This is taken from the description on Hanika’s website of her novel *Das Eigentliche* (Graz: btb, 2010) (<http://www.iris-hanika.de/>).