

MEMORIAL

Eberhard Jäckel (1929–2017)

EBERHARD Jäckel, an eminent historian who also played an unusually consequential role in German public life, died in Stuttgart on August 15, 2017, two weeks after his eighty-eighth birthday. A child of the German north—he was born in Wesermünde, now part of Bremerhaven, and spent his youth there and in Hamburg—Jäckel taught first at the University of Kiel, where he completed his *Habilitation* in 1961 under the direction of Karl-Dietrich Erdmann. That thesis became his first book, *Frankreich in Hitlers Europa*, and led to his appointment in 1967 to succeed Golo Mann as professor of modern history at the University of Stuttgart.¹ Once transplanted, Jäckel took root, remaining in that post until he retired thirty years later, and in that vicinity for two more decades until his death.

Jäckel's book on France was well received at home and among specialists, but never translated, and it was overshadowed in the Anglophone world by the subsequent works of Robert Paxton, writing both alone and in partnership with Michael Marrus.² What made Jäckel's name among English speakers was Wesleyan University Press's publication in 1972 of a book initially titled *Hitler's Weltanschauung*, later issued by Harvard University Press in paperback as *Hitler's World View*.³ It is still in print, and justifiably recognized as a classic. In remarkably lucid and economical prose that contradicted the prevailing reputation (and often reality) of German academic writing, Jäckel argued for the consistency of "race and space" as the lodestars of Adolf Hitler's ideology from the mid-1920s to the end of his life. The removal of "the Jew" from German domains and the expansion of the latter to include *Lebensraum* on the European continent constituted the Führer's entwined and unshakeable goals—with nationalism, authoritarianism, and militarism his unvarying means to those ends. Only dedication to these means would enable the German/"Aryan" race to conquer the land required for survival in the incessant struggle among peoples for their "daily bread." It followed that Germany's primary enemy, more important than any competitor for territory, was the population that supposedly had spread the debilitating counterprinciples of internationalism, democracy, and pacifism—that indeed had brought the inhibiting notions of conscience and altruism into the world, namely, the Jews. Their victory would be the end of the German nation, whereas its victory would be the end of them. There could be no middle ground in this Manichaean war to the death.

Jäckel's slim volume needed only 139 pages, including notes, to overturn the interpretation of Hitler established more than two decades earlier by Alan Bullock's almost 800-page

¹Eberhard Jäckel, *Frankreich in Hitlers Europa* (Stuttgart: DVA, 1966).

²Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940–1944* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972); Michael R. Marrus and Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France and the Jews* (New York: Basic Books, 1981).

³Eberhard Jäckel, *Hitler's World View*, trans. Herbert Arnold (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1972; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981); originally published as *Hitlers Weltanschauung: Entwurf einer Herrschaft* (Stuttgart: DVA, 1969).

biography.⁴ In place of an opportunistic pursuer of power for its own sake, Jäckel portrayed a consistent ideologue, an autodidact capable of considerable tactical flexibility but no deviation from his purposes. The book also launched Jäckel toward the line of argument that runs through his subsequent books on Nazi rule and the Holocaust: namely, that Hitler's thoughts and actions were decisive in shaping both.⁵ They were so precisely because the Nazi regime contained many competing individuals and power centers. Polycracy begat "monocracy" because the former prompted contestants to outbid each other for Hitler's favor by posing as more effective instruments to fulfill the desires he had signaled.⁶ With this insight, Jäckel foreshadowed Ian Kershaw's now famous and generally accepted formulation of the importance in Nazi policy of "working toward the Führer."

Normally represented as a "continentalist" with regard to Hitler's objectives, an "intentionalist" and "centralist" with regard to the genesis of the Final Solution and power relations in Nazi Germany, Jäckel was, in my view, primarily a "logicist," a believer that the defining momentum of the Third Reich arose from a constant process of fitting circumstances into the framework of guiding ideas. This meant, with regard to the origins of World War II, that Hitler's desire for war was decisive, but that it "encountered numerous conditions that made possible or at least considerably eased its execution ... History is not simple, but always a coinciding of many things."⁷ Similarly, the road to the Holocaust was not straight or direct, but erratic and swerving, yet its endpoint was the logical consequence of the Nazi Führer's ideological premises. Given Hitler's preconceptions, neither he nor his acolytes and subordinates could have interpreted prevailing circumstances in ways that produced different outcomes. Thus, for example, the possibility that Chełmno and Bełżec began as solutions to immediate regional problems does not preclude a central decision for murder, but, in fact, reflects a preexisting but inchoate one. The already implicit was made explicit because the construction of the two killing sites expressed the momentum built into the central racial and spatial objectives of the regime. As Jäckel once put the matter, perhaps a bit too pointedly, "the improvisation may have been premeditated."⁸

This emphasis on the logic of escalation built into Nazi antisemitism is one of the bonds that united him with Raul Hilberg. At almost exactly the same time as Jäckel phrased the words just quoted, Hilberg wrote, "By 1941 the participating decision-makers themselves became aware that they had been traveling a determined path. As their assault took on gestalt, its latent structure became manifest."⁹ Jäckel became one of the chief proponents of getting a mass market edition of Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews* published in German, even if he was not quite a convert to Hilberg's emphasis on bureaucracy and

⁴ Alan Bullock, *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny* (New York: Harper, 1952).

⁵ Eberhard Jäckel (with Jürgen Rohwer), *Der Mord an den Juden im Zweiten Weltkrieg: Entschlussbildung und Verwirklichung* (Stuttgart: DVA, 1985); idem, *Hitler in History*, (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1984); idem, *Hitlers Herrschaft: Vollzug einer Weltanschauung* (Stuttgart: DVA, 1986); idem, *Umgang mit Vergangenheit: Beiträge zur Geschichte* (Stuttgart: DVA, 1989); idem (with Lea Rosh), *Der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland* (Cologne: Komet, 1990); idem, *Das deutsche Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: DVA, 1996).

⁶ Jäckel, *Hitler in History*, 28–30.

⁷ Jäckel, *Das deutsche Jahrhundert*, 196.

⁸ Jäckel, *Hitler in History*, 46.

⁹ Raul Hilberg, "The Bureaucracy of Annihilation," in *Unanswered Questions: Nazi Germany and the Genocide of the Jews*, ed. François Furet (New York: Schocken Books, 1989), 120. The book appeared originally as *L'Allemagne nazie et le génocide juif* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1985).

the impersonal as almost mechanical drivers of the Holocaust. For Jäckel, the propellants were always Hitler's ideas. But Jäckel recognized that Hitler could not alone translate them into action, which is where the mechanisms and reflexes that Hilberg had exposed came into play—just as Hilberg agreed with Jäckel about the activation of these impulses by ideology. At a 1991 symposium honoring Raul Hilberg upon his retirement from the University of Vermont, Jäckel was the only senior German scholar in attendance, just as he was the only German contributor to the resulting *festchrift*.¹⁰

While making his scholarly mark, Jäckel also became one of the most publicly visible historians in Germany. Apparently out of disgust with the aspersions Konrad Adenauer had cast upon the parentage and wartime exile of Willy Brandt, Jäckel joined the Social Democratic Party in 1967, and he and the party's leader soon became close. Jäckel had a hand in shaping the Brandt government's *Ostpolitik*, and he helped draft Brandt's acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize that resulted from his efforts to achieve *détente*. Years later, when Jäckel teamed up with journalist Lea Rosh to lead the drive to create a memorial in Berlin to the murdered Jews of Europe, Brandt was one of the first politicians to lend support.¹¹ Behind the statesman's effort to surmount geopolitical nostalgia and the professor's drive to overcome historical amnesia stood a common determination to get Germans to face up to the content and consequences of their Nazi past.

The partnership with Rosh began in 1988 and led to a widely watched, four-part television documentary called *Der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland*, a popular book of the same name, and the Geschwister Scholl Prize in 1990. Actually getting the Berlin memorial built took longer: it did not open until 2005. By then, Jäckel's name and face were familiar to most historically and/or politically aware Germans. He had written hundreds of newspaper and magazine articles, appeared on national television countless times, and been a prominent participant in every major public dust up over aspects of the Nazi past, from the *Historikerstreit* to the Goldhagen affair and beyond.¹²

This visibility reflected Jäckel's conviction that history professors have public responsibilities. He described one central task of his profession as "repeatedly to correct the memory of society, which is very untrustworthy, and to offer society and the public a well-tested picture of the past."¹³ On another occasion, he insisted, "We're not paid as professors only to conduct research in our little offices, but also to inform our fellow citizens about, and let them have the benefits of, those researches. I do that quite intentionally."¹⁴ When an administrator at his university presumed to suggest that Jäckel apply for approval for his voluminous

¹⁰Eberhard Jäckel, "On the Purpose of the Wannsee Conference," in *Perspectives on the Holocaust: Essays in Honor of Raul Hilberg*, ed. James S. Pacy and Alan P. Wertheimer (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 39–49.

¹¹Stefan Dege, *Deutsche Welle*, Aug. 17, 2017 (<http://www.dw.com/de/er-forschte-zu-hitlers-tagebüchern-historiker-eberhard-jäckel-gestorben/a-40139199>).

¹²See, most recently, Andrew I. Port, ed., "Holocaust Scholarship and Politics in the Public Sphere: Reexamining the Causes, Consequences, and Controversy of the *Historikerstreit* and the Goldhagen Debate. A Forum," *Central European History* 50, no. 3 (2017): 375–403."

¹³Christiane Peitz, "Er hatte die Idee zum Holocaust-Mahnmal," *Der Tagespiegel*, Aug. 17, 2017 (<http://www.tagespiegel.de/kultur/zum-tod-von-eberhard-jaeckel-er-hatte-die-idee-zum-holocaust-mahnmal/20202856.html>).

¹⁴Sabine Freudenberg, "Historiker Eberhard Jäckel ist tot," *Norddeutsche Rundfunk*, Aug. 17, 2017 (<http://www.ndr.de/kultut/geschichte/Eberhard-Jaekel-ist-tot,eberhardjaeckel100.html>).

“outside activities,” he rejected that label and retorted that conveying the results of research to a broader public was one of a professor’s core duties.¹⁵

Jäckel was superbly equipped for success at intellectual outreach. He spoke and wrote in clear, direct, and short sentences, and thus, as Lea Rosh commented, “he could explain history clearly and understandably to everyone.”¹⁶ Even critics of his work admired his prose. Reviewing one of Jäckel’s books unfavorably, Fritz Stern nevertheless noted that “he writes crisply, lucidly, persuasively. He is refreshingly interested in the concrete and the personal; he writes with a certain deftness, and ... a commendable economy, as if he has asked himself: what is the minimum a historian can say and what is the bare requisite students must know?”¹⁷ Jäckel also had an affable, approachable manner, was dignified but unpretentious, and exuded the air of a gentleman. Despite his Hanoverian origins and Swabian *Wahlheimat*, he embodied the ancient Prussian injunction against self-promotion: “be, don’t seem” (*sein, nicht schein*). Accordingly, he did not pick fights, but he did not shy away from them or dissimulate either. While always refraining from personal attacks, he unflinchingly criticized views with which he disagreed, including the “functionalism” of his formidably disputatious rival Hans Mommsen, as well as the spurious claims of less worthy foes such as David Irving, Ernst Nolte, and Daniel Goldhagen. Though Jäckel could be biting (who can forget his dismissal of *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* as a “simply bad book”?), his usual tone was measured. Quite rightly, his university’s official *Nachruf* ended with a reference to the loss of “an intellectual voice that was always intent on fairness and moderation.”¹⁸

Throughout his career, despite his quasi-celebrity status, Jäckel continued to devote time and energy to one of the traditional tasks of a major professional historian: collecting and providing commentary on significant sources. In addition to *Deutsche Parlamentsdebatten* (1970), two of the other resulting volumes are of lasting importance. *Hitler: Sämtliche Aufzeichnungen 1905–1924* (1980), which Jäckel edited with Axel Kuhn, remains an indispensable compilation of virtually all of Hitler’s earliest extant writings, despite the embarrassing inclusion of seventy-six mostly short and trivial items forged by Konrad Kujau, who later became famous as the author of the faked Hitler diaries.¹⁹ *Die Juden in den geheimen NS-Stimmungsberichten 1933–1945*, which he edited with the Israeli scholar Otto Dov Kulka, and which has also appeared in English translation, is an illuminating and equally essential selection of contemporary Gestapo reports on German public opinion regarding the Nazi persecution of Jews.²⁰

Jäckel’s last sole-authored book, *Das deutsche Jahrhundert: Eine historische Bilanz*, appeared in 1996, a year before he retired, and amounts to a codification of his clear-eyed, clearheaded,

¹⁵ Andreas Rödder, “Das Vorurteil durch das Urteil bekämpfen,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Aug. 18, 2017 (<http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/debatten/zum-tod-des-stuttgarter-historikers-eberhard-jaeckel-15157139.html#void>).

¹⁶ Deutschlandfunk Kultur—Studio 9, “Historiker Eberhard Jäckel gestorben, Mitinitiator des Holocaust-Mahnmals,” Aug. 17, 2017 (http://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/historiker-eberhard-jaeckel-gestorben-mitinitiator-des.2165.dehtml?dram:article_id=393742).

¹⁷ Fritz Stern, “Exorcising the 20th Century,” *New York Times Book Review*, May 12, 1985.

¹⁸ “Universität Stuttgart trauert um Eberhard Jäckel,” *Presseinformation*, Aug. 18, 2017.

¹⁹ See Eberhard Jäckel and Alex Kühn, “Neue Erkenntnisse zur Fälschung von Hitler-Dokumenten,” *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 32, no. 1 (1984): 163–69.

²⁰ Eberhard Jäckel and Otto Dov Kulka, eds., *Die Juden in den geheimen NS-Stimmungsberichten 1933–1945* (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 2004). This also appeared as *The Jews in the Secret Nazi Reports on Popular Opinion in Germany, 1933–1945*, trans. William Templer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

and social democratic approach to understanding the recent German past. He described the book as an attempt “not so much to describe ... as rather, above all, to explain” how the twentieth century—which could have been an era of German prestige and prosperity in the way that the eighteenth century was for France and the nineteenth for Britain—became instead a time of German destruction and division. The theme from beginning to end is the domestic “struggle for state power” between democrats and monarchists, a struggle that the former were on the way to winning until the catastrophe of World War I gave birth to the German Communist Party, fatally weakening the democrats and opening the way to the pyrrhic victory fifteen years later of the monarchists, who lifted Hitler to power as a means of restoring their dominance. Jäckel depicts January 30, 1933, as a “greatest anticipatable accident” (*größter anzunehmender Unfall*) of the sort for which electric power plants plan, i.e., the worst thing that can happen when improbable events (e.g., the Depression), structural weaknesses (e.g., the division of the left, Article 48 of the Weimar constitution), and human failures (e.g., Franz von Papen’s overconfidence, Paul von Hindenburg’s nationalism), all with independent and discrete causes, occur simultaneously and interact. Thereafter, Hitler adroitly played off the Nazi Party against the monarchists (notably in the purges of 1934 and 1938), rode a wave of mass popularity largely resulting from his economic and diplomatic successes, and thus assured that his aspirations inexorably directed the Third Reich toward war and mass murder. Appalled more by the prospect of defeat than by the regime’s crimes, the monarchists struck back but failed in July 1944, making “their last exit from German politics.” Hitler fought on, despite knowing that the war was lost, in order to achieve the outcome he had prophesied seven months before the conflict had begun: the annihilation of the Jews in Europe.

With Hitler’s defeat came liberation, not only from him, but also, in West Germany, from both the eastern agricultural regions that always had held back political and economic progress, and from the petrified social structure that had conditioned Weimar politics. East Germany labored for forty-four years under an imposed sociopolitical system that eventually collapsed from its inability to satisfy its population, and from the withdrawal of Soviet support. The century ended with Germany a more unified, prosperous, democratic, peaceful, and secure nation than at any time in the preceding one hundred years. Moreover, Germany had become a country that no longer sought continental domination, thus putting an end to the fundamental cause of both world wars. The nation nevertheless remained a disproportionate presence in Europe, both demographically and economically, and thus susceptible to the temptations that can arise from such a status. Jäckel’s final book therefore ends with warnings: for the country to remain anchored in the West and to promote ever tighter European integration, both as antidotes to nationalist illusions—and, in a remarkably prescient penultimate paragraph, against conflicts in Eastern Europe that could arise from attempts to restore the Russian Empire.

Das deutsche Jahrhundert stands, in many respects, as an intellectual testament of Eberhard Jäckel’s generation: liberal and humane, chastened by the past, and emphatic in its embrace of democracy, secularism, the social market economy, and the Western alliance. Did his treatment of the Nazi era exculpate the German people, as Stern implied in the book review quoted earlier? Perhaps. Like Hans Mommsen’s competing “functionalist” model, Jäckel’s explanation had an exonerating dimension. Whereas Mommsen implied that the out-of-control machinery of the Third Reich, not the German people, had produced the Nazis’ crimes, Jäckel portrayed the Germans of the 1920s and 1930s as just fallible and deluded

human beings, no wiser and no worse than others in the ways they responded to historical conditions.²¹ That both historians were trying to gain a hearing for unwelcome messages from their German audience may have tempted each to apply “a spoonful of sugar.” But there can be no doubt, in either case, about the overriding message, which highlighted what Germans had done during the Third Reich. Both historians understood that fixing the attention of their fellow Germans on this was the central task of their professional generation.

Of course, as a historian, Eberhard Jäckel was not infallible. He fell at first for Kajau’s forged documents, though not for his faked diaries. He occasionally sacrificed nuance for clarity, not only in his sentences but also in his overall interpretations, as the foregoing summary of *Das deutsche Jahrhundert* suggests. In that book he also echoed the familiar false assumption that the destruction of the Jews had undermined the German war effort, whereas it consumed, in fact, very few of the nation’s resources, deprived the *Reich* of only marginally important productive capabilities, brought in enormous amounts of money and material, and never was allowed to interfere with military operations.²² His belief (shared to varying degrees with Lucy Dawidowitz, Arno Mayer, and, most recently, David Cesarani), that wiping out the Jews became Hitler’s predominant objective after 1941—as a consolation prize of sorts for his recognition of Germany’s inability to win the war—is similarly far-fetched. Had that been the case, the Germans would have put more pressure on Italy in 1942 and marched into Hungary and Romania in 1943 to obtain the hundreds of thousands of Jews that these countries refused to deliver. The *Reich* refrained from doing so in order to keep those countries fighting on its side. Germany intervened to force the issue in Italy and Hungary only after their governments moved to defect from the Axis; it never did so in Romania, which put off that defection until the Soviets reached the gates of Bucharest, thus leaving the *Reich* no time to react. Similarly, the Łódź ghetto and the munitions factories around Radom staffed by Jewish slave laborers kept producing for the Germans and were not liquidated until the approach of the Soviet army forced Heinrich Himmler’s hand in the summer of 1944. The Holocaust reached its fierce crescendo in 1942 and continued thereafter because Hitler, Himmler, and their paladins believed that the war could not be won *without* the elimination of the Jews. But even they were prepared to relax this conviction, on occasion, for the short-term sake of the war effort.

Such lapses were, however, just that. Eberhard Jäckel was a masterful historian, a gifted writer, a major shaper of German memory culture, a fine model of intellectual commitment and civility, as well as a warm, winning, and decent person, whom many will remember with abiding affection and admiration.

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²¹See esp. Jäckel, *Hitler in History*, 39.

²²See Peter Hayes, *Why? Explaining the Holocaust* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2017), 131–37; idem, “Hilberg, the Railroads, and the Holocaust,” in *German Railroads/Jewish Souls: The Reichsbahn, Bureaucracy, and the Final Solution*, ed. Christopher Browning and Peter Hayes (forthcoming).