

SOME THOUGHTS ON RECENT GERMAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

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The "Thousand Year Reich" survived only twelve years yet spawned at least twelve million documents. From the rubble of Berlin, from remote Davarian hiding places and from evacuated offices throughout Germany, miles and miles of documents flowed to Nuremberg, Whitehall, Paris and Alexandria (Virginia). Never before had the most secret material of a great power been so immediately available to the historian. Archivists meticulously organized files according to provenance to facilitate research; then each scholar approached the sources with his own questions and his own prejudices.

After the war, the demands of the prosecutors at the Nuremberg Trials set the tone for the exploration of the rather obvious theme of Nazi guilt. No one doubted that National Socialists had perpetrated heinous offenses against their fellow men, but judicial procedure demanded that legal briefs be written to prove the accused guilty or innocent. Data was organized to prove that leading Nazis had conspired to wage an aggressive war, committed crimes against humanity and violated accepted rules of war. The court records and attendant documentation have produced one of the most fascinating compilations of our times, the Nuremberg Trials.¹ Arguments proving guilt (or relative innocence in some cases) do not probe the ultimate question of why. Lawyers and judges left the problems of motivation and historical continuity to historians.

The first spate of answers came from some who had observed the Nazis first hand. William L. Shirer, a journalist formerly stationed in Berlin, produced his Rise and Fall of the Third Reich in 1960. Based largely on evidence from the Nuremberg Trials and little else, Shirer argued that Germanic tradition had been responsible for this horrendous regime.² In the beginnings of the Christian era, Tacitus pointed out the German desire for a leader. In more recent times, Luther and then Bismarck emerged as Teutonic champions rallying the forces of nationalism. Peter Viereck and other researchers had gone into this in great detail.³ Such prejudicial evaluations of national character remain extremely selective in the use of historical data and cannot be readily proven or disproven. Friedrich Meinecke, the doyen of German historians, admitted that anti-democratic factors existed in Germany as they did in all states. He argued, however, that only a particular series of historical accidents in the period after 1918 permitted these negative forces to triumph in Germany.⁴

Writing in the same period, Alan Bullock concentrated on the key figure of the Nazi regime, Adolf Hitler. The subtitle, A Study in Tyranny, reveals this Englishman's approach. Hitler's rise to power, seizure of totalitarian control, foreign policy and conduct of the war constitute the very solid outline of this biography.⁵ No psycho-historian probing Hitler's latent schizophrenia as Langer does,⁶ nor detailing the Führer's supposed necrophilia as Fromm does,⁷ Bullock remains on traditionalist ground.

While Shirer had responded to the problem of continuity in one way and Bullock had skirted it, a German historian, Karl Dietrich Bracher, encountered it head on. In his very balanced view, nationalistic stereotyping was discounted. Recent German political history accounted for the emergence of a Hitler. The success of Bismarck, the dynamic rise of the young empire, the disdain of the upper classes for democracy had all frustrated political liberalism in Germany. In the Bismarckian Reich, many citizens became accustomed to government from above; personal rule and power politics resolved conflict. Confronted with grave economic crisis after 1929, more and more Germans favored a return to the Bismarckian solution. While modern elitists hoped to exploit Hitler, Hitler unscrupulously manipulated them. Bracher's monumental works have not been translated,⁸ but a later work - available in English - summarizes his views.⁹

The attempt to place Hitler and Nazism within an even broader context is the goal of historians and political scientists like Hannah Arendt and Martin Broszat. Arendt's sweeping analysis depicts the progressive deterioration of civilized life once men have abandoned the Judaeo-Christian ethic. Unscrupulous elitists allow the criminal element to gain a foothold in government; bureaucratic administration of life in a mass society makes evil a banality.¹⁰ Broszat, in a more manageable piece of prose, concentrates on National Socialism and effectively concludes that the German phenomenon reflects "the pathology of modern mass society in which the individual has lost his ties and values and all sense of direction."¹¹

Attempts to analyze the Nazi era and Hitler remain myriad. From numerous dissertations and specialized articles, new syntheses are being produced. One of the most successful and most readable of these is Joachim Fest's biography of Hitler. Capitalizing on the abundant research available since the Bullock book, this Frankfurt journalist analyzes the actions of the Führer within the general framework of German history.¹² Balanced and judicious as it is, the Fest book will not be the last word. Right here in Danbury, the famous author, John Tolland, has just completed a biography of Hitler. When it is published later this year, students will be able to determine the place of his work in the pattern of National Socialist historiography.

Footnotes

1. The generic title, Nuremberg Trials, is an imprecise term which unless specified can refer to any one of three collections of documents. Known according to the original covers of the publications, as the blue, the green and the red series, these are - in order - Trial of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal (42 vols.; Nuremberg, 1948); Trials of War Criminals before the Nuremberg Military Tribunals (Washington, D.C., 1951-52; Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression (10 vols.; Washington, D.C., 1946). The first includes the stenographic report of key Nazi leaders such as Goering and Speer; documents in this series are not translated. Many original sources including the famed Paris-Storey documents, i.e., those organized numerically by Colonel Storey in Paris, are translated rather poorly in the third set. The "green series" merely includes excerpts of testimony and select documents from the trials of lesser Nazi leaders and "fellow travelers" tried by the Americans after the major case.
2. William L. Shirer, The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich (New York, 1960). Note especially pp. 90-113.
3. Peter Viereck, Metapolitics (New York, 1941).
4. Friedrich Meinecke, The German Catastrophe, trans. Sidney B. Fay (New York, 1950).
5. Alan Bullock, Hitler (New York, 1952).
6. Walter C. Langer, The Mind of Adolf Hitler (New York, 1972).
7. Erich Fromm, The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness (New York, 1973).
3. Karl Dietrich Bracher, Die Auflösung der Weimarer Republik (4th ed.; Villingen, 1964) and Karl Dietrich Bracher, Wolfgang Sauer and Gerhard Schulz, Die nationalsozialistische Machtergreifung (Cologne and Opladen, 1962).
9. Karl Dietrich Bracher, The German Dictatorship, trans. Jean Steinberg (New York, 1970).
10. Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism (new ed.; New York 1966).
11. Martin Broszat, German National Socialism 1919-1945, trans. Kurt Rosenbaum (Santa Barbara, California, 1966).
12. Joachim C. Fest, Hitler, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York, 1974).

