

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Nicolas Berg. *The Holocaust and the West German Historians: Historical Interpretation and Autobiographical Memory*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2015. 346 pp. \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-299-30084-5.

Reviewed by Anna Corsten (Universität Erfurt)

Published on H-German (August, 2017)

Commissioned by Jeremy DeWaal

The German edition of Nicolas Berg's *The Holocaust and West German Historians: Historical Interpretation and Autobiographical Memory* caused a major debate among German scholars when it was first published in 2003 under the title *Der Holocaust und die westdeutschen Historiker. Erforschung und Erinnerung*. This debate as well as Berg's contribution to it must be seen within the context of a general trend in German historiography examining the life and work of leading postwar historians during the past two decades. In 2015, the book was translated and edited by Joel Golb and published in the George L. Mosse Series in Modern European Cultural and Intellectual History of the University of Wisconsin Press. The American edition, with about 300 pages, is significantly shorter than the German original, which contains more than 750 pages. After the "Introduction to the American Edition," five historiographical case studies are presented in chapters 1 to 5. Here, Berg specifically confronts the reader with the question of how West German historians dealt with the Holocaust.

Unfortunately, the shortened introduction does not explicate precisely how Berg performed his discursive analysis that claims to be based on Paul Ricœur's approach in *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004). By regarding history and memory as intertwined, Berg aims to reflect on personal as well as generational memories in their connection with contributions of historians. Therefore, it is crucial for him to regard memory as present during all historiographical phases, which are, following Ricœur, a "movement from the archive (in which documents are meant to be discovered or from which they are simply drawn) to both understanding and explana-

tion (of said documents) to representation (i.e., through the freshly written text)." Berg lays emphasis on the point that "Ricœur avoids any hierarchization among the three phases ... of history-writing," which is named a "historiographical act" (p. 4). However, in his introduction to the German original Berg had stated more precisely that the borders between historical records and the published works of the historians have been rescinded. The publications of historical research themselves become the basic records of the archive. Furthermore, the works of these postwar historians have to be connected with their autobiographical memory and with the public discourse of the time of their appearance.

For this purpose, Berg analyzes crucial publications as well as personal papers of leading historians who shaped West German historiography after 1945. Thus, the author tries to show that leading figures and institutions failed to acknowledge their responsibility as historians to face the Holocaust. He arrives at the conclusion that historiography only offered certain perspectives on the Holocaust; others, especially those rapprochements of Jewish historians or writers, were excluded since they were perceived to be subjective.

In chapters 1 and 2, Berg deals with three crucial figures in West Germany's historical science after 1945 and how they dealt with the Holocaust. Friedrich Meinecke (chapter 1), the doyen of German historical science, was one of the first to write about how recent horrors of National Socialism could be interpreted. In *The German Catastrophe* (1946) he was also one of the few to emphasize the continuity between Prussia and the "Third

Reich” at that time. However, Berg also regards Meinecke’s book as an early attempt of apologetics of National Socialism since Meinecke used key concepts such as “catastrophe” and “fate” but failed to address the question of the Germans’ collective guilt. In addition, he did not talk about Auschwitz or the faith of European Jewry during National Socialism at all, a trend that Berg also observes in the works of two other leading historians during that time: Gerhard Ritter and Hans Rothfels (chapter 2). Berg draws a particularly critical image of Ritter, who, as he became an important figure in Germany’s historical scholarship, not only denounced foreign voices but also included certain topics for research while he left those studies out that emphasized continuities in German history that lead to National Socialism. Ritter himself regarded National Socialism as an industrial accident (“Betriebsunfall”).

The third chapter deals with Protestant historians who, unlike the rest of German mainstream historiography, started reflecting on their own responsibility during the “Third Reich.” Here, Hermann Heimpel was one of the few persons who offered a critique on the common rapprochement on National Socialism and the Holocaust in West Germany. He did not only call for methodological innovations but also for a more critical memory towards the recent past.

Again, a more critical image of West Germany’s historiography is presented when Berg looks at the founding phase of the Institute for Contemporary History (IfZ) in chapter 4. Here, he repeatedly points to the fact that the persecution and extermination of the Jews was not present in the first expanded research plan of the Institute. With the aid of different episodes, Berg shows how the Holocaust and critical thinking on the recent past were further neglected as a subject of study. For example, Berg refers to the collaboration between the IfZ and Hans Günther Adler, a survivor of several concentration camps who had published widely on the Holocaust. Adler was working on a research project concerning deportations of Jews from Germany. The project was begun in 1959 with a contract with the IfZ but was finally let down after the manuscript had exceeded the predefined length and Adler had taken too much time to finish it. The IfZ also criticized the fact that the manuscript contained subjective components. Berg interprets the failing of this cooperation as another example for his thesis that neither the work nor the memory of Jews was wanted in the historical scholarship at that time. Since memory always remains subjective, it was abandoned from early research on the Holocaust. At the same time, Berg un-

derlines the political and financial dependency of the IfZ on the federal government and West German states during this early phase, but unfortunately he does not further elaborate on the consequences of that dependency for research projects or the relation between political decisions and historiographical writings.

In the last chapter, Berg put together the material he had collected on the Jewish historian Joseph Wulf, who, in contrast to the German edition, receives his own chapter in the shortened English version. The chapters on discourses about totalitarianism, fascism, and antisemitism as well as on intentionalism and structuralism were left out instead. The publications of Joseph Wulf’s and Léon Poliakov’s documentation on the Holocaust are regarded as the first volumes on this topic that Berg contrasts to the early editions of the Gerstein Report in *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* (1953), and *Hitler’s Table Talk* (1963).[1] What Berg tries to show is that these two projects either failed to address the Holocaust (like Percy Schramm in the introduction to *Hitler’s Table Talk*) or followed the description of a perpetrator (like the Gerstein Report). Although offering a much broader perspective on the Holocaust, the documentary volumes by Wulf and Poliakov were overlooked and Joseph Wulf remained an outsider in the West German historical scholarship even though he had published extensively on the Holocaust.

Berg imposed an enormous task on himself by analyzing a corpus of sources consisting of both autobiographical writings and scientific papers and books. Therefore, Berg has not only to be credited for taking up such a difficult task in a detailed manner but also for his innovative idea of explaining the dealing with the Holocaust in West German historiography after 1945 by connecting historiography and autobiographical memory. Also, Berg certainly reveals new insights into the historiography of the Holocaust by looking at “outsiders” to the West German historical scholarship such as Joseph Wulf or Léon Poliakov. Moreover, the structure of his study offers a fresh perspective by choosing both a synchronic and diachronic approach.

Berg clearly accuses West German historiography of failing to address the Holocaust in appropriate ways. However, he does not give precise criteria for an appropriate historical writing. In addition, he does not clearly separate between autobiographical and socio-historical situations of the historians and their work. Still, Berg does not accuse the work of the German historians of the postwar era of being wrong. Furthermore, he does not claim that their explanations were not grounded or

that they were using incorrect records. What he observes is that certain aspects were explained while others were not, and that certain perspectives were represented but others were neglected.

Berg highlights this by pointing to the (apologetic) desire for silence and the preservation of a positive image of Germany. However, there might be further interpretations and reasons for narrating some stories instead of others. One reason can be seen in the struggle for representing an appropriate identity or meaning of German history. This seems to have been Ritter's motivation when he emphasized the history of German resistance. The collective identity of postwar Germans could not follow their national idea because it had been abused by National Socialism. Consequently, the stories of the resisting conservatives could be a model for a new identity. According to Ian Hacking's *The Social Construction of What?* (2000), one could call this phenomenon a "looping effect" of collective self-classification. The looping effect basically says that if A (e.g., the Germans) is classified as H (e.g., Nazi), it might be the case that A does not want to be classified as H, and therefore searches for new self-images and for changes in behavior and attitudes.

Furthermore, certain examples Berg uses to show the exclusion of the Holocaust by West German historiography cannot be explained by the desire for silence and the preservation of a positive image of Germany itself. For example, he mentions that Adler agreed with the IfZ on the rejection of Gerald Reitlinger's *The Final Solution* (1953), which was according to Berg the first account of the extermination process. This cannot have been motivated by a wish for silence since Adler badly wanted an engagement with the Holocaust in historiography. It is instead possible that Reitlinger's approach did not meet the criteria of scientific writing Adler (and the IfZ) envisioned. Following Michel Foucault (e.g., the *Archaeology of Knowledge* [2002]), this would be caused by a formation of discourse in which something cannot be articulated appropriately because of the limits of discourse itself. Thus, it would be necessary not only to focus on certain explanations and the scholar who wrote about the Holocaust (as well as his background), but also to take a

closer look at the way an argument was presented, the argument itself, and whether this argument fit the current discourse.

Moreover, the tabooing of certain aspects in the post-war historiography can also be explained with the aid of the concept of symbolic violence by Pierre Bourdieu (e.g., in *Language and Symbolic Power* [1991]). Following Bourdieu's argument, historiographical acts can impose meaning and by doing so they silence alternative perspectives. But they let us uncover the taboos of historical writings of a certain time when asking why specific books/authors were rejected while others were not. In this context it is important to note that West Germany was not the only country in which the research on the Holocaust was aggravated. Raul Hilberg, who had—according to Berg—difficulties in publishing his magnum opus in West Germany, also had a hard time finding a publisher in the United States. Thus, a broadening of the scope of research could help to find other reasons to explain the process of ignoring the Holocaust on an international level.

Although there are certain explanations beyond the pattern of argument Berg already introduced in the beginning, this book is a highly important and stimulating contribution to the study of Holocaust historiography. In his book, Berg offers a groundbreaking link between autobiographical memory and historical writing. His study marked the beginning of research on a long-existing gap in the scholarship. Consequently, Berg's critique on West German historiography needs to be taken seriously despite a few one-sided explanations, which further research might elaborate on.

Note

[1]. Joseph Wulf and Léon Poliakov, *Das Dritte Reich und die Juden* (Berlin: arani-Verlag, 1955), *Das Dritte Reich und seine Diener* (Berlin: arani-Verlag, 1956), *Das Dritte Reich und seine Denker* (Berlin: arani-Verlag, 1959); and Joseph Wulf, *Das Dritte Reich und seine Vollstrecker. Die Liquidation von 500.000 Juden im Ghetto Warschau* (Berlin: arani-Verlag, 1961).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Anna Corsten. Review of Berg, Nicolas, *The Holocaust and the West German Historians: Historical Interpretation and Autobiographical Memory*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. August, 2017.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=48648>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.