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Reviewed by Stefan K. Berger (School of Languages, Linguistics and Cultures, University of Manchester)

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Hans Rothfels and the Intersection between Radical Conservatism and Nazism

Hans Rothfels was one of the most powerful doyens of the German historical profession in the 1950s. A victim of the National Socialist race laws, he was forced into exile in 1939. After 1945, he was one of the few historians who returned to resume a somewhat delayed model career. He gave legitimacy to the compromised historical profession in Germany by confirming its dubious claim that, as a profession, it had stayed well clear of Nazism. When this myth came under increasing fire from a younger generation of historians in the 1990s, Hans Rothfels was one of those who came in for a good deal of criticism over his championing of *Volksgeschichte* during his years as professor at the University of Königsberg between 1926 and 1935. *Volksgeschichte* rose to prominence after the First World War. It was an attempt to replace the state as the crucial focus of historical studies in Germany with the *Volk*. The notion of *Volk* employed by many historians was one deeply tinged with racial and nationalist overtones. One of the key objectives of *Volksgeschichte* was to contribute to the revision of the Versailles Treaty, in particular the loss of territories to neighboring countries.[1] *Ostforschung* became a branch of historical studies which aimed at revising the new Eastern borders of the Weimar Republic. Rothfels occupied a prominent place within *Ostforschung*, taking up and propagating many of the ideas of *Volksgeschichte*. The controversy surrounding Rothfels found its highpoint in February 2003, when H-Soz-u-Kult organized a discussion forum on Rothfels.[2]

The volume under review is yet another attempt to

evaluate Rothfels's career from its beginnings in the Weimar Republic through the Third Reich and the exile years in the United States to its apogee in the young Federal Republic. It has its origins in a conference organized by the Institut für Zeitgeschichte in Munich. Rothfels was, of course, its first director and played an influential role in determining the course of West German *Zeitgeschichte* after the Second World War. Yet, contrary to what one might expect, this volume is not an apologia for Rothfels. It includes a range of critical voices, despite the fact that, regrettably, two of his foremost critics are absent: Nicolaus Berg and Karl Heinz Roth apparently had different commitments at the time of the conference. Unfortunately, the introduction leaves the question open whether they were asked to contribute to the conference volume without having been at the conference.

Overall, the emphasis of the volume is on understanding Rothfels in his epoch, on contextualizing him as a man of his time, historicizing him rather than sitting in judgment on him. One of those contexts is the experience of the totalitarian state and its offer of a truly Faustian pact: vast new possibilities for scholars, including those representing the historical sciences, in exchange for scholars becoming the handmaidens of politics. The second context is the national conservative milieu in which Rothfels thrived in Königsberg. At the end of the Weimar Republic, this milieu shared several key assumptions with the National Socialists. In the introduction, the editors stress that these two contexts are essential for properly understanding the life and career of

Hans Rothfels. The rest of the articles deal with different stages of Rothfels's life.

Jan Eckel, who provides a sketch of Rothfels's intellectual biography,[3] argues convincingly that one of the central ideas underpinning Rothfels's historical thinking throughout his career was the notion that the German state was threatened both from within and without. The experiences he gained living through war, revolution, hyperinflation and the Great Depression confirmed this persistent fear and led him to advocate geopolitical orders that, in his view, would bring security and stability to an inherently insecure and unstable world. Eckel also portrays Rothfels as representative of that segment of national conservative thought in the Weimar Republic that remained at arm's length to pluralism and democracy after 1945. Men like Rothfels were, however, willing to support the anti-Communism of the early Federal Republic and slowly many lost their negative views on Western forms of political and social thinking.

Wolfgang Neugebauer analyzes Rothfels's research on East Central Europe and finds much to commend it. Thus Rothfels emphasized a specifically East Central European *libertas* culture early on as characteristic of the region. Making use of the methodology developed by Otto Hintze, Rothfels was also an early proponent of the comparative history of East Central Europe and sought structural similarities in East Central European societies. Neugebauer finds in Rothfels's writings a clear fascination with the cultural and ethnic diversity of East Central Europe. But it is here that Neugebauer also locates the major shortcoming of Rothfels's oeuvre. His Germanocentrism prevented him from any deeper understanding of the ways in which non-German cultures contributed to the shaping of East Central Europe.

Ingo Haar demonstrates how vociferously Rothfels fought against the Weimar Republic and against those of his colleagues with democratic and republican credentials. He also shows how much overlap there was in his radical conservative thinking with the ideas of the National Socialists. Peter Th. Walther investigates Rothfels's existence in exile and concludes that he played a marginal role in the American university landscape. The exile years did not seem to have a major impact on his methodological or thematic orientation, although he clearly de-emphasized his earlier espousal of a racialized *Volksgeschichte*. Christoph Cornelissen shows how Rothfels joined forces with Gerhard Ritter after 1945 to instrumentalize the German resistance of July 20, 1944, in order to reject Allied criticisms of the traditions of German his-

tory. In particular they both came to a positive evaluation of Prussian conservatism.

The most ambitious theoretical contribution to the volume comes from Thomas Etzemüller. Drawing on Ludwig Fleck's *Denkstillehre*, Etzemüller wants to analyze not only the individual intentions of Rothfels, but presents Rothfels as the epicenter of a prominent intellectual collective that played an important role in historical thinking from the later years of the Weimar Republic to the early years of the Federal Republic.[4] The "Rothfelsians" were united by propagating radical ideas of ordering society through forms of social engineering which knew no boundaries. Etzemüller sees different emphases in their research before and after 1945, but the thinking in terms of order (*Ordnungsdenken*) remained the central concern of the "Rothfelsians" well into the 1960s and 1970s when their *Denkstil* finally became obsolete.

Herman Graml's contribution is most clearly written to save Rothfels's reputation and defend him against his critics. Graml seeks to demonstrate that his revered mentor, as editor of the *Vierteljahreshefte*, did not omit any significant theme of contemporary history. Rothfels actively sought to counter any apologia for National Socialism and in particular picked up the theme of the death camps early on. Where Rothfels intervened to prevent the publication of research, as in the case of George Hallgarten, this action was taken not for political reasons but because these writings were not scholarly enough. Alas, the relationship between politics and scholarship is a complex one that cannot be reduced to a straightforward dichotomy.

Matthias Beer contributes an intriguing article in which he argues against the idea of the invention of contemporary history after 1945. Drawing on an article by Justus Hashagen from the time of the First World War and a publication by Theodor Schieder from 1935, Beer demonstrates that some of the key characteristics of contemporary history (as summarized in Rothfels's famous article in the first issue of the *Vierteljahreshefte*) had already been formulated during the first half of the twentieth century.

Finally, Heinrich August Winkler and Horst Möller provide brief articles that again seek to emphasize Rothfels's conversion in exile and after 1945 and stress the need to understand rather than judge his intellectual biography. Yet, as several contributors to this volume clearly show, even an emphatic approach to Rothfels cannot avoid two central conclusions. First, there was considerable overlap between the radical conservative and

the National Socialist milieu in the interwar period. Second, radical conservative thought did not vanish with the end of the National Socialists but continued to have a major influence on the intellectual history of the early Federal Republic.

Notes

[1]. *Volksgeschichte* was first systematically analyzed by Willi Oberkrome, *Volksgeschichte: methodische Innovation und völkische Ideologisierung in der deutschen Geschichtswissenschaft 1918–1945* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993). Oberkrome's study followed a pioneering work by Michael Burleigh, *Germany Turns Eastwards. A Study of Ostforschung in the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). For a

comparative perspective on Volksgeschichte see also Manfred Hettling, ed., Volksgeschichten im Europa der Zwischenkriegszeit (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003).

[2]. See <http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/forum/type=diskussionen&id=281>, where much additional literature on Rothfels can be found.

[3]. See also the more detailed work by Jan Eckel, *Hans Rothfels* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2005).

[4]. See also Thomas Etzemüller, *Sozialgeschichte als politische Geschichte. Werner Conze und die Neuorientierung der westdeutschen Geschichtswissenschaft nach 1945* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2001).

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