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“*Making History in Kohl’s Republic: The Politics of the Past in the 1980s and 1990s*”. GHI-sponsored panel at the 32nd Annual Conference of the German Studies Association. St. Paul, Minnesota, USA: German Studies Association; German Historical Institute, Washington D.C., 04.10.2008.

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## “Making History in Kohl’s Republic: The Politics of the Past in the 1980s and 1990s”. GHI-sponsored panel at the 32nd Annual Conference of the German Studies Association

Over the past years, the era of Chancellor Helmut Kohl has gained importance as a field of historical inquiry. In this context, historians have become increasingly interested in (West) Germany’s changing relationship to the Nazi past. Many of the peculiar efforts of the Kohl government in this realm produced notable public controversies (such as the Bitburg and Jenninger affairs). On the other hand, Germany’s contemporary landscapes of memory are littered with monuments that were initiated by the Kohl government. These include the Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe, the Neue Wache in Berlin, and the House of the History of the Federal Republic. In addition, it was during Kohl’s long reign that the West German outlook on National Socialism was dramatically redefined with regard to the victims and perpetrators of the Holocaust.

On October 4, 2008, the GHI sponsored the well-received panel “Making History in Kohl’s Republic: The Politics of the Past in the 1980s and 1990s”, which explored various facets of West German politics of the past (*Geschichtspolitik*) during the Kohl era and put these policies into larger historical frameworks. In particular, the panelists examined Helmut Kohl’s politics of the past and its legacies, the *Historikerstreit*’s participants’ conflicting approaches towards history and memory, the scandal about Bundestagspräsident Philipp Jenninger’s 1988 speech in remembrance of the 1938 November Pogrom, and the Kohl government’s policies towards the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC.

Combining autobiographical and methodological considerations, JAN-HOLGER KIRSCH’S paper “Hier geht es um den Kern unseres Selbstverständnisses als Nation’: Helmut Kohl und die Genese des Holocaust-Gedenkens als bundesdeutscher Staatsräson” provided the framework for the panel. Kirsch was concerned with gauging the actual impact of Kohl’s policies on German historical consciousness. He argued that instead of focusing on top-level policies, historians should pay closer attention to Germany’s changing social structures and media culture under Kohl. Such developments had far reaching effects on how Germans confronted the Nazi past, and remained often unaffected by high-level governmental policies. In order to substantiate his argument, Kirsch advanced three theses. First, the paradigm of *Erinnerungskultur* replaced *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* during the Kohl era. Kirsch demonstrated that Kohl did not intend to close the books on the Nazi past for good, but aimed at strengthening Germany’s “Selbstverständnis als Nation” and its reputation abroad by integrating the memory of the Holocaust into German collective memory. Such a development - Kirsch literally spoke of a “Lernprozess” - was epitomized by Kohl’s staunch support for the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin. Second, while Kohl established *Geschichtspolitik* as a political field of action, it was never limited only to the memory of the Third Reich. Furthermore, the political manipulation of historical consciousness has been made increasingly difficult, if not impossible, by the competing memorial cultures on a local, regional, and na-

tional level as well the expanding impact of the media. Finally, Kirsch analyzed the legacies of Kohl's memorials and monuments for the tradition of *Geschichtspolitik* in Germany. He argued that even though Kohl played a major role in the establishment of the Federal Republic's central museum and memorial sites, his influence on the interpretation of German history through such institutions was limited. According to Kirsch, the most important legacy of Kohl's *Geschichtspolitik* must be seen in the political process that led to the establishment of these institutions. Instead of encouraging public debate about appropriate forms of memory, Kohl deemed such decisions too important to be discussed in public. In her comment, Suzanne Brown-Fleming raised the question whether Kohl focused attention on Germany's recent history for political ends or was personally animated by this sentiment.

NICOLAS BERG delivered a highly differentiated analysis of the tensions between historiography and individual memory. His paper "'Virulenz' und 'Richtschwert': Versuch einer Deutung der Gedächtnismetaphern im Historikerstreit" paid only marginal attention to the actual content of the *Historikerstreit* - the question of the singularity of the Holocaust. Instead, Berg focused on the biographies of its protagonists, who were, with the exception of Ernst Nolte, born during the second half of the 1920s. Building on the scholarship of Helmut Schelsky, Arnulf Baring, and Dirk Moses, Berg explored some common denominators of this particular generation of West German intellectuals. He stated that the rejection of guilt and responsibility for the crimes of National Socialism was a central characteristic of the so-called "skeptische Generation." The "zero hour," to them a symbol of liberation not of complicity with a criminal regime, served as the formative experience of the 1945ers. However, many of them had been in the Hitler Youth or had been *Flakhelfer* and soldiers. The 1945ers' refusal to critically engage with their experiences during the Third Reich had a distinct impact on their interpretations and epistemological approaches towards the period of Nazi rule. Stressing neutrality and objectivity as scholarly values, historians of the "skeptische Generation" failed to examine issues of guilt and personal responsibility. Instead they focused on aspects such as the "structure" of the Nazi regime. Berg thus pointed to the tension between memory and historiography and showed how individual experience translated into epistemological categories. Referring to the correspondence between Martin Broszat and Saul Friedländer of 1988, he showed that personal experience determined the choice of historical

perspective. Berg concluded that it should be the task of a critical historical profession to overcome such an antagonism between history and memory.

JOACHIM SCHOLTYSECK addressed the controversy about Bundestagspräsident Philipp Jenninger's speech on the 50th anniversary of Reichskristallnacht in 1988. His paper, entitled "Die Skandal-Rede Philipp Jenningers als geschichtspolitisches Lehrstück," provided a detailed analysis of the speech's content. In addition, Scholtyseck evaluated its public reception and addressed the highly politicized nature of memory in Kohl's republic. He mainly attributed the public outcry that followed the speech (and led to Jenninger's resignation) to a misinterpretation of Jenninger's words and an overreaction on the part of his political opponents and the press. Jenninger had employed the rhetorical device of free indirect speech ("erlebte Rede") to adopt the perspective of potential Nazi perpetrators. While this approach broke a taboo, Jenninger had actually aimed at confronting ordinary Germans with their (potential) responsibility for the Holocaust. Scholtyseck maintained that the speech's actual content thus hardly explains the scandal that followed it. Therefore, the controversy needs to be seen within the context of other major controversies about the Nazi past during the 1980s, such as the *Historikerstreit*. Jenninger triggered a negative reaction from all those opponents of Kohl's *Geschichtspolitik* who had also opposed Ernst Nolte and others a few years earlier. Scholtyseck particularly criticized the press for consciously creating a scandal rather than paying attention to what Jenninger had actually said. The panel's commentator supported Scholtyseck's claim that from today's perspective, Jenninger's speech can only be considered a clear and graphic condemnation of Nazism and the Holocaust. The scandal should mostly be attributed to the political nature of collective memory in Kohl's republic.

That West German *Geschichtspolitik* had a transnational dimension was the main argument of JACOB EDER'S presentation. His paper "Sanitizing the Nazi Past?" illustrated that the Kohl government attempted to influence the design process of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's permanent exhibition during the 1980s and early 1990s by lobbying for a positive portrayal of the Federal Republic in the museum. German officials feared that the museum would arouse anti-German sentiment among the general American public, particularly American Jews, and thus severely damage West Germany's reputation in the United States. In addition, Eder claimed that the Kohl government wished to allay fears that militaristic nationalism would reemerge in the

event of German unification. According to Eder, West German emissaries tried to persuade museum officials to integrate a segment on the history of the Federal Republic into the exhibition concept, including references to German restitution payments to Israel and Germany's close military alliance with the United States, and/or the military resistance, particularly the assassination attempt on Hitler of July 20, 1944. While negotiations with the USHMM were still in progress, German emissaries also attempted to promote their interpretation of recent German history in the United States through a number of other channels, which included attempts to alter high school curricula and sponsoring a traveling exhibition on German anti-Nazi resistance movements. Eder demonstrated how German efforts for representation of German history in the USHMM clashed with the plans of the museum designers. Holocaust survivors, the dominant group in building the museum, did not intend to provide such a forum for West Germany. Even though German efforts were ultimately fruitless, Eder illustrated that Kohl's policies of redefining Germany's relationship to the Nazi past were not limited to German territory.

Summarizing the major aspects of the panel's presentations, commentator SUZANNE BROWN-FLEMING accentuated the contested nature of political memory in Kohl's republic. Furthermore, she highlighted the deeply moral dimension of exploring the history of modern Germany, the Nazi period, and the Holocaust: Historians do

not only need to adhere to the highest scholarly standards; they also have to keep the moral implications of their scholarship in mind.

#### Overview:

Convener and chair: Philipp Gassert, German Historical Institute, Washington D.C.

“‘Hier geht es um den Kern unseres Selbstverständnisses als Nation:’ Helmut Kohl und die Genese des Holocaust-Gedenkens als bundesdeutscher Staatsräson”  
Jan-Holger Kirsch, Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung, Potsdam

“‘Virulenz’ und ‘Richtschwert’—Zur Gedächtnismetaphorik im Historikerstreit (1986-89)”  
Nicolas Berg, Simon-Dubnow-Institut, Leipzig

“Die Skandal-Rede Philipp Jenningers als geschichtspolitisches Lehrstück”  
Joachim Scholtyseck, Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, Bonn

“Sanitizing the Nazi Past? The Transatlantic Dimension of West German Politics of Memory and the USHMM”

Jacob S. Eder, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia

Commentator: Suzanne Brown-Fleming, Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies/USHMM, Washington D.C.

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