

An Examination of Certain of the Polarizations of the Historikerstreit

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Abstract: The historians' debate or the *Historikerstreit* of the 1980s in the then divided Germany brought to the fore the key areas of division between the historians and philosophers of the day, sounding the ground on where they stood vis-à-vis the project/process of remembering and commemorating the past otherwise known as the *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. This paper proposes to examine certain of the prominent debates which took place in the publications of the erstwhile Federal Republic of Germany, with especial reference to the Nolte-Habermas war of words as also the Stürmer-Augstein polarities, as sourced from extracts, original documents and compendiums which include (but are not limited to) the *Frankfurter Zeitung* and *Die Zeit* newspapers. The aim will be to understand the coming to terms which an entire generation (and more) arrived at as scoped through the erudition of public intellectuals who had a vast influence on the direction and even character, of the nation of Germany as we know it.

Keywords: debate, depoliticization, intellectual history, national identity, public memory, revisionist history.

I. Introduction

In the West Germany of the 1980s a historical discussion – dubbed the *Historikerstreit* - ensued amongst historians of the left and the conservative right, broadly amongst intellectuals and academics on the issue of remembering the German past, specially the question of how to deal with the complexities of the Nazi-era period and the historical condition known as the Holocaust. This debate centered around the question of the singularity of the Holocaust and how German historiography was positioned to deal with the process of remembering the Nazi past, as well as its impact on the essential character or the national identity of the then Federal Republic of Germany. Some of the most prominent historians and public intellectuals who took part in the debate, through publications in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Die Zeit* newspapers, were Ernst Nolte, Michael Stürmer, Joachim Fest, Klaus Hildebrand, Karl Dietrich Bracher, Andreas Hillgruber, Jürgen Habermas, Rudolf Augstein, amongst many others. This present paper will focus on four essays penned by Nolte, Stürmer, Habermas and Augstein, and try to parse the meaning and direction of their arguments, made either in favour of the distinctiveness (singularity) of the Holocaust or arguing against the negative trend of remembering the Nazi era in terms of national guilt and a moral burden on the national character of Germany.

This debate which catapulted certain historians and public intellectuals into the forefront of the national consciousness centered really on questions of interpretations of the aftermath and impact of the Second World War, especially as argued in stances put forth by the historian Ernst Nolte and Michael Stürmer. Two catalysts for the ensuing debate can also be found in the publication in April 1986 of the Cologne historian Andreas Hillgruber's book entitled *Two Kinds of Destruction: The Shattering of the German Reich and the End of European Jewry* (*Zweierlei Untergang. Die Zerschlagung des deutschen Reiches und das Ende des europäischen Judentums*), and the visit in May 1985 of the US President Ronald Reagan to the Bitburg Cemetery, at the behest of West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl. Hillgruber's book included two essays – one concerning the defence of the Eastern Front against the Soviet army storming towards Berlin, and the other a

shorter piece discussing the Holocaust which tended to the argument that “Austria, more than Germany, fostered the virulent anti-Semitic feeling that produced the death camps, and that it was Hitler's personal hatred of the Jews that pushed the Holocaust to its horrible end.”¹. According to the historian Charles S. Maier, it was Hillgruber’s justification of the German Wehrmacht’s resistance to the advancing Soviet forces and their bitter fight against the same to defend the populace of that area, along with the belief that the German intelligentsia should really identify and hail the efforts of the Germany army against the Soviet troops, which drew such a sharp response from opponents of this view.² While positing that Hillgruber, though falling on the conservative side of the debate, cannot with certainty be held of harbouring “apologetic intentions toward Nazism”³, Maier is careful to point out the arguably thorny issue in Hillgruber’s argument – “Hillgruber rehearses these conditions in his essay essentially to defend the German army against the charge that by resisting Soviet troops they were abetting Hitler’s work of massacring the Jews.”⁴. This publication caused significant outrage within the West German academic community, leading to the start of the protracted war-of-words in the form of the *Historikerstreit*.

The other significant catalyst, Reagan’s visit to the Bitburg military cemetery also invited open and vociferous criticism. Together with Chancellor Helmut Kohl, Reagan was invited to visit the cemetery on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. Bitburg was known to be the resting place of a reported forty-nine *Waffen Schutzstaffel* (SS) stormtroopers. The SS had been adjudged a criminal organization at the Nuremberg war trials, and as such a controversy was created. The visit faced overwhelming criticism from the Jewish community worldwide, with the noted author and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel appealing to Reagan to alter his schedule – “I implore you to do something else, to find another way, another site. That place, Mr. President, is not your place. Your place is with the victims of the SS.”⁵. While Bitburg had been planned as a “ritual of reconciliation”⁶, it turned out to be the focal point of the controversy. For the Kohl government, a back-tracking by the US President would mean a public admission of error. Also, Maier states that a major diplomat from the Chancellor’s party, one Alois Mertes, who had done a great deal for the maintenance of German-American relations, and who happened to represent the Bitburg area, preferred the visit not be shifted to some other location⁷. The US President, refusing to backdown from the initial plans, issued a statement in a press conference on April 30th 1985, five days prior to the Bitburg visit, asserting it was “morally right” (for him to visit the cemetery) and that the soldiers who were buried there had been judged for their actions already – “you’re asking with reference to people who are in the cemetery – were buried there ... all of those in that cemetery have long since met the supreme judge of right and wrong. And whatever punishment or justice was needed has been rendered by one who is above us all.”⁸. An effort to mollify the critics by making an

¹James M. Markham, “German Book Sets Off New Holocaust Debate,” *The New York Times*, August 30, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/09/06/books/german-book-sets-off-new-holocaust-debate.html>.

² Charles S. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 19-20.

³ Maier, 19.

⁴ Maier, 20.

⁵ Andrew Glass, “Reagan visits German war cemetery, May 5, 1985,” *Politico*, August 30, 2023, <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/05/05/this-day-in-politics-may-5-1985-565776>.

⁶Maier, *The Unmasterable Past*, 10.

⁷ Maier, 10.

⁸David Hoffman, “Visit ‘Morally Right’ Reagan Says of Bitburg,” *The Washington Post*, September 4, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1985/04/30/visit-morally-right-reagan-says-of-bitburg/e5794dde-c363-45dd-a6e0-b6f7511f86b7/>.

impromptu stop at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp (prior to the Bitburg visit) – did not do as much to temper criticism as was expected.

What is to be noted, however, is that the culmination of these two events – the Reagan visit and the arguments brought forth in the Andreas Hillgruber text – together may be said to have fomented a new kind of conservative radicalism in West German thought, one that wanted to shake off the guilt and the moral burden associated with the Nazi past, and rather to examine – reappraise even – the new German national identity more than 40 years after the Second World War. This led to the climate of vitriolic debate in the national newspapers, with debates raging on how to come to terms with the crime of the Nazi past and whether these crimes were unique in themselves, or could be studied in a comparative vein with other genocides. The forthcoming sections in this paper will examine the arguments of the four public figures mentioned previously (Michale Stürmer, Ernst Nolte, Jürgen Habermas, and Rudolf Augstein) to try and understand how their polarizations stack against these critical questions.

II. Stürmer and the country without history

Writing for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on April 25th 1986, the historian Michael Stürmer, who was formerly associated with the University of Erlangen⁹ and at the time of writing the article was serving as speechwriter and advisor to Chancellor Kohl, is at pains to assert the importance of memory, so much so that he begins and ends his essay with the same refrain “In a country without memory anything is possible.”¹⁰ He is concerned with a communication gap between and amongst generations in the Federal Republic of Germany, which he argues leads to a decrease in self-confidence and a possible shift of long-held values. Stürmer is concerned with how the continuity in the sense of self of the German past may be assured. It is evident Stürmer is taken with the cause of history and how it is remembered and passed down the generations in his country. This is especially noteworthy with the marked increase or boom in flea markets and the nostalgia attached with museums. He praises the quest for history in his country – what he remarks on as the increased attention being given to historical literature and historical exhibitions. He finds two reasons for this return to history, and leans more towards the argument that people turn to the past when they cannot find meaning or direction in the present – “a loss of orientation and a search for identity are closely related. But anyone who believes that this trend will have no effect on politics and the future is ignoring the fact that in a land without history, the future is controlled by those who determine the content of memory, who coin concepts and interpret the past.”¹¹ Stürmer is keen to navigate the quest for a semblance of historical identity and emphasizes that the very content of memory and the interpretation of the past will be crucial to the creation and sustenance of a national identity. It is the interpretation of history which can direct the path of a historical consciousness and while reasserting (by quoting the philosopher Karl Jaspers) that nothing is sacred to the point of not being allowed to be questioned, Stürmer in the same breath denounces the failure to question and the loss of orientation which accompanied Hitler’s rise in Nazi Germany and led to the creation of a barbaric form of state. But if history is to be understood as a tool of legitimacy, or providing a moral imperative, then it must be remembered that Germany did face a series of “permanent upheavals”¹² and yet in spite of such a series of revolutions, much of the current state of German history writing really only focused on the tailcoats of the German dictatorship. A reinterpretation of history is pivotal to the state of affairs of the Federal Republic during the time of Stürmer’s essay. Described as one of the “most vociferous advocate of the need for a new national and nationalistic

⁹Maier, *The Unmasterable Past*, 43.

¹⁰Michael Stürmer, “History in a Land without History,” in *Forever In The Shadow of Hitler? Original Documents of the Historikerstreit, The Controversy Concerning the Singularity of the Holocaust*, trans. James Knowlton and Truett Cates (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1993), 16-17.

¹¹ Stürmer, 16.

¹² Stürmer, 16-17.

history,”¹³, the critic Mary Nolan points out that Stürmer and his colleagues were aware that Germany was not in actuality a “country without history”, but rather that the key tensions of the academic entanglements of the time referred more to what Stürmer termed “the technocratic underestimation of history by the political Right and the progressive strangulation of history by the Left”¹⁴ that ended up damaging the very concepts and memory of the past; which instead of untethering the Federal Republic (in light of its centrepiece role of political and economic heft within the Atlantic and European systems), was further threatening to burden the national consciousness. What Stürmer, therefore, attributes as the main drawback in the quest to create and maintain the continuity he so craves is that the communication gap or the view of the past in each new generation in Germany must contest with all of the upheavals in German national history, not a narrow focus on one particular past to the detriment of all other interpretations. This is what he wanted his public to try and perceive – the long view of history, instead of a narrow focus on the most recent dictatorial past.

III. “The Past that Will Not Pass”

One of the pioneering figures of the *Historikerstreit* debates was the pre-eminent German historian Ernst Nolte. Associated with the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Nolte, with his background in studies of fascism and communism, was professor emeritus at the Free University of Berlin, where he taught modern history. Siding on the part of the conservatives in the debates surrounding fascism and communism, Nolte gained prominence as part of the argumentative back-and-forth which ensued between him and Jürgen Habermas, and which also form the kernel of the discussion and its aftermath to this day.

The title of Nolte’s essay – “The Past That Will Not Pass: A Speech That Could Be Written but Not Delivered” (published in the *FAZ* on June 6th 1986) – refers to a speech which Nolte had initially planned to present before the Roemerberg Conversations convention in Frankfurt. There are differing views as to whether the organizers of the event really did withdraw their invitation (as Nolte claimed) or whether as some of his staunchest critics allege, Nolte himself refused to attend. Be that as it may, Nolte in iron terms lays down what he means by the fetching title of his essay – stating emphatically that it is the ghost of the National Socialist past to which he is referring. Moreover, it is his use of the word “bugaboo” – a bogey – when speaking of the ills of the recent past hanging over the German present which is most striking in his initial opening salvos. He is adamant in referring to a position of confusion which has undergirded the present political thinking in the Federal Republic, pointing to a sense of deep-seated insecurity whenever it came to an assessment of the Nazi past. Similar also is his critique of the stance of feminism which, according to his understanding, tends to make a monster out of the masculinity associated with National Socialism¹⁵. He is keen on drawing a line under the German past, so that the German past may not be seen as so “essentially different from other pasts”¹⁶. He is particularly critical of the process of ‘coming to terms with the past’ or the *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* – instead asserting that this process has less to do with drawing a definitive line under the National Socialist past and more to do with fanning the fires of holding onto a persecuted past which confer a kind of privilege on the heirs of the persecuted. Nolte very controversially compares the moral guilt of the Germans to the “‘guilt of the Jews’ which was a main argument of National Socialists.”¹⁷. On reading the essay, one gets that Nolte’s meaning is that where a normal process of forgetting and moving on with history should have resumed, the Federal

¹³Mary Nolan, “The Historikerstreit and Social History,” *New German Critique* Special Issue, no. 44 (Spring-Summer 1988): 62-63, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/488146>.

¹⁴Stürmer, “History in a Land without History,” 17.

¹⁵ Ernst Nolte, “The Past That Will Not Pass: A Speech That Could Be Written but Not Delivered,” in *Forever In The Shadow of Hitler? Original Documents of the Historikerstreit, The Controversy Concerning the Singularity of the Holocaust*, trans. James Knowlton and Truett Cates (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1993), 18-19.

¹⁶ Nolte, 19.

¹⁷ Nolte, 19.

Republic is still bogged down with suspicions about its past. This led to a blocking of the normal process of healing and mending, and caused barriers to come in the way of scholarship – where fearless questions about the past could not be asked for fear of public reprisal and backlash. Nolte further states that the attention still attaching to the atrocious mechanism of the Final Solution serves the purpose of diverting the attention of the present populace – the generations Stürmer referred to – from such topical issues as the “question of “unborn life” or the presence of genocide yesterday in Vietnam and today in Afghanistan.”¹⁸

Nolte, in an earlier essay entitled “Between Historical Legend and Revisionism? The Third Reich in the Perspective of 1980”, had made some similar arguments, primary among them that the memory of the Third Reich was still as strong thirty-five years after its cessation (the essay was published in July 1980). Among some of his strongest comparisons and criticisms were that there should be a reconsideration of the Third Reich which should banish it from the historical isolation in which it is treated. One of his most controversial stands was that National Socialism should be understood as a kindred response to the threat of Bolshevism – “Was the Bolshevik murder of an entire class not the logical and factual prius of the “racial murder” of National Socialism?”¹⁹. Nolte makes a strong argument for historical revisionism when he asseverates that any demonization of the Third Reich had to be unacceptable and that a thorough and robust comparison of the extremes of the Third Reich “will not eliminate the singularity of the Third Reich, but they will allow it appear as a part of human history.”²⁰. Nolte held that German history had been so deeply politicised as for there to have been black and white sides to every consideration of history, and which had led to the aforementioned demonization of the Third Reich and Nazism. This polarization may have been understandable in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, but its continued tangent in present-day Germany was not characteristic of a successful democracy. Speaking of the controversy generated by Reagan’s visit to Bitburg, Nolte asks his readers to consider that the prejudices of the opponents of Nazism are so rife that a storm of protest had to accompany the Bitburg visit. The most regretful outcome of this stilted view of history was that it prevented the past to be examined in all its complexities, by only making a potent and evil example of the Nazis and Hitler. The past should be known in all its complexity – “black-and-white images of politically involved contemporaries should be correctable; earlier histories should be subject to revision”²¹. Nolte is of the view that any attempt at a reassessment of National Socialist history left it open to the charge of a possible “vindication of Hitler ... exculpation of the Germans ... or that they might fail to learn the lesson imposed upon them by history?”²²

In trying to advance the cause of the scientific approach of history to examine all facts and causes without bias, Nolte proffers a comparison of the Gulag Archipelago and Auschwitz, controversially stating that apart from the “sole exception of the technical process of gassing”²³, there was not much which the National Socialists had practiced which had not already been spoken of in the literature of the 1920s, and that there was nothing too unique about tortures, deportations, annihilation and extermination of a selected group. In order that the ethos of free inquiry and the discipline that it requires is not tarnished, it is important that such a safe space exist where all such questions may be examined under the limelight, questions that try to understand the delicate

¹⁸ Nolte, 19.

¹⁹ Nolte, 22.

²⁰ Ernst Nolte, “Between Historical Legend and Revisionism? The Third Reich in the Perspective of 1980,” in *Forever In The Shadow of Hitler? Original Documents of the Historikerstreit, The Controversy Concerning the Singularity of the Holocaust*, trans. James Knowlton and Truett Cates (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1993), 14-15.

²¹ Nolte, “The Past That Will Not Pass,” 20.

²² Nolte, 20.

²³ Nolte, 22.

subdivisions between the biological annihilations of the National Socialist regime vis-à-vis the social extirpation of the Bolshevik revolution. Nolte wraps up by emphatically stating that the time for the bounds of collectivist thinking – which shun critical inquiry of the kind he has been arguing for and which “stigmatize criticism of existing states of affairs as impermissible”²⁴ should sooner be done away with if the pursuit of truth is to be made free of utility, independent of the sway of present needs and desires.

IV. How to settle the damages: Jürgen Habermas in the *Historikerstreit*

The philosopher and social theorist Jürgen Habermas, famous the world over for his work with the Frankfurt School of Social History, may be credited for igniting the *Historikerstreit* into being, with the publication of his essay entitled “A Kind of Settlement of Damages: The Apologetic Tendencies in German History Writing,” in *Die Zeit* newspaper on July 11th 1986. Sharply critical of Nolte, Stürmer and Hillgruber’s book, Habermas criticises all three of them for trivializing the condition of the Holocaust in their blanket pursuit of trying to find a balance between “endowing higher meaning and mythologizing”²⁵. He criticises Stürmer for being less interested in the identity of the individual person rather than the possible integration of an entire community (forgetting in the process that a communal whole is made up of individualities). Severely critical of the description of the Eastern Front heroics of the Wehrmacht soldiers, as advanced by Andreas Hillgruber in the first part of his book *Two Kinds of Destruction*, Habermas compares his stance to that of Norbert Blüm – “Blüm argued that the action of annihilation in the camps could in fact continue only as long as the German eastern front held.”²⁶. Habermas proceeds to criticise Nolte and his offerings in the two essays published prior to Habermas’ own. With reference to the “Revisionism” essay, Habermas holds that Nolte bases his entire revisionism thesis on the fact that the history of the Third Reich was written and constituted by the victorious party, who hence made the entirety of the National Socialist doctrine into a perceived “negative myth.” Habermas is at his most scathing when unpacking Nolte’s comparison of the Holocaust to other historical terror regimes, among them the Cambodian genocide under Pol Pot, the Bolshevik revolution, Stalin’s liquidation of the kulak way of life, and the Gulag system of forced labour camps. He is especially trenchant in his derision of Nolte’s claim that the “so-called annihilation of the Jews during the Third Reich was a reaction or a distorted copy, but not a first act or an original.”²⁷. Chastising Nolte for his comment about the “technical process of gassing,” Habermas claims that Nolte is really little more than a revisionist trying to help the West German populace relieve themselves of guilt and become a flag-bearer for NATO. He chides the thesis that the Gulag is the antecedent of Auschwitz and argues that historians are almost always in the service of one ideology or many. Habermas, while himself arguing for a broad sweep about the nature and constituents of historiography (the ideological leanings) accused Nolte of pandering to the nationalist consciousness, when Nolte tries to take away the singularity of the Nazi horrors (by calling them a demonization of the recent past), while also trying to strip the momentousness of Auschwitz.

Habermas is resistant to any cause of revision, especially when it aims to reconstruct the historical specificities of the Third Reich. The critic Paul Rutschmann maintains that Habermas viewed the trio of

²⁴ Nolte, 23.

²⁵ Jürgen Habermas, “A Kind of Settlement of Damages: The Apologetic Tendencies in German History Writing,” in *Forever In The Shadow of Hitler? Original Documents of the Historikerstreit, The Controversy Concerning the Singularity of the Holocaust*, trans. James Knowlton and Truett Cates (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1993), 34-35.

²⁶ Habermas, 35.

²⁷ Habermas, 39.

Stürmer, Nolte and Hillgruber as a bunch of ideology planners²⁸ – whose only aim was to force a consensus into the national debate of reevaluating the Nazi past, via a comparative and long view of history lens. The evil which Habermas saw in these arguments was the portent of relativizing too conveniently and narrowly – that by a comparison of the Jewish experience to other traumatic genocides throughout the breadth and scope of history would strip the Holocaust of its singularity in that moment and time. Such a redrawing of historical lines was a perversion to the reflexivity of memory – “those complex connections between the criminality and the dubious normality of everyday life under Nazism, between destruction and vital productivity, between a devastating systematic perspective and an intimate, local perspective, could certainly stand being objectified and brought up to date.”²⁹ Habermas writes that while he isn’t against a careful delineation between understanding and condemnation of the recent past, he is definitely against the impulses that guide the misuse of national identity and which distorts national consciousness in favour of a rather patriotic/nationalistic West German new identity.

In an assessment of Habermas, Charles Maier adumbrates that knowledge which derives from a public discussion which in turn is completely unconstrained by political underpinnings is something that is important to Habermas’ conception of history; that his work “presupposes that knowledge and politics must be shaped in conversation, not in isolation.”³⁰ Habermas was of the view that a settlement of damages, as predicated by Stürmer as a kind of compensation for modern society, was an arrow that missed its mark. If the inner continuity of the German nation was to be assured by the application of scholarly rigor and the demythologizing of the past (wrest the Third Reich history from its isolation as held by Nolte), then the specifics of endowing meaning on national identity and culture was at the very centre. As Nolte would have it, just by stripping the uniqueness of the Third Reich and consequently its crimes, one could never endow meaning by studying the Holocaust as set against the formation of the Soviet Union (dekulakization, Bolshevism, Gulag). What Habermas strongly objected to was the too easy assimilation of the magnitude and cruelty of the Holocaust into an easily definable paradigm borne out of Bolshevism³¹.

Where Hillgruber had tried to overshadow the Holocaust by insisting on the heroic aspect of the Eastern Front fight (while it kept on sustaining the concentration camps), Nolte by his arguments and comparisons tried to include the Holocaust as one among many modern atrocities. This may be the reason why Habermas viewed the tendency of current German historical writing to tilt towards a promotion of apologetic tendencies (refer title). The singular magnitude of Auschwitz could never be reduced to a mere claim of technical modernization, and comparisons to atrocities worldwide should never be allowed to soften the memory of the National Socialist period for young Germans not immediately acquainted with the post-war years, except through familial and historical lineage. Habermas advanced the cause of a “constitutional patriotism”³², one that could still tether the Federal Republic to a leading role in Central Europe, but without the burden of a philosophy colored by a nationalistic outlook. The only way forward – towards a balancing of past, present and the harnessing of future history – was by abiding to the principles of democracy: “the unconditional opening of

²⁸ Paul Rutschmann, “*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*: Historikerstreit and the Notion of Continued Responsibility,”

New German Review: A Journal of Germanic Studies 25, no. 1 (2011): 11.

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1fg6076b>.

²⁹Habermas, “A Kind of Settlement of Damages,” 41.

³⁰ Maier, *The Unmasterable Past*, 41.

³¹Habermas, “A Kind of Settlement of Damages,” 41.

³² Habermas, 43.

the Federal Republic to the political culture of the West³³ – the standout achievement of Habermas’ post-war period.

V. Augstein and the New Auschwitz Lie

On October 6th 1986, in the pages of *Spiegel* magazine, the journalist and politician Rudolf Augstein penned a fierce criticism of the positions taken by Ernst Nolte and Andreas Hillgruber, and weighed in on the ongoing *Historikerstreit* among West German public intellectuals. His essay is termed the “New Auschwitz Lie” – referring to the propensity for Holocaust denial, the refusal to acknowledge the genocidal, state-sponsored mass persecution and murder of European Jewry. Augstein professes bewilderment that the Cologne historian Hillgruber, with the publication of his controversial book *Zweierlei Untergang*, should really centre on whether it was six million Jews who were annihilated or as Hillgruber details, only five. He is scathing when he states that “Hillgruber sets the number of Jewish victims at Auschwitz “according to reliable estimates” at approximately one million.”³⁴. Referring to the threat deemed important by Nolte in his piece on historical revisionism, namely the declaration in 1939 by the President of the Jewish World Congress – Chaim Weizmann – that the Jews of the world had declared war on the side of England³⁵, Augstein questions whether one can really take such a claim seriously in believing that Hitler may have felt threatened by such a declaration³⁶. Certainly, that declaration could not possibly be a justification for the way in which Hitler treated Jews since then – by interning them, making them prisoners of war, and eventually paving the treacherous path to the Final Solution.

Augstein is particularly incensed at certain of Hillgruber’s questions – for example, he cites the question of whether the annihilation of European Jewry could really be considered to have been “pre-determined.” While acknowledging that the history was written by the victors (as Nolte had so many times emphasised in his essays), Augstein is sceptical of whether new “accents” – new revisions, endowing a new meaning – must of necessity accompany any revision of the war crimes under the Hitler regime. He argues that it is not productive to lean into the kind of comparisons that Nolte had previously drawn – the manner in which the Israelis might be remembered had the PLO been victorious, and such historical events as Hitler’s singular racial crimes to the mass social and class war waged by the Stalin administration in Soviet Russia. Augstein is critical of any revisional look which tries to place Hitler as being the only person with the desire to want a systematic extirpation of the Jews – that leaves open a dangerous tendency to exonerate all those others who were adjudged criminals of war during the Nuremberg, and other subsequent war trials. He cites the example of Hans Globke, the man who worked in the Ministry of the Interior during the Third Reich and later continued as Chief of Staff in West Germany under the Konrad Adenauer regime. Globke, while annotating the Nuremberg Race Laws, did not proffer any objection to the widespread discrimination against Jews that the Laws substantiated and brought into the legal framework, and as Augstein mentions, while in charge of the Office for Jewish Affairs, brought about the mandatory name change directive – one that would make it easier to identify and imprison Jewish men and women. Augstein, by calling out the nefarious nexus between Hitler and his high command officials (like Globke), reminds readers that Hillgruber or Nolte’s thesis is flawed, that all high-ranking members of the Nazi party were equally culpable for the fate of the Jews, and that Hillgruber’s “frank assertion [that] the Jews would have been discriminated against, but not a man, woman, or child would have

³³ Habermas, 43.

³⁴ Rudolf Augstein, “The New Auschwitz Lie,” in *Forever In The Shadow of Hitler? Original Documents of the Historikerstreit, The Controversy Concerning the Singularity of the Holocaust*, trans. James Knowlton and Truett Cates (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1993), 130.

³⁵ Nolte, “Between Historical Legend and Revisionism,” 8.

³⁶ Augstein, “The New Auschwitz Lie,” 130.

been gassed.”³⁷ is a preposterous claim and he hereby makes the controversial statement that Hillgruber should be considered “a constitutional Nazi, one of the kind that would exist even without Hitler.”³⁸

Augstein systematically shows the links between Hitler’s aimed objectives and the way things were executed to the letter, citing a *Reichsbahn* bill that thoroughly detailed the discounts given to the government on any issues connected to the transportation of Jews to the work and death camps, while also underlining that the wagons themselves served as gas chambers by asphyxiating those rounded-up with engine exhaust. He also doubly emphasizes that any claim that the leaders of the *Wehrmacht* were unaware of the final objective – the extermination policy against Jews, Roma, Sinti – is a false claim, stating that German policy from the first day of occupation in Poland was the complete and utter annihilation of all Jews. He also states that all of Hitler’s enforcers really did believe that they were strengthening the cause of *lebensraum* – by expanding and forcibly killing people of a different ethnicity, they were really “building a great Reich in the East in which their grandchildren and great-grandchildren would live as members of the master race.”³⁹ It is dangerous to draw a line under past history, as Nolte would do, by pointing out the supposed historical antecedents – the originals to Hitler’s copy – by saying that the kulak liquidation and mass delegitimization of the peasant class had occurred prior to Hitler seizing power, or that the victims of Stalin’s 1938 Purges happened before Hitler went to war, first against Poland and eventually Soviet Russia. None of those claims, factual or otherwise, can deprive the insanity of Hitler’s actions. He cites a passage from Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, where a thirty-eight-year-old Hitler is expecting the collapse of the Eastern empire, while zeroing in on Jewish domination within Russia as being the cause. “We are chosen to be witnesses of a catastrophe that will be the violent confirmation of the correctness of the national theory of race”⁴⁰ – the xenophobia is captured quite clearly in such proclamations, and this is why any project of trying to incorporate the crimes committed under the National Socialist regime with other historical atrocities serves more the cause of delimiting the meaning of the unique persecution and murder of the European Jewry, rather than any historical attempt at a fuller understanding of such genocidal acts. The Auschwitz lie should never be allowed to perpetrate so evenly, on the coattails of a purported reassessment of German national history, and should never go unchallenged by those capable of reasoned argumentative acumen.

VI. Conclusion

The *Historikerstreit* that captured the press and media in the summer and autumn of 1986 was one where the work of historians, philosophers and journalists became of stellar importance. It captured the very uniqueness of the moment – in the year previous the Federal President Richard von Weizsäcker had addressed the Bundestag in Bonn on 8 May, on the fortieth anniversary commemorating the end of the War in Europe – by stating what a day of “decisive historical importance”⁴¹ it was for all Europe. He makes it clear in his historic address that this day should be singled out for remembrance of all the suffering borne by countless millions, and also to reflect on the course taken by history. The arguments and debates, the criticism, and the apologetics which the *Historikerstreit* catapulted into the public limelight draws from that. The heated debate among conservatives and liberals, centered on questions of how best to approach and remember the National Socialist past of West Germany, and which historiographical routes to employ while trying to understand the ongoing

³⁷Augstein, 131.

³⁸Augstein, 131.

³⁹Augstein, 133.

⁴⁰Quoted in Augstein, 133.

⁴¹Richard von Weizsäcker, “Speech during the Ceremony Commemorating the 40th Anniversary of the End of War in Europe and of National-Socialist Tyranny on 8 May 1985 at the Bundestag, Bonn,” *Bundespräsidialamt*, September 18, 2023, https://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Reden/2015/02/150202-RvW-Rede-8-Mai-1985-englisch.pdf?__blob=publicationFile.

burden and responsibility of the Holocaust, of the process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* and interpreting the facts of history. The role of history and national identity, the freedom to pursue academic lines of inquiry unafraid of political or institutional backlash, the issues of modern collective memory and collective history – all played a part in the various positions assumed by the leading historians and philosophers taking part in the debate. The Nolte-Habermas confrontation forms one of the cores of the argument, in that Nolte wanted to examine the Third Reich without the deep politicization that any such endeavour always invited. Nolte's thesis that this uniquely German phenomena was just as comparable to other results of dictatorships worldwide and the need to de-isolate lines of inquiry into the Hitlerian past drew arrows of fire from the philosopher Habermas, who was against a revisionist look at history that did not take the side of an ideological standpoint. Habermas was of the opinion that historians are always deeply embedded on one side of ideology or other, and a complete depoliticization of history was a vain effort at twisting core truths – while an objectified understanding of history might be possible, revisionist history ran the danger of being in “service of a nationalist renovation of conventional identity.”⁴² One may argue that historians on both sides of the divide mistook their colleagues' standpoints to some extent and may have misrepresented certain of the arguments while in the midst of the vitriolic exchange of words, but it is imperative to remember that the historians' debate was an impactful reflection on the ways and means of remembering and dwelling with German national history, while also producing discussions on the political present of the time they were in. It may be cogent to state that while the *Historikerstreit* by itself was unlikely to chart the course of the West German future, it certainly opened up lines of inquiry and ways of thinking through the vast morass of history in newer and previously unexplored veins.

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⁴² Habermas, “A Kind of Settlement of Damages,” 42.

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