
BOOKS & WRITERS

Can One Explain the “Demonic”?

Problems of German History—By FRITZ STERN

THE GERMAN HISTORIAN Ludwig Dehio wrote (in 1951) that

the prerequisite for *any* creative German response after the epoch of the two World Wars is the unconditional recognition of the terrible role that we have played in this period. We were the last, and also the most demonic, hegemonial power of the declining old Europe. . . .

It was a succinct, programmatic statement: Germany's repeated bids for world power must be seen in the light of previous hegemonial aspirations, all of which occurred at a time and indeed as part of Europe's ascendancy in the world. Germany's bid came as Europe's power was already shrinking, as witness America's role in the defeats of Germany. By invoking the demonic (a category more familiar to Germans than to others), Dehio sought to suggest some dark, inexplicable energy that drives or lures genius and greatness into the nether world of criminality. From 1890 to 1945 dark, irrational forces did batter Germany, and finally left a legacy of inhumanity such as no power had bequeathed before.

Of the centrality and complexity of German history there can be no doubt. Germany's reaching for greatness—her political expansionism and her intellectual-artistic innovations—shaped the history of our era. In a sense we are all victims and heirs of German history: victims because earlier convulsions still affect our lives, heirs because we continue to live off the great achievements of German culture. The German past is unlikely to lose its grim fascination; it is a challenge to our historical understanding, as it is to our moral sense. The injury wrought to our collective self-regard has yet to be fully grasped. Finally, Germany's persistent squandering of its own power may tell us something about modern politics and the uses of power generally.

For all these reasons the study of German history has attracted extraordinary talent—inside the two Germanies and abroad, especially in

Britain and America. Since 1945 there has been a flood of memoirs and monographs dealing with the German past. There have been some major scholarly battles as well, but never drawn along national lines; in fact, West German and foreign historians have cooperated as never before.

To master the details of this new scholarship is a daunting task, and hence the appearance of Gordon Craig's *Germany 1866–1945*¹ would be welcome under any circumstances; its appearance in the *Oxford History of Modern Europe*, edited by Lord Bullock and Sir William Deakin, is particularly auspicious. For that series has been extraordinarily successful—despite or perhaps because of the fact that it has mirrored the diversity of historical writing today. Twenty years ago appeared the first volume in that series, A. J. P. Taylor's history of European diplomacy, an audacious if perversely conventional effort. Taylor transcended the older genre of diplomatic history by writing a fine first chapter on the context in which statesmen had to act—and then proceeded blithely to depict their policies as if that context did not exist, as if, in fact, they could operate autonomously. He maximised the possibilities of that older genre by writing with verve, insight, and cheerful indifference to received opinion.

The editors of the Oxford History seem to afford laudable latitude to their authors. The most recent work before Craig—Theodore Zeldin's two volumes on France—is defiantly unconventional, the most comprehensive and brilliant study of a people's political culture I know of. A. J. P. Taylor and Theodore Zeldin suggest something of the range of historical writing today—and while the very multiplicity of approaches is a sign of health as compared to the sterility of orthodoxy, it also underlines the danger of an excessive parcelling-out of the past, an endless slicing up of it into discrete bits, until the past in its original unity recedes ever further.

IN ASKING Gordon Craig to write the second of two projected volumes on Germany—the first will also be written by an American, the remarkable young historian, James Sheehan—the editors

¹ *Germany 1866–1945*. By GORDON A. CRAIG. Oxford University Press, £10.

selected a seasoned craftsman, whose *Politics of the Prussian Army* has been a landmark since its appearance in 1955. The virtues long associated with Craig's work are again the hallmark of this narrative of German politics, a synthesis of most of the recent monographic literature. Craig is a master at reconstructing the tangled web of political, diplomatic, and military history. He has an admirable grasp of historical personages, of the immediate circumstances of decisions, of motives and unintended consequences, of power politics, and of the workings of bureaucracy and government. His individual portraits are often gems of perception; future assessments will want to reckon with his sketches of Wilhelm II and Hitler, of Stresemann and Brüning (the last two surprisingly benevolent). He writes with a compelling clarity, an unflagging energy, and a style attuned to the drama of the subject; he has a deft sense for the apt quote or the striking phrase. Detachment and judiciousness mark his own work; he is hard on causes he would tend to favour—such as the Social Democrats—and understanding of men and movements he abhors. Craig's account of Hitler, according to him the only figure in Weimar who possessed political genius, attests the possibilities of fair-mindedness and insight.

At the beginning Craig implicitly abjures what might be called the perspective of 1933 or 1945, that is, the effort of seeing the German past as the necessary prelude to Nazism:

The brief history of united Germany... demands the attention of reflective men, not only for what it has to teach about the role of fear and cupidity and obtuseness in human affairs, about the seduction of power and the consequences of political irresponsibility, and about the apparently limitless inhumanity that man is capable of inflicting upon his fellows, but because it also has much to say about courage and steadfastness, about devotion to the cause of liberty, and about resistance to the evils of tyranny. It is important to recall that... there were always men and women... who risked their careers and their lives to create the kind of Germany in which [the triumph of humanity] could come true. What is recounted here is as much their story as that of the powers that triumphed over them.

What follows is a narrative of issues and events, of leading persons and historic actors. Despite his intention, Craig concentrates on the powers that triumphed rather than on the people who resisted. He describes—perhaps better than anyone else before him—the political career of unified Germany. Here is an account of the unbroken difficulty of governing modern Germany—from Bismarck's régime that was “based on the premise of social immobility” to Wilhelm II's hectic apathy. His

treatment of the November Revolution is good, and picking up from remarks by Count Kessler about German officers sporting epaulettes again by mid-November and from Bakunin's despair in 1848 about Germans not burning public buildings, he says in an unusually blunt judgment:

... it is no exaggeration to say that [the Republic] failed in the end partly because German officers were allowed to put their epaulettes back on again so quickly and because the public buildings were not burned down, along with the bureaucrats who inhabited them.

He depicts Weimar where crisis described normality, and analyses what Arnold Toynbee once called the “malignant chaos” of the Third Reich. Craig grasps the connections between domestic and foreign policies—connections that may have been particularly intricate in the case of Germany. So many German statesmen sought to repeat Bismarck's use of foreign triumphs to compel domestic critics. Perhaps this extra pressure further blurred the vision of leaders; the search for greatness ended in the historic defeats of 1918 and 1945, which opened up the possibilities of domestic reform.

CRAIG'S EMPHASIS is rigorously political; out of twenty chapters he allots only two to cultural developments; but his few pages on education, especially on universities and the conservative professoriate, are incisive and far from pious. Equally forthright is the section on the condition of women, kept in a state of perpetual dependence. Of Weimar culture he says that “in the richness and variety of its cultural accomplishments [it] is second to none in German history.” Informative though these forays are, they tend to be discrete essays, insufficiently integrated with the rest of the book. Are there, for example, connections between the condition of women and the general attitude toward politics or *Innerlichkeit*?

To combine analysis with narrative, even to present continuities over time, is one of the hardest tasks of the historian. The narrative here is the broad, stately stream of events; analysis would interrupt the flow. Nor does Craig pause for problems of historiographical disputes. *What happened* and *how*—not *why*—are the questions that inform the book. The record reconstructed is not unfamiliar, in part because of Craig's own previous work.

It is not sensible to wish that the author had written a different kind of book from the successful one he has given us. In fact, it is likely to become a standard work for the political history of modern Germany; its nearest rival, the third volume of Hajo Holborn's magisterial *History of Modern Germany*, is longer and by its philosophical penetration makes greater demands than does

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Craig's work. But there are constraints that the genre imposed on Craig, and his omissions might have illuminated certain aspects of German history, as he himself would be likely to admit. His very first sentence asks: "Is it a mistake to begin with Bismarck?" The question reflects his concern with changing historiographical modes, but having answered it in the negative, he resolutely stays with political leaders, with events. There is almost a kind of self-denying austerity to the book, as he defiantly clings to the surface of politics, with but occasional excursions elsewhere.

There are drawbacks to this traditional method; a few examples will suffice. Craig acknowledges that Imperial politics were deeply affected by the social transformation that took place between Unification and the Great War. But one paragraph on economic developments between 1870 and 1890—and that based on two books written some 40 years ago—is inadequate (particularly as compared to three pages on the Kruger Despatch and four on the Zabern affair). Urbanisation and secularisation are mentioned in passing. Social stratification or the life and assumptions of the lower classes are hardly considered at all. What James Joll has felicitously called the "unspoken assumptions" remain virtually unexamined; Ralf Dahrendorf's authoritative analysis of the historic barriers to German democracy, though ack-

nnowledged, is not pursued. The book is a study of politics without social roots; the concreteness of the political recital is itself a form of abstraction.

IN FOREIGN POLICY the emphasis on events also slights an analysis of some of the deeper processes—the emergence, for example, of the Anglo-German antagonism, one of the most fateful elements in recent history. Or to take a more basic example: Craig necessarily mentions (but always in passing) the habit of self-delusion, the vast over-estimation of one's own strength, mixed often with what he calls: "This desire for recognition, which was to be found in all sections of society, [and which] was the biggest political fact of the last years of the [19th] century." But why this thirst for recognition, this longing for acclaimed power coupled with this exaggerated sense of insecurity? Why this wilful blindness, this unconditionality (to use Craig's own favourite term) which hobbled German expansionism before, during, and after the Great War? Craig speaks of Ludendorff's "megalomania", says of a major decision in July 1918 that "irrationality could hardly be carried further"—and yet this habitual delusion is nowhere fully examined.

THE IRRATIONAL played an extraordinary role in German politics and culture. After comprehensively discussing the great German Inflation of the early 1920s, Craig comments that "its political cost had been great, and it left wounds in the collective psyche that did not heal in the years of relative stability. . . ." But that psyche had been battered before. The German Youth Movement—barely mentioned in passing—had manifested something of a deep psychic dissatisfaction; the War had torn into that psyche, and Versailles outraged it. Can one understand Hitler, that orator-therapist, without some sense of the unconscious? Craig does quote Otto Strasser's famous description of Hitler in a mass meeting:

"His words go like an arrow to the target; he touches each private wound on the raw, liberating the mass unconscious, expressing its innermost aspirations, telling it what it most wants to hear."

The vulnerability of the German psyche to Hitler was more important for his rise than all the putative funds contributed by monopoly capitalists. Twenty-five years ago, Franz Neumann, whose *Behemoth* had been a brilliant Marxist analysis of the Nazi State, gave a lecture on the rise of Nazism called "Anxiety and Politics", the very title indicating a corrective to a view that had given insufficient attention to the irrational. Peter Loewenberg's recent work suggests how meticulous scholarship can be illuminated by psychological insight.

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Craig's discussion of Nazism is good, though a comparative dimension would have strengthened it. The Nazi régime depended on willing submission as much as on the latent threat of terror, and Craig documents the capitulation of the intellectual world by elaborating on the painful examples of Gerhart Hauptmann, Carl Schmitt, Martin Heidegger, and Gottfried Benn. By contrast, very little is said about the ambiguous and divided response of the Christian churches, though their accommodation and belated, intermittent resistance had an even larger impact than did the ideological subservience and opportunism of intellectuals.

One last example of the difficulty of the genre may be adduced. With his usual forthrightness, Craig says:

The extermination of the Jews is the most dreadful chapter in German history, doubly so because the men who effected it closed their senses to the reality of what they were doing by taking pride in the technical efficiency of their actions and, at moments when conscience threatened to break in, telling themselves that they were doing their duty and serving their country.

But were there not antecedents—both in the spectacular rise of German Jewry and in the growth of anti-Semitism—that need to be explicated if that dreadful chapter can be even remotely grasped? A few scattered sentences or an occasional paragraph on anti-Semitism seem insufficient.

Craig has an implicit sense of the importance of historical reconstruction. Speaking of Hitler's intended "scorched earth" policy in 1945 (which, if executed, would have been far worse for Germany than any imaginable variant of the Morgenthau Plan) Craig comments:

The German people survived [in 1945], but only after they had been stripped of everything that had obscured their vision of reality during the drunken years of destiny and had been brought to *Stunde Null*, the cold grey dawn in which they were challenged at long last to come to terms with their history.

This coming-to-terms with that particular past is a continuing process; and Craig's book is a part of that process. One hopes that more comprehensive analyses—of the same outstanding literary quality—will follow. German history will continue to make exacting demands on the historian. What Dehio called "the demonic" cannot be caught in a recital of events—nor can the substratum of society, its rich texture, and its bonds be thus explained. The writing of German history requires what all historical inquiry calls for—only more so: it requires breadth, it requires new perspectives, adapted in part from outside narrow professionalism, from the intellectual culture at large, perspectives which would (to use a phrase of the late Richard Hofstadter) add to "the speculative richness of history."

Science & Anarchism

Notes on Feyerabend—By JOHN NAUGHTON

THE RETURN of the Ayatollah Khomeini to Iran has thrown some unexpected light on all that we hold most dear. Implicit in Western media coverage of "the most amazing comeback since Lazarus", as someone put it, was a palpable sense of journalistic astonishment at the sheer effrontery of the man—an elderly religious leader who has the temerity, in this day and age, to set up a religious state. Suppose, however, that the scenario had been slightly different—specifically that Khomeini had been an engineer with a PhD from MIT, returning to set up a government of technocrats. Would we then have been quite so astonished, or so apprehensive about the outcome? I think not. The reason, of course, is that we have become so accustomed to science's usurpation of the place of religion as the constitutional bedfellow of the state that we no longer notice anything unusual about the arrangement. Our unthinking acceptance of this state of

affairs is all the more remarkable when one considers that it is such a comparatively recent development—essentially dating only from the Second World War. The force of habit is indeed powerful, and perfectly capable of inducing strange inconsistencies in behaviour. How many liberal intellectuals, for example, object vigorously to the compulsory teaching of religion in state schools, but raise not a whimper at the compulsory teaching of physics and chemistry, and the indoctrination of children with the notion that the view of reality afforded by the physical sciences is the "true" one?

Unpalatable though the thought may be, there are some parallels between the obeisance paid by the contemporary lay public to science and the servile respect shown by medieval peasants to the Church. No doubt there is an element of utilitarian cunning involved—a subconscious desire to pay homage to any institution which enjoys such close