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Letter from the Editor: History Writing as the Continuation of Politics by Other Means

Over the past four years, *Central European History* (*CEH*) has had the unenviable task of soliciting, under my editorship, almost a dozen memorials for recently deceased scholars who shaped the field and profession in countless ways—prompting one appreciative colleague to write that the journal has now created, "through its memorials, a kind of archaeology about the writing of German history." Ones for Peter Gay (1923-2015), Allan Mitchell (1933-2016), Ernst Nolte (1923-2016), Gerhard A. Ritter (1929-2015), Carl Schorske (1915-2015), Fritz Stern (1926-2016), and Hans-Ulrich Wehler (1931-2014) have already appeared, and *CEH* will publish two more in the fall of 2018 to honor Georg Iggers (1926-2017) and Eberhard Jäckel (1929-2017). Another appears in the current issue: a lengthy **tribute to Hans Mommsen (1930-2015) by Larry Eugene Jones**, who painstakingly portrays Mommsen's enormous impact on the field of twentieth-century German history. One thinks of his pathbreaking contribution to the "intentionalist/functionalist" debate and his ideas about "cumulative radicalization" under the National Socialists, of his provocative characterization of Adolf Hitler as a "weak dictator" operating in a "polycratic" regime, of his spirited interventions in the *Historikerstreit* and the Goldhagen debate of the 1980s and 1990s. At the same time, Jones emphasizes the "moral passion" that Mommsen brought to the study of German history as "an engaged historian who felt passionately about the issues he addressed …" Yet, as he correctly hastens to add, "passion is not necessarily an ingredient of good historical scholarship…" It must "always be tempered, as it was in Mommsen's case, by a respect for the sources and fidelity to what a careful and objective analysis of those sources will reveal."

That sounds almost quaint in our postmodern age, especially in light of renewed criticism, yet again, of "academic history" for supposedly failing to "transcend its eighteenth-century origins as an empiricist enterprise," for "treating reified appearances (i.e., immediately observable, preferably archival, evidence) as embodying the real and containing the truth of social relations…," for tending "to produce scholars rather than thinkers…" (as if the two were mutually exclusive categories).* Of course, few would accuse Hans Mommsen of not having been a "thinker," or of having been averse to "theory" (though some might criticize him for not having adopted the varieties of "theory" they embrace …). In any event, Mommsen's career and oeuvre remind us that, even when the writing of history—and *writing* about the writing of history—can appear to be the continuation of politics by other means, this can sometimes be done at a very high level indeed.

It is not just the historical profession that has suffered important losses of late. Two luminary figures who dominated the postwar German political scene from the mid-1970s to the late 1990s have recently died as well: Helmut Schmidt (1918-2015) and Helmut Kohl (1930-2017). To mark this important caesura in the political life of the Federal Republic, *CEH*

*See Ethan Kleinberg, Joan Wallach Scott, and Gary Wilder's manifesto "Theses on Theory and History" (http://theoryrevolt.com).

invited six experts—**Clayton Clemens, Ronald Granieri, Mathias Haeussler, Mary Elise Sarotte, Kristina Spohr, and Christian Wicke**—to participate in a discussion forum on the **"Lives, Legacies, and Historical Impact of the 'Two Helmuts.'"** Going beyond prevailing stereotypes, their contributions argue that the approaches and policies of these two politicians—who, in many ways, offer an obvious character study in contrasts—were ultimately more similar than many assume; that there was a great deal of continuity in the policies they adopted; and that both men largely "preserved" what they had inherited domestically, while pushing Europe forward, as Clemens puts it, "along a path that had already been paved." Despite wide areas of agreement, the participants nevertheless seem to clash when it comes to assessing the respective talents and legacies of the "two Helmuts," as well as when it comes to speculating about which of the two had a greater impact on the course of postwar (West) German history. It is perhaps here that one detects, once again, the way in which historians sometimes approach the writing of history as a continuation of politics by other means—especially when it comes to "politics" in the narrowest sense of the term.

That holds equally true for some of the themes explored in **Gavriel Rosenfeld's "Who Was 'Hitler' Before Hitler? Historical Analogies and the Struggle to Understand Nazism, 1930-1945,"** which looks at how contemporary journalists in the English-speaking world endeavored to make sense of Hitler following his rise to power. Rosenfeld's point of departure are the frequent comparisons made today between the *Führer* and contemporary political figures—not seldom by some historians and other scholars who seem to wear their politics on their sleeves, at least when it comes to this topical topos. But his actual focus lies elsewhere: on the ways in which contemporaries of Hitler employed historical analogies to explain the threat posed by the Nazis and, at the same time, to reassure readers that Hitler was, in a sense, little more than old wine in new bottles. Rosenfeld's article alerts us to the limited explanatory powers of historical analogies. But what is especially striking about the ones drawn in the 1930s and 1940s is the wide array of historical, mythical, and literary figures and villains upon which observers and pundits drew at the time. To paraphrase Paul Fussell: "Oh What a Literary Interwar"—something that underscores the striking poverty, by contrast, of the ubiquitous "Hitler-centric" analogies of today. As Rosenfeld cautions in his conclusion, the *Führer*'s post-1945 "rise to analogical dominance" as the embodiment of pure evil "has impoverished our historical vocabulary, reduced our historical literacy, and limited our ability to understand present-day events."

Recent political developments, above all the presidency of Donald Trump, have been a recurring theme in *CEH* of late, either directly or more obliquely. That was true of the fiftieth anniversary issue that appeared in March 2018, and it is also the case in the present one—most unmistakably in Rosenfeld's article, but also in the discussion forum about the "two Helmuts." The other two articles in this issue are, by contrast, without any (ostensible) presentist bent. **Elizabeth B. Jones's "Fixing Prussia's Peripheries: Rural Disasters and Prusso-German State Building, 1866-1914"** looks at a neglected aspect of Prussian state formation: the role that various types of "emergencies" in remote rural regions played in (de)stabilizing the new unified state. Focusing on official responses to disasters in the agricultural "peripheries" of East Prussia and the northwestern state of Hanover, the article deals with changing expectations about—as well as competition for—limited state aid, and the effect that this had on perceptions of what constituted "good governance." At the same time, Jones argues, state efforts to deal with rural disasters "simultaneously tested and

reinforced the bonds among Prussians, and later between Prussians and Germans," thus exposing "visible fractures in the bombastic images of unity and strength crafted by [Otto von] Bismarck and his supporters in the era of unification." Her article sheds light as well on evolving, almost "orientalist" perceptions at this time of "otherness" and "backwardness" within Prussia and unified Germany proper.

Cassandra Painter's "Domesticating a Myth: Catholic Saint-Making in Weimar Germany" is an equally fascinating examination of religious revival after World War I that focuses on themes of regional identity, gender, and the perceived challenges of modernity during an especially volatile period in twentieth-century German history. Taking as its focus the early 1920s revival of a movement dedicated to the century-old veneration of Westphalian mystic and stigmatic Anna Katharina Emmerick (1774-1824), the article sheds light on tensions between lay venerators and Catholic elites over what constituted "proper" and "acceptable" forms of grassroots religiosity. Jones also emphasizes the ways in which Catholics evoked "nostalgic visions" of the Westphalian *Heimat*—in contradistinction to, and as a reaction against, the "godless modern metropolis" they closely associated with Weimar. Finally, the article looks at how Germans instrumentalized Emmerick's image to give voice to prevailing foreign policy resentments, portraying the mystic as a symbol of German martyrdom at the hands of World War I's victorious but vengeful Allies. She came to be seen as a "crucified saint for a crucified *Volk*" during a period of "(national) humiliation, impoverishment, and sacrifice"—a period strongly reminiscent, it was thought, of Emmerick's own time a century earlier under Napoleonic occupation.

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