

MEMORIAL

Henry Ashby Turner, Jr. (1932–2008)

Helmut Walser Smith

HENRY Ashby Turner, Jr. passed away at seventy-six years of age on December 17, 2008, succumbing to complications of melanoma. With his passing, the history profession loses a historian of modern Germany whose archival research and revisions of received wisdom permanently altered our understanding of how the Third Reich came to power.

Born in Atlanta, Georgia, Turner grew up in Maryland and received a B.A. in history from Washington and Lee University in 1954, where he was elected to Phi Beta Kappa. At Washington and Lee, he studied with William A. Jenks, a historian of Austria who inspired generations of European historians, and the sociologist James Graham Leyburn. Turner remained a loyal, admiring student of his undergraduate mentors, and would later dedicate his magnum opus to them. Beginning in fall 1954, Turner spent a year as a Fulbright Fellow, first at the University of Munich, then at the Free University of Berlin, where he fell in love with what was then still a rubble-filled former capital. He subsequently enrolled as a graduate student in history at Princeton University, where he earned a Ph.D. in 1960 under the supervision of Gordon Craig. Hired as an assistant professor by Yale University, Turner remained at Yale for the duration of his forty-four year career. He became a full professor in 1971, chair of the department from 1976 to 1979, and Master of Davenport College from 1981 to 1991, and he held a series of endowed chairs before retiring as the Stillé Professor of History in 2002.

Turner, as readers of this journal will know, was a historian of twentieth-century Germany and the author of more than a half-dozen major books on the subject. He was especially fascinated by the Weimar years and by the demise of Germany's first experiment with democracy. For Turner, that demise was never foreordained. Throughout the body of his work, he emphasized that history could have turned out otherwise. Contingency was for Turner both an article of faith and the starting point for his understanding of the historian's craft. It also influenced his teaching. Many of his undergraduate students will not easily forget his lecture on the Battle of Königgratz of 1866, which ended with a thunderous victory for Habsburg forces, the destruction

of the vaulted Prussian army, and the victorious march of Austrian troops down Unter den Linden. Yale students scribbled attentively, until Turner, his smile wry, told them to put down their pencils, and erase everything from the battle onward.

Turner's first book, *Stresemann and the Politics of the Weimar Republic* (Princeton, 1963), addressed the foreign minister's role in domestic politics, and argued that Stresemann was a "pragmatic conservative" and a "republican of reason" who came, however reluctantly, to genuinely embrace the Weimar Republic. Previous studies had focused almost exclusively on Stresemann's foreign policy. Turner showed that Stresemann's inability to bring the right wing of the Deutsche Volkspartei (DVP) behind his conciliatory policies in the late phase of the Weimar Republic was an important factor allowing the party to drift to the right after his death in 1929. As a result of this shift to the right, Stresemann's party, the DVP, helped to undermine the republic and opened the way for a regime that Stresemann "would have found reprehensible in every respect." A deeply humane work, Turner's first book also signaled hallmarks of Turner's approach to the past: his focus on individuals, with a corresponding emphasis on the political responsibility of historical actors; his sense for the openness of history, which only underscored the tragedy of Stresemann's early demise; and the communication of historical argument in clear, active prose.

Great historians—those whose research has irreversibly shifted our understanding of an aspect of the past—are usually historians who have penetrated deep into the details of a past context, who have worked with new archival data, and who have had a personal involvement in the questions they asked. This was the opinion of the American historian Bernard Bailyn.¹ It also defines what made Henry Turner's contributions to the study of big business and the rise of National Socialism into a body of work of fundamental, enduring importance: in a word, great history.

Turner began to think about problems concerning the relationship of capitalism to fascism in the early 1960s. His first publications on the question date to the latter half of the decade and start from the assumption that the debate, as then carried on, did not rest on the firm foundation of archival evidence. The principal archives were in Germany, however, and indeed Turner belonged to the first generation of German historians in the United States who regularly traveled across the ocean to conduct archival research (at first by ship, where in 1962 on the passenger liner *Bremen* he met a young German historian named Hans-Ulrich Wehler). Turner's book *Faschismus und Kapitalismus in Deutschland*, published in 1972, brought together these articles, which, tellingly, focused on

¹Bernard Bailyn, *On the Teaching and Writing of History* (Hanover, NH: Montgomery Endowment, Dartmouth, 1994), 90.

documents and personalities, whether Hitler's secret brochure for industrialists of 1927, or Fritz Thyssen's dubious account of his influence in *I Paid Hitler*, or the views of the industrial leaders of the economically powerful but politically hamstrung *Ruhrlande*, the secret cabinet of heavy industry in the Weimar Republic.

Source criticism, not political orientation, was the key to his approach, and it brought him into conflict with a series of historians, some of whom were on the political left, such as G. W. F. Hallgarten, Dirk Stegmann, and Eberhard Czichon, while others were less obviously so. Turner, for example, criticized the popular work of William Manchester, who advanced fantastic claims about the power and influence of the Krupp family; and he later raised serious questions about the scholarship of Edwin Black, an investigative journalist who wrote a best seller attempting to demonstrate the alliance of IBM and the Nazi state with respect to the persecution of the Jews.

Source criticism is also what he imparted to his graduate students, who were made to read Ernst Bernheim's *Lehrbuch der historischen Methode und der Geschichtsphilosophie*, first published in 1889, a 500-page tome that instructed readers how historians evaluated the veracity of documents. Following Bernheim, Turner taught students to engage in both "external source criticism," which involved questions of the materiality of the source and its provenance, and "internal source criticism," which considered questions about the quality of information within a document. A significant part of Turner's published work engaged in precisely these kinds of criticisms, showing how questionable documents falsified the record, or describing the formal qualities that made certain documents uniquely revealing of the time. Turner was also famous for disclosing how alleged facts often turned on questionable sources. He showed, for example, how all the evidence for the allegedly positive resonance to Hitler's 1932 speech in front of the Industry Club in Düsseldorf derived from one, extremely tainted document: the party-line memoir of Otto Dietrich. Turner's brand of classic *Quellenkritik* altered the starting point for research in his field. But one should not forget what might be called his positive *Quellenkritik*. One of his earliest publications brought to light a closed-room speech by Gustav Stresemann on his Locarno politics in front of the DVP. In his later years, Turner published a sensitive exploration of Hans Fallada's insights into the Great Depression (and worked on a translation of Fallada's *Bauern, Bonzen und Bomben*). He also wrote about the ambivalences of the Klemperer diaries, which he thought offered a unique window into the Nazi period. And he edited the memoirs, written in British captivity after the war, of Otto Wagener, Hitler's close advisor on economic policy. The Wagener memoirs, first published as *Hitler aus nächster Nähe. Aufzeichnungen eines Vertrauten 1929–1932* (Frankfurt am Main, 1978), show an Adolf Hitler unsure, especially in the two years before the seizure of power, of the future course of economic or military policy.

Turner's research culminated in *German Big Business and the Rise of Hitler*, published with Oxford University Press in 1985. The book belongs to the category of historical work that has irreversibly shifted our understanding of a subject. Among German historians, the central arguments are almost too well known to need retelling: the principle thesis, now accepted by scholars, is that Hitler received comparatively little financial support from the community of big business prior to the Nazi seizure of power. Turner supported his main thesis with a series of crucial secondary research findings. The business community, wary of the illegality of Nazi brutality and distrustful of its anti-capitalist rhetoric, kept its distance from Hitler in the first decade of the Weimar Republic. Instead, the early growth of the NSDAP was largely financed by grass-roots fundraising. Not until the electoral breakthrough of September 1930 did some members of the community of big business show genuine interest. But their interest encountered the contradictory economic policies of National Socialism. In the following two years, leaders of the business world engaged in considerable discussion with National Socialist leaders, but with precious few exceptions, these discussions did not lead to significant financial donations. Wanting to hedge their bets, business leaders instead spread their financial support among the various anti-Socialist and anti-Communist parties, and gave to the NSDAP mainly in order to support the anti-Socialist factions within the Nazi party. This kind of giving, which reached a high point in the summer of 1932, declined precipitously thereafter. When, after Schleicher's resignation, Hindenburg allowed Franz von Papen to offer Adolf Hitler the chancellorship of Germany, big business merely watched as ill-informed, powerless bystanders.

As Turner was completing his book, David Abraham, a young, untenured historian at Princeton, published *The Collapse of the Weimar Republic: Political Economy and Crisis* (Princeton, 1981), a book that offered a structural explanation for how the ruling elite, which included big business, maintained its power by opting for a fascist solution to the political and economic crisis of the early 1930s. Turner reviewed the book in the *Political Science Quarterly*, questioning its reductionist categories and its inattention to historical detail. He also decried what he thought to be Abraham's tendency "to misidentify numerous individuals and publications, to rewrite quotations, to invoke only those parts of documents that suit his needs, and to employ footnote citations so vague as to discourage a check of his sources."² Upon reading Tim Mason's guarded but essentially positive review of Abraham's book in the *American Historical Review* (*AHR*), Turner wrote a public letter to the *AHR*, which asserted that "T. W. Mason obviously assumed that it [Abraham's book] rested on sound scholarship. Unfortunately, that assumption was not warranted." Turner went on to

² Henry A. Turner, review, *The Collapse of the Weimar Republic: Political Economy and Crisis*, David Abraham, *Political Science Quarterly* 97, no. 4 (1982–1983): 739–741.

detail the shortcomings of Abraham's citations. Mason, who checked the sources himself, called upon Abraham to correct them, and Abraham responded, admitting some mistakes, but insisting that the "errata" hardly impinged on the substantive argument, and that at bottom there was a conflict between "positivists" and "conceptualists."³

The exchange between Turner, Mason, and Abraham signaled the start of what was perhaps the most acrimonious controversy in the field of German history as practiced in the United States. This is not the place to reconsider the details of the controversy, except to note that for Turner, the fundamental problem was not Abraham's Marxism, or even his structural interpretation, but his use of sources. Adequate source criticism was fundamental to the historical enterprise, and indeed to historical truth telling, Turner insisted. The subsequent debate, which also involved Gerald Feldman of the University of California, Berkeley, revealed that Turner had actually underestimated the number of misquotations and incorrect attributions in Abraham's book, many of which derived from Abraham's having often translated directly in the archives and conflated paraphrases of documents with direct quotations. Yet the controversy quickly became politicized as a conflict between conservative and Marxist historians, and was depicted as powerful professors bullying a vulnerable, untenured academic, a line of thinking that culminated in Arno Mayer's denunciation of Turner as akin to Joseph McCarthy: "Sir, have you no shame? Have you no sense of decency?," Mayer asked in a private letter, subsequently published.⁴ But when the dust cleared from the controversy, what was remarkable about it was how many historians did not take with sufficient seriousness the numerous archival inaccuracies that first Henry Turner, then Gerald Feldman, and subsequently other scholars pointed out.⁵ It is one of the enduring services of this journal, *Central European History*, that it steered the debate into the realm of open scholarship in a series of extended exchanges between Abraham and Feldman.⁶ Scholars could then see the full range of the arguments and take measure of the evidentiary problems. But by then, the controversy had become poisonous; it cost David Abraham his career as a German historian, and it cast a shadow over the life work of both Turner and Feldman, two of

³The exchange is in "Communications," in *The American Historical Review* 88, no. 4 (1983): 1143–1149.

⁴Arno Mayer, "A Letter to Henry Turner," in "A Special Supplement: The David Abraham Case: Ten Comments from Historians," *Radical History Review* 32 (1985): 85–6.

⁵See especially Ulrich Nocken, "Weimarer Geschichte(n). Zum neuen amerikanischen Buch 'Collapse of the Weimar Republic,'" *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 71 (1984): 305–27.

⁶Gerald D. Feldman, "A Collapse in Weimar Scholarship," *Central European History* 17 (1984): 159–77; David Abraham, "A Reply to Gerald Feldman," *Central European History* 17 (1984): 178–244; Feldman, "A Response to David Abraham's 'Reply,'" *Central European History* 17 (1984): 245–67; Abraham, "On Professor Feldman's Insistence: Some Closing Remarks," *Central European History* 17 (1984): 268–90.

the most distinguished German historians of the postwar era.⁷ At some point, however, this controversy, too, will become history. Henry Turner made sure of that. He deposited the entirety of his correspondences concerning the affair in the archive of Sterling Memorial Library at Yale University.

The late 1980s and early 1990s saw what initially looked like a productive period in Turner's work. He wrote an elegant and successful short history of *The Two Germanies since 1945* (New Haven, 1987) and began work on a project on the construction of citizenship in modern German history. But he soon put the latter project aside. A young German historian, Dieter Gosewinkel, had published a book, *Einbürgern und Ausschließen. Die Nationalisierung der Staatsangehörigkeit vom Deutschen Bund bis zur Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Göttingen, 2001), which Turner immediately recognized and acknowledged as a profound work on the subject. Turner turned to other projects, but it was apparent that the relationship between industry and National Socialism continued to exercise his thoughts.

In the meantime, however, a revolution had occurred, bringing down the East German regime. That Henry Turner was not a fan of Marxism was hardly a secret. But what he especially disliked about the communist East Germany was its sheer mendacity and the special privileges that its leaders arrogated to themselves. I traveled with Henry Turner and his wife Jane Turner through East Germany in March 1990. Turner was remarkably open to his East German colleagues. When not a few West Germans were ready to dismiss the vast majority of their East German colleagues with dispatch, Turner believed that they only needed a bit of time, spent, of course, in the archives, and a computer. He gave a series of lectures—mainly on his counterfactual history, entitled *Geißel des Jahrhunderts. Hitler und seine Hinterlassenschaft* (Berlin, 1989), in which Turner speculated what would have happened had Hitler been killed in 1930. In the context of East Germany, the lectures challenged his audiences to consider the influence that individuals have on history. He spoke eagerly with young historians about their projects and wanted to know the details of how the revolution began and how the Stasi operated. He also hoped to open exchanges and contacts between Yale and various East German universities. And of course, we visited archives.

Turner returned to the question of how 1933 could have happened. In a remarkable, short book, beautifully written and skillfully wrought, Turner recreated the political jostling during *Hitler's Thirty Days to Power: January 1933* (Reading, MA, 1996). From the newly opened archives in Moscow, he had unearthed new documents on Kurt von Schleicher, but he placed special responsibility for Hitler's coming to power with Hindenburg and von Papen.

⁷For another account of this matter, see Jonathan R. Zatlín, "Memorial, Gerald D. Feldman (1937–2007)," *Central European History* 41 (2008): 281–88, esp. 285–86.

More important than any one person's responsibility was, however, the element of contingency that marked the decisions that brought Hitler to power. Turner thereafter addressed the ties of industry to Nazism during the Third Reich. In a final monographic work, *General Motors and the Nazis: The Struggle for Control of Opel, Europe's Biggest Carmaker* (New Haven, 2005), based on open access to the files of General Motors (GM) but without financial support from GM, he explored the degree to which GM, which controlled Opel, cooperated with the Nazis in political repression, supported and profited from armaments production, and gained from slave labor. Turner emphasized GM's resistance in some areas, such as political repression, its ordinary profits in other areas, such as armaments production, and the degree to which Opel was largely out of GM's control when it engaged in the large-scale use of slave labor.

Turner's work over the years received its share of accolades, and as a scholar he received fellowships from the Fulbright Foundation, the Guggenheim Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the *Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin*. He also received the Commander's Cross of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany and an honorary degree from his alma mater, Washington and Lee University. Almost all of Turner's books have been translated into German, and he belongs to the handful of historians of Germany working in the United States whose influence on the German scholarly world was commensurate with his influence in the U.S. Turner also had more than a dozen graduate students who went on to become German historians and publishing scholars, and was second reader to scores more. An exacting mentor, Turner placed the bar very high. But he was also a very warm and concerned advisor, who took time to help his students, in ways small and large. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, he showed considerable understanding for the Yale graduate students as they tried to form a union, and extended this understanding to students whose involvement in demonstrations brought them into difficulty. As the job market once again became especially tight in the late 1990s, Turner had a more difficult time placing his graduate students, and this problem caused him considerable anguish.

Ever stoic, Turner had been in a battle with an aggressive cancer since late 2005, a fact that he did not widely share. It seemed, however, that a first round of experimental treatments had brought it under control. When I saw Henry Turner in February 2008, he seemed his old self. He was eagerly working on a book (a text that would start in 1871 and constitute the first half of his postwar Germany book) and had just finished an article on "The Myth of Chancellor von Schleicher's *Querfront* Strategy," which he published in this journal. A shrewd political commentator, Turner was also extremely optimistic about the current scene in American politics. From the start, he enthusiastically supported Barack Obama against "those bandits" that had run the White House and had in his opinion dragged the United States into a

misbegotten war in Iraq. No doubt, he was extremely pleased about the results of the election last November. His bout with cancer also caused him to reflect on his life, which he spoke about with an unequivocal sense of gratitude: for his family, for the “job of his dreams” (as he put it), and for a life of scholarship addressing questions that were close to him.

Henry Turner is survived by his wife Jane, his sons Bradley and Matthew, his daughter Sara, and six grandchildren.

VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY