

MEMORIAL

Allan Mitchell (1933–2016)

ALLAN Mitchell first discovered Germany and, shortly later, France in the 1950s when the devastation of World War II was still everywhere apparent. Over the eight decades of his life, his initial fascination with these foreign civilizations never wore off. It led to his remarkable achievements in historical studies: more than a dozen books and innumerable articles and talks, all solidly constructed and elegantly expressed. His profound originality as a scholar was to use German archives and perspectives, largely inaccessible to others for linguistic and other reasons, to write French history of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Allan was admirably equipped for undertaking the immense task he set himself—thanks, first of all, to the example set by his hard-working Scots immigrant father, an artisan and skilled maker of furniture. For Allan, scholarship always meant *hand* work—a craft. He was an indefatigable explorer of archives, some of them rather byzantine in their complexity, where he patiently filled five- by eight-inch spiral notebooks by hand. His exceptional talent for analysis subsequently transformed this raw material into handwritten blocks of text. Next, he copied these texts, first by typewriter and later by computer, and made them into drafts that he then perfected in multiple versions. Allan was never content simply to write up his notes: his prose, like the furniture of his father, was polished indeed.

His academic qualifications were irreproachable: a BA, Phi Beta Kappa, from Davidson College; two MA degrees, one from Duke University in history, the other from Middlebury College in German; Fulbright years abroad in both Germany and France; a PhD in history from Harvard University. He was inspired at Harvard by William Langer, one of the foremost diplomatic historians of his time, and by the eminent intellectual historian H. Stuart Hughes. His PhD in hand (or in a file cabinet), Allan easily ascended the academic hierarchy: first at Smith College, in Northampton, Massachusetts, where he remained for ten years, and then at the University of California at San Diego. Both Smith and California offered him opportunities for extended residence abroad, which, along with his previous extended stays, gave him a profound grasp of the languages and cultures of France and Germany. He could even read with ease old-fashioned German handwriting—a skill that even many native-born Germans lack today, but one that is crucial for dealing with nineteenth-century German archives.

His first book, *Revolution in Bavaria, 1918–1919: The Eisner Regime and the Soviet Republic* (1965), describes the establishment of the tumultuous and ephemeral Bavarian Republic under the presidency of the socialist Kurt Eisner, assassinated in 1919. The founding of this state, along with the complicated events that followed the German defeat in World War I—the overthrow of the Wittelsbach dynasty, the flight of the emperor, the bitter conflicts between various right- and left-wing forces—was an important stage in the long, precarious progress of the Weimar Republic.

This first book was a particularly accomplished piece of work for a young scholar at the beginning of his career. But it was in his second book, *Bismarck and the French Nation, 1848–1890* (1971), that Allan laid the foundation of the immense structure that he was to build during the rest of his career. The brevity of this volume—only 152 pages—belies its importance: it is an incisive and subtle but extremely dense work of diplomatic history that traces what is significant in the sometimes contradictory career of the iron chancellor, who was, for a long time, the most powerful statesman in Europe. Allan shows the skill with which Otto von Bismarck managed to maintain good relations with his sovereign, the King of Prussia and later Emperor of the Reich after the defeat of France in 1870. He demonstrates how adroitly Bismarck, a master of “wiggle room,” contrived to placate the leaders of France and of Austria, conceding just enough to avoid antagonizing them, while at the same time avoiding any firm commitment and being ready and willing to resort to brute force when he judged it necessary. One sees here clearly the concept that was to guide all of Allan’s future work: the notion that the history of France in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is inseparable from the history of Germany.

The hefty volumes that followed, which were conceived from the outset as a trilogy, spell out the nature of the relations between these countries in much greater detail. What is particularly remarkable in these books is the prodigious research behind them. Allan preferred to bypass published sources, such as collections of letters or editions of complete works, because he viewed them as sometimes incomplete or biased. Allan tried instead to go directly to archival manuscripts, in which the harvest was very rich. In *The German Influence in France after 1870: The Formation of the French Republic* (1979), Allan greatly expanded the account of German influence on France that he had given in his preceding volume, *Bismarck*. He deftly traced the political and economic stresses and convolutions that France went through after its defeat by Germany in 1870 in order to show that the Third Republic was only shaped through the deep involvement, patronage, and support (often covert) of the conquering nation.

His next book, *Victors and Vanquished: The German Influence on Army and Church after 1870* (1984), had a more narrow focus, but its consideration of the Church extended to ecclesiastical policy on education. Military leaders, far from being *revanchistes*, were mainly concerned with rebuilding and reforming their devastated forces to assure the future defense of the country. With regard to Church policy, Bismarck’s *Kulturkampf* and subsequent reversal posed conundrums for leaders in France: to what extent was support of the pope anti-German? In the final volume of his trilogy, *The Divided Path: The German Influence on Social Reform in France after 1870* (1991), Allan charted the first hesitant steps made by France in the direction of a welfare state, particularly the ones concerning public health, and contrasted them with the great progress accomplished in Germany. He noted, in one telling example, that at the end of the nineteenth century, the death rate from the tuberculosis that ravaged France remained much higher than the one in Germany. Allan attributed this difference, in great part, to the rejection by liberal, laissez-faire, republican France of the type of interventionist policies implemented by its authoritarian neighbor.

Allan’s next book, *The Great Train Race: Railways and the Franco-German Rivalry, 1815–1914* (2000), continued to compare the two countries but had a more narrow focus. The study is remarkable, not so much for casting its subject in terms of a competition, but rather for the monumental research upon which it was based. Nobody had ever set up shop for so long in far-flung archives to find out and express in such clear and arresting detail just what had gone on in the interminable committee meetings that set policy for French and German

railroads. The book showed why technology invented in Great Britain was adopted in France and Germany, and how private companies in both countries managed to resist state intervention for so long. Allan concluded that, although the development of railroads had become, by the outbreak of World War I, one of the many ways in which Germany clearly surpassed France, this superiority was not decisive in the outcome of the conflict.

Subtle and sophisticated, Allan sometimes wrote himself into the story he was telling—most prominently in *Witnessing Postwar Europe: The Personal History of an American Abroad* (2011). After all, it was his personal commitment that had been at the origin of his vocation. Given his longstanding interest in Franco–German relations and the fact that he had lived in Paris for extended periods, it was only natural that he should examine the Nazi occupation of the capital. Among the books he wrote on this subject, *Nazi Paris* (2008) stands out once again for the depth of the research upon which it is based, as well as for the precision and originality of its conclusions. Without minimizing the horrors inflicted by the German overlords and their Vichy collaborators, Allan describes the nuts and bolts of the occupation of this vast city—an occupation that he viewed not only from the French perspective but also from the German one, looking at the way both sides dealt with public behavior and economic policy, as well as issues of deportation, torture, policing, and capital punishment.

In his last book, *Unrepentant Patriot: The Life and Work of Carl Zuckmayer* (2016), Allan wrote the biography of a well-known German playwright who had been extremely popular during the interwar period. He hoped that this book would be read in conjunction with a short biography he had published five years before: *The Devil's Captain: Ernst Jünger in Nazi Paris, 1941–1944* (2011). These books formed a pair, he believed, not only because their subjects had been contemporaries, but also because one of Zuckmayer's plays, *The Devil's General* (1946), had suggested the title and general tenor of his Jünger biography: for Allan, Zuckmayer's general, who felt contempt for the Nazis but nevertheless served in their army, prefigured Jünger's life in Paris. The latter was an authentic hero, seven times wounded in World War I and much decorated. He rejoined the Wehrmacht in World War II and had a desk job during the occupation of the French capital where, as a well-known writer, he sometimes dined with the French literary elite. But where did his fundamental allegiance lie? It was indeed puzzling that a decorated member of the occupation army, whose duties included witnessing the execution of deserters, should become a revered literary figure after the war, translated and published in France in the Pléiade edition of the world's greatest writers. He had long been an extreme right-wing, antiparliamentarian nationalist. Some scholars see these positions as close to those of the NSDAP, but Jünger was always careful to maintain a considerable distance from the Nazis. Allan situated him among the conservative right, yet nevertheless found him to be essentially opportunistic—a man who sought his advantage wherever he thought he might find it. He did not, however, impugn Jünger's ambiguous moral compass and integrity. It is to Allan's credit that he did not attempt to resolve this ambiguity.

Allan Mitchell remains a towering figure (the cliché is entirely appropriate) among recent historians. Those who focus on Franco–German relations can only feel deep admiration and gratitude when they reflect on a lifetime of brilliant scholarship that has greatly enlarged the field and explored it with exemplary rigor and originality.

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