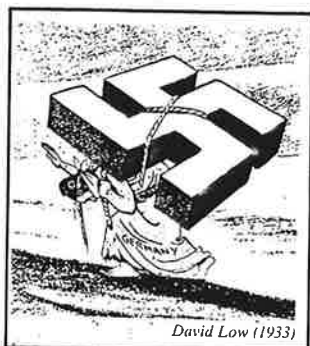


CONTROVERSY

The Battle of the Historians

A Report from Germany—By JOSEF JOFFE



David Low (1933)

FIFTEEN YEARS AGO, the German historian Ernst Nolte opened a seminar at Harvard with the memorable question: "Where have we seen the idea of a Final Solution before—I mean before Hitler? . . ." Encountering only blank stares, Nolte exclaimed: "In the works of Marx, of course! Didn't Marx preach the annihilation of an entire class, namely the bourgeoisie? There you have it: the original idea of a Final Solution." By now, puzzlement had frozen into strained silence, and the American scholar Eric Goldhagen, a survivor of the Holocaust, tried a bit of friendly irony: "Professor Nolte, when Fiorello La Guardia, New York's famous liberal-reform Republican mayor, overwhelmed his political opponents, the Democrats, in the elections of 1932, the *New York Times* quoted him in a banner headline: 'WE REALLY MURDERED THEM'. Herr Nolte, he did not mean it *literally*."

But Nolte, a Heidegger disciple who favours "metaphysical history", did not get the point then, nor has he apparently accepted the distinction between metaphor and mechanised mass murder ever since. In fact, last summer he returned to the theme with a vengeance that burst through the confines of a polite academic exchange, spilling into the pages of the national press. Within weeks, Nolte had triggered one of the most bizarre and yet revealing debates in the annals of German historiography. It embroiled everybody who is anybody in the profession, and it refuses to abate.

The opening volley, an essay by Nolte entitled "The Past That Will Not Pass Away", was published in West Germany's leading conservative daily, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.¹ Beginning with a startling indictment, the essay builds up to a stupefying conclusion that seeks to demolish everything we know and presumably no longer need to ask about the history of the Holocaust. All the literature on National Socialism, Nolte had discovered, shares a "conspic-

JOSEF JOFFE is foreign editor and columnist of the "*Süddeutsche Zeitung*" in Munich.

uous failure", and that is "its inability or refusal to see" that the Nazis had not been the first in the business of mass deportations, death camps, and the "extermination of entire groups according to objective criteria". With the exception of the gas chambers (a new "technical process"), the Bolshevik heirs of Karl Marx had already set the example in the early 1920s. And so Nolte poses the "inevitable" question:

"Did the National Socialists, did Hitler, carry out an 'Asiatic' deed perhaps only because they regarded themselves and their ilk as potential or real victims of an 'Asiatic' deed? Was not the Gulag Archipelago more of an origin (*originärer*) than Auschwitz? Was not the 'class murder' [committed] by the Bolsheviks logically and factually prior to the 'race murder' [committed] by the National Socialists?"

That passage needs to be "translated" for those who are not familiar with the vocabulary of neo-Hegelian history. In plain language, Nolte suggested that Auschwitz was but an imitation, that the Russian/"Asiatic" model deserves history's imprimatur as the one and only original. (In an earlier essay, "Between Myth and Revisionism",² Nolte had made the point in all its baldness: "the so-called [sic] annihilation of the Jews during the Third Reich was a reaction or a distorted copy and not a first act or an original.") Nor did Nolte stop with this compliment to Lenin, Stalin, and their comrades. Masked as seemingly open questions, the insinuations move softly toward the real purpose of the exercise—the recasting of 20th-century European history. Did Auschwitz, he asks, "perhaps grow out of a past that would not pass away?" Did Hitler, in other words, merely do to the Jews what "the Red terror" had done to "the Whites", inflicting an "Asiatic deed" on the Jews for fear of suffering the same fate at the hands of the Communist monster? Yes, he concludes, "there is probably a causal nexus".

To call this a forced argument is a polite understatement,

¹ Ernst Nolte, "Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 6 June 1986. This article was an abbreviated version of a longer address Nolte was to have delivered in Frankfurt at the 1986 *Römerberggespräche*, an annual gathering of public figures and intellectuals, from which he was suddenly disinvented.

² "Between Myth and Revisionism: The Third Reich in the Perspective of the 1980s", in H. W. Koch, ed., *Aspects of the Third Reich* (Macmillan, 1985).

since it defies the most rudimentary canons of reasoning. To put it in abstract terms. Nolte postulated a monstrous daisy-chain of destruction that obeyed the following "logic": *A* (Hitler), being afraid of *B* (the menace of Bolshevism), slaughtered *C* (the Jews) in pre-emptive self-defence. A similarly freakish plea—which would dispatch guilt by projecting it—can also be found in his "Between Myth and Revisionism". Here again, Nolte uses his favourite tool—the insinuating question, the contorted prose—to construe a direct connection between Jewish "aggression" and Nazi "retaliation". Might not Hitler be "allowed to treat the Jews as prisoners of war and by this means to intern them" when Britain declared war in 1939? After all, a few days later, Chaim Weizmann had vowed on behalf of the Jewish Agency that "Jews in the whole world would fight on the side of England. . . ."

That "declaration of War" and Nolte's insinuation of a "consequential" Nazi response, drew a bitterly ironic retort from the Berlin philosopher Ernst Tugendhat: How do we explain "the persecution and victimisation [of Jews] before the fall of 1939—including that of my own grandfather?" Jabbering about the *Weltjudentum's* conspiracies against the *Reich* has been a stock-in-trade of neo-Nazi propaganda. Yet here was a serious, if also stubbornly obsessive, academic historian, who had won international acclaim with his *Three Faces of Fascism* (1963), providing professorial grist for the mill of the beer-hall crowd. Nor was this the only surprise in Year One after Bitburg. For two decades, Nolte had been a one-man cottage industry, attracting neither disciples nor real foes in the profession. Suddenly, he was not alone.

A SLIM VOLUME with a long title also appeared in 1986 in the West German bookshops—*Two Kinds of Doom: The Destruction of the German Reich and the End of European Jewry*.³ Its author, Andreas Hillgruber, is a Professor of Contemporary History at the University of Cologne. Like Nolte, Hillgruber had worked away in relative obscurity, making his mark on the profession as a respected student of German diplomatic history. Along with Nolte, he suddenly gained notoriety by plunging into murkier waters with *Two Kinds of Doom*. And like Nolte, Hillgruber made for an inviting target.

It may not be altogether fair to quote from publicity material; but in this case it seems an economical way of driving straight to the point. And it helps to bypass the vexing habit of Nolte, Hillgruber *et al.* of shrouding their arguments in velvety questions, of avoiding falsifiable propositions where innuendo will do, and of squeezing the German language for every ounce of obfuscation that it so richly contains.

"Hillgruber's spectacular work [reads the blurb on the

³ Andreas Hillgruber, *Zweierlei Untergang: Die Zerschlagung des Deutschen Reiches und das Ende des europäischen Judentums* (Berlin, Siedler, 1986).

⁴ For the extensive literature on the Allies' plans for Germany's post-War future, see Hermann Graml, *Die Alliierten und die Teilung Deutschlands (The Allies and the Partition of Germany)* (Frankfurt, Fischer, 1985), especially the bibliography on pp. 242-49.

back of the book] comes out against the conventional opinion which holds that the destruction of the German Reich was an answer in kind to the atrocities of the Nazi régime. [He] establishes that the amputation of the Reich . . . had become an Allied war objective long before Auschwitz."

But why construe as spectacular discovery what is familiar to the professional and the informed layman alike?⁴ Of course, the Allies did not set out to destroy the *Reich* in order to punish the Germans for Auschwitz (although that shock richly increased the revulsion). Of course, the victors followed de Gaulle's classic motto: "*Pas de Reich, retour aux Allemagnes* (No more *Reich*; once more, many Germanies)" in order finally to undo that enormous central powerhouse which had twice tried to impose its hegemony on the rest of Europe. By implying that the Allies were *not* motivated by moral outrage and then elaborating in meticulous detail when exactly Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin decided to do what to Germany, Hillgruber was evidently setting up a hidden agenda.

To say, if by many turns and twists of indirection, that the Allied war effort was driven by the age-old quest for power and advantage is far more subtle and singular than the shopworn tactic of establishing "immoral equivalence" by balancing, say, Auschwitz against Dresden. If Nolte would like to spread the guilt around a bit (in *Germany and the Cold War* [1974], he claimed that all the great powers have had "their own Hitler periods") Hillgruber's metahistorical approach is simply *amoral*. If you look at the "Third Reich" *sub specie aeternitatis*, and then belabour the obvious by pointing out that the Allies behaved as states have always done, you score twice.

Not only do you unmask as sheer posturing what came afterwards in the guise of "Re-Education" and "Nuremberg"—you dispatch the issue of morality altogether. If the Allies merely re-enacted the oldest game of nations, then the debate moves comfortably from the level of moralising to the level of historicising. The question is no longer; "Who was good and who was evil", but becomes: "What is the verdict of history?" Since the Allies' real purpose was naked power and the reordering of Europe, let us examine the "systemic" consequences—the way we look at the effects of the Thirty Years War or the Congress of Vienna. In short, Hillgruber means to say, let History sit in judgment, and not the Nuremberg Tribunal.

THIS IS WHY the bulk of Hillgruber's tract is not devoted to "the end of European Jewry"; that essay remains brief and curiously uninvolved. His real concern is the Eastern Front in 1944-45, a collapse he renders in the language of *Götterdämmerung*. When he writes about the Russians, he invokes the vernacular of secular catastrophe: "orgy of revenge", "mass rape", "arbitrary murder", "indiscriminate deportations". As it shifts to the German side, the story turns into a *Nibelungen*-like saga of loyalty and transcendence. There are the "desperate and sacrificial exertions of the

German Army". There is the "bulwark" of the Eastern front which "shielded the population against the flood" that was the Red Army. And there was the "ethics of responsibility" that motivated commanders and Nazi functionaries who would do their best to "prevent the worst". (By contrast, Hillgruber reduces the Officers' Plot against Hitler on 20 July 1944 to the quixotic "ethics of pure conviction".⁵)

The "desperate battle of defence" was not just to protect "centuries-old settlement space" and the "homeland of millions". An even nobler purpose was evidently to save History itself, or in Hillgruber's opaque terminology, the "autonomy of the German Reich's great-power status (*die Bewahrung der Eigenständigkeit der Grossmachtstellung des Deutschen Reiches*)". Alas, we are led to conclude, British machinations, American naivety and Soviet greed brought about the "Reich's demise and, with it, the collapse of the European Centre". With that dénouement, the Fates decreed yet another unforgivable outcome: the end of "Prussia's and the German Reich's role as mediator . . . for all of Europe". In a larger sense, as Hillgruber muses in conclusion, "all of Europe was the loser in the catastrophe of 1945".

GOOD, NOW WE KNOW. All of Europe "lost" because it was liberated from Nazi imperialism. It was not Germany's hubris, let alone the uncouth treatment of Jews, Gypsies, and other *Untermenschen*, that led to retribution and downfall. Hitler might have started that war, but what is another historical grab for supremacy *sub specie aeternitatis*—and in a state system where lots of respectable people, from Charles V to Napoleon I, have played the same game over and over again? If you want to talk responsibility, every page in Hillgruber's little book whispers: "Let's talk about History and Consequences—e.g. America's and Soviet Russia's lasting intrusion into the heart of the Continent. And thus the tract deftly dispatches the burden, laying it softly, softly, on the doorsteps of Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin. See what you have done? You went after the "German Reich", but the true loser was Europe. Hillgruber's "is not an evil book", noted the Harvard historian Charles S. Maier delicately in *The New Republic*. "But it is badly balanced [and] opens the way to apologia. . . ."⁶

The debate was joined when Professor Jürgen Habermas, West Germany's leading social philosopher on the Left, published an impassioned, rambling rebuttal in the Hamburg weekly *Die Zeit*. A disciple of Adorno and Horkheimer,

⁵ These terms—*Verantwortungsethik* and *Gesinnungsethik*—were coined by the German sociologist Max Weber to distinguish between two types of morality: *the ethics of responsibility*, whose moral worth is not determined by intentions but by socio-political consequences; and *the ethics of pure conviction*, where abstract notions of moral goodness or duty take absolute precedence over feasibility or the longer-term results of an action.

⁶ Charles S. Maier, "Immoral Equivalence", *The New Republic*, December 1986, pp. 36-41.

⁷ Jürgen Habermas, "Eine Art Schadensabwicklung", *Die Zeit*, 11 July 1986.

⁸ Joachim Fest, "Die geschuldete Erinnerung", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 29 August 1986.

Habermas accused Nolte, Hillgruber and others of "apologetic tendencies" and of a "revisionism" which would first try to sterilise and then to "shake off" Germany's grim past. The ultimate purpose of that exercise was to transcend an outworn "obsession with guilt" and to "refurbish" Germany's broken national identity by shameful means.⁷ A few weeks later, Joachim Fest, the author of a best-selling Hitler biography (*Adolf Hitler*, 1973) was stung into action. In the pages of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (which he co-edits), Fest weighed in on the side of Nolte and company with an even longer piece titled "The Remembrance We Owe".⁸

Habitually a brilliant writer and *feuilletoniste*, Fest tried to buttress Nolte's murky ruminations with a *tour de force* more valiant than persuasive. He began cautiously enough: Hitler's "will to annihilation" might not have been totally inspired by the "threat of annihilation" emanating from the Russian Revolution. Still, it was "hard to believe" in the absence of a link. For there were those "terrifying impressions exuding from Russia"—reports of wholesale deportations and the "extermination of entire population groups"—which "provided a backdrop of reality" for Hitler's "extirpation fantasies". Resting his case in defence of Nolte's "causal nexus", Fest concluded: "To present such considerations and to establish connections cannot be inadmissible. . . ."

In response to Habermas, the historian Klaus Hildebrandt, a former student of Hillgruber, also defended Nolte and his intellectual companions in the lofty name of academic freedom (*FAZ*, 31 July 1986). Nobody must impose a *Frageverbot*, hence rule out questions that seek to unearth "parallels" or "models" with regard to the "quality of destruction" residing in Nazism and Communism. The only problem with that plea (as the historian Eberhard Jäckel, a Social Democrat, noted in *Die Zeit*) was that nobody had accused Nolte of raising inadmissible questions. The real issue was that Nolte had posed a *disingenuous* question which tried to link the Nazi gas chambers to the Bolshevik menace and to construct "guilt by insinuation" rather than shoulder the burden of empirical proof. If evidence there was, it consisted mainly of *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*. Nor was Nolte saved by another sally in the pages of the *FAZ* (14 November), when Fest's colleague, Johann-Georg Reissmüller, tried a slightly different tack.

What about the systematic persecution and murder in the early 1930s of the "Kulaks", the freeholding peasants who refused to be "collectivised" under Stalin? That was among "the vilest of mass crimes committed by the Bolsheviks", Reissmüller wrote, and, what is more, there was plenty of information about that "monstrous event" at the time. Though Reissmüller did not openly set up the fate of the Kulaks as a "model" for Hitler, he seemed to suggest as much. So Richard Löwenthal (a Social Democrat and an internationally known Sovietologist) wrote to counter that suggestion. The "slow mass murder [of the Kulaks] was unknown to the world at large for a long time." That information reached the West "in the course of World War II"—in other words, long after the Nuremberg race laws were enacted and when the ghettos and gas chambers were already a reality. Hitler, wrote Löwenthal, did not import the idea of the Final Solution from Russia; he had inherited it from his

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mentor Dietrich Eckart who died in 1924 and whom Hitler would fondly cite for the rest of his own life.

Lest a non-German reader lose the last thread of meaning in this labyrinthine debate, let me restate the three key issues. Who was first in the business of mass murder: the Bolsheviks or the Nazis? Did the Red model somehow "inspire" or "cause" the Brown model? How "singular" was the Holocaust when compared to the boneyards left behind by Lenin, Stalin, and Pol Pot?

TO ALL of these questions, the historian Eberhard Jäckel provides perhaps the best answer.⁹ It is true, he wrote, that ours is the century of mass murder, inflicted on the innocents either haphazardly or systematically, with the inefficiencies of the "old ways" or the "economies of scale" afforded by the death factories. Yet the Holocaust was unique because

"never before had a State . . . decided and so declared that a certain group of people—including the old, women, children, and babies—was to be killed *in toto* if possible, while executing that decision with all the means available to a State."

Russian Bolsheviks like the early *Cheka* boss Martyn Lat-sis (quoted by Joachim Fest as Exhibit A for the defence) might have talked about "eradicating the bourgeoisie as a class". Perhaps he meant it literally, perhaps it was only a bloody metaphor uttered in the midst of a civil war. (The war against the Jews was rather one-sided.) Still, such an aspiration was destined to remain a pale abstraction in the face of Heinrich Himmler's notorious speech on 6 October 1943:

"We grappled with the question: What about the women and the children? Here, too [continued the *Reichsführer* of the SS], I have decided to opt for the clearest of solutions. I did not think myself entitled to exterminate the males . . . and allow the children to grow up as avengers against our sons and grandsons. The hard decision had to be taken to make this people vanish from the earth. . . ."¹⁰

Finally, Jäckel reminds us of the well-established record: "On many occasions, Hitler explained why he wanted to remove and kill the Jews." His reasons add up to "a complex and coherent structure of thought". And in it there is no room for "murders committed by the Bolsheviks" or "any particular fear of them", which the revisionists have invoked as model or causal precursor of the Holocaust. Nor was Hitler, "the Aryan, afraid of Slavic or Jewish sub-humans." It is, thus as absurd to insinuate "pre-emptive murder" as it is to

transfigure Hitler-Germany's war of conquest into a "pre-emptive war" of defence.

Why, then, this debate? And why now? A telling clue might be found in Hillgruber's tract, where a brutally frank paragraph elucidates the meaning of Germany's surrender in 1945. For the "victims" of the concentration camps and prisoners, it was surely a day of "liberation". Yet it is "not appropriate to apply [that term] to the fate of the nation as a whole." No mainstream voice has ever put it so crudely. In polite society the rule has been to refer to V-E Day as "the most tragic and doubt-inspiring paradox for each of us". And why?—asked Theodor Heuss, the first West German President. "Because we were saved and destroyed at one and the same time."

Today, nobody knows how many Germans felt genuinely "liberated" on 8 May 1945, but *then* nobody would have dared to say otherwise. Though retribution was rather brief and cursory, though Adenauer did hardly worse than Talleyrand in regaining respectability for his country, the burden has remained. For those old enough to remember, it is the humiliation of defeat or the loss of land and glory that poisons the notion of liberation. For the rest—for those younger than, say 55—the mortgage is more subtle and enduring. They had no part in the "Teutonic deed" that was Auschwitz, but they had to live with the indelible stigma of moral inferiority.

They came to adulthood without any sense of nation, continuity, or pride. Theirs was a half-nation that could at best draw a Calvinist sense of redemption from the miraculous economic rebirth. But whereas Americans or Frenchmen grow up with *The Star-Spangled Banner* or Bastille Day, the post-War West German generation did not even have a decent national holiday, or any other symbols or traditions that bind the individual to his tribe. If anything did reach out from the past, it was the stifling, fearsome tentacle of national guilt.

It was only a matter of time before the West Germans would try to sever it. Until the 1950s, they had proved their qualities by acting as a model Ally and super-European, while literally buying redemption with vast restitution payments to the survivors and to Israel. By the late 1960s, however, they began to stir. During the Viet Nam War, it was the demonstrators of the New Left who raised, still unconsciously, the question of "moral equivalence". Didn't My Lai show that the "re-educators" and "liberators" were no better than their own parents? In 1982, their younger siblings drew a straight line between General Stroop's butchers murdering the last Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto and General Sharon's troops beleaguering the PLO in Beirut. And presto—what is the moral difference between the SS and the heirs of their victims?

With the battle against *Pershing* and Cruise missiles uniting Social Democrats and Greens, starry-eyed idealists and old-style Communists, a "movement of national re-awakening"¹¹ had finally appeared on the German scene. The Federal Republic is an "occupied country", thundered the former SPD mayor of West Berlin, Heinrich Albertz, and the Americans are conspiring to turn it into a "shooting gallery of the superpowers".

The first true "national revolt" since 1945 was driven by

⁹ Eberhard Jäckel, "Die elende Praxis der Untersteller", *Die Zeit*, 13 September 1986.

¹⁰ Heinrich Himmler, *Geheimreden 1933 bis 1945*, ed. Bradley F. Smith and Agnes F. Peterson, preface by Joachim Fest (Propyläen Verlag, 1974), p. 169.

¹¹ Thus Wolfgang Pohrt, "Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Frieden", in his *Endstation: Über die Wiedergeburt der Nation* (Berlin, Rotbuchverlag, 1982), p. 76.

two classic engines of all such movements: the conviction of collective victimisation, and tribal moral superiority. In *The New Yorker* (5 April 1982), Jane Kramer had noted:

“For young Germans, the idea that their country has a mission in a damned world is a kind of redemption. They have no history to attach to with any pride, and it is intoxicating for them now to think of themselves as victims of a madness other than their own. This is why there is an almost expiatory fervor to so much of the new pacifist politics.”

THOUGH SEPARATED BY time and ideological colour, the Battle of the German Historians and the War against the American Missiles are clearly related—like two brothers fighting over patrimony or primogeniture. In both cases, the real object of conquest was the past that would not pass away. The young German Peace Marchers targeted Western nuclear weapons and their American purveyors but, in truth, they reacted against the grating legacy of the lost war. The rubble had long ago been cleared away, but the Germans were still the prime victims of the new order: partitioned by alien superpowers, robbed of a national identity, chained to the *status quo* by forces they could not control. By overturning the *ancien régime* the rebels would triumph twice: against their parents, who had indentured themselves to the victors; and against a system that denied them their national self.

Their “progressive” purpose—national reassertion and the reclamation of moral worth—was no different from the quest of the revisionist historians and the traditional ideologues on the outer fringe of Helmut Kohl’s Centre-Right majority. Indeed, the neo-nationalist campaign of the Left, laying siege to the post-War bastions of legitimacy, was *destined* to trigger a competitive response on the Right. Yet, “the War of the German Succession” posed a nasty dilemma for the Establishment. It could not allow the Left to capture the flag, but neither could it imitate the Left’s simple “Us against Them” strategy. For “They” happened to be NATO, America, and the West. The problem was how to win the moral-ideological battle without losing the country’s Western cocoon—how to be good Germans without turning into bad Allies.

This problem has been with us since the end of World War II. Though Conservatives and National Liberals had been among the standard-bearers of 20th-century German nationalism, that option has closed to their post-1945 heirs who picked up the pieces to acquire a controlling share in the new enterprise. Germany’s ultra-nationalist fling had ended in catastrophe; no strength could be drawn from yesterday’s shattered idols. And under the loaded guns of the occupiers, there was no road to rehabilitation but the internationalist

one—straight into the Atlantic and European community.

Nor was this particularly painful. Abroad, self-denial proved the stepping stone of self-assertion. And domestically the alliance with the West provided a succession of Centre-Right governments with the underpinnings of legitimacy and long-term tenure. For once the Germans were not alone but on the side of the stronger battalions. If NATO yielded a shelter and a role, the European Community opened markets and a legitimate outlet for West German energies.

Yet 40 years later the *ersatz* nationalism of Europeanism and anti-Communism had paled; and into that vacuum stepped the Left, eager to push the real thing. Could the Centre-Right come up with a safe moral equivalent—an infusion of good feeling without nasty anti-Western after-effects? Perhaps the antidote could be found in the small town of Bitburg.

The Kohl Government had been dreading the day when the Allies would reconvene to celebrate the 40th anniversary of V-E Day. A “splendid moment in our great history” for Churchill, 8 May 1945 symbolised the greatest catastrophe in the chequered history of German national unity. But there was promise, too—if an American President could be lured to a military cemetery where he would pay homage to Germany’s fallen of World War II. Bonding victors and vanquished in mutual respect, a magnanimous gesture would at last lift the stigma and seal the return to normality—if not bury the past altogether. Instead, the past came back with a vengeance—uniting virtually all of America in an outcry of revulsion. In Bitburg, President Reagan and Helmut Kohl discovered that it was easier to inter the dead than the symbols of the War—especially when they came graven in stone like the inscriptions of the *Waffen-SS*. Forty years were not enough.

FOR THE GERMAN CONSERVATIVES, Bitburg came as a shock.¹² After 40 years of rehabilitation under Western auspices, there was still no absolution. The old question remained: how to unshoulder the burden, how to re-establish pride and moral worth. The Battle of the Historians was surely launched among the graves of Bitburg on 8 May 1985. If the past could not be laid to rest, it had to be reconstructed. If images of cattle-cars and crematoria refused to subside, then the films must be taken in hand by the professionals for re-editing and retouching. If the ancestral stain could not be scrubbed off, perhaps the crimes could be made to pale in the blinding light cast on those of others.

All history is backward-looking politics; thus Bitburg was more than a German-American confrontation over the past. More important, it was also the scene of an *intra-German* battle over the future. To have an American President dispatch the moral mortgage had promised a triple advantage in the contest for domestic power. First, the clasp of hands across the graves would have proved to the electorate that America was still West Germany’s best friend. Secondly, it would have demonstrated that the Christian Democrats could “deliver” the Americans, that they were the best guardians of that profitable partnership. Third, it would have flummoxed the

¹² In “The Past That Will Not Pass Away”, Ernst Nolte asked what would have happened if Chancellor Adenauer “had refused to visit Arlington Military Cemetery, arguing that men were buried there who had participated in terror attacks against the German civilian population. . . .”

Opposition, those Greens and Social Democrats who have a different future in mind for West Germany—who would loosen, if not cut, the tie that binds; who worry more about American *Pershings* than Soviet *SS-20s*; and who dream of a *Mitteleuropa* “zone of peace” where Germany could once more assume its traditional role as “third force” between East and West.

AND THIS IS WHERE the Battle of the Historians intersects with the battle over political legitimacy and domestic power.

Tied to the Alliance and America, the Centre-Right cannot play the nationalist (in essence, anti-American) card which the Left has brandished since the beginning of this decade. Nor can it re-enact the historic game of Right-wing nationalism and revive Germany's old “mission in the East” above and beyond that basic quantum of *détente* which pays homage to the realities of Soviet power. For to move toward East Berlin and Moscow would threaten the three traditional pillars of the Centre-Right's tenure: abroad, the tie to NATO neighbours and to the United States; at home, the anti-Communist consensus which would have to be sacrificed for the sake of a real option in the East.

Bitburg demonstrated that the escape routes from the darkest chambers of German history remained locked—and at a time when the traditional mainstays of legitimacy in the Federal Republic were under assault from the neo-nationalists of the Left. And their more radicalised battalions want *eine andere Republik*, a radically transformed political and social system: with a lot more Socialism-cum-Ecologism at home and a great deal less Atlanticism abroad.

From a Western perspective, the neo-nationalism of the Right, though linked to steadfast anti-Communism, is hardly more reassuring. On the one hand, the New Historical Revisionism clearly functions to discredit the Left: it will not increase the attraction of Socialism (let alone the Soviet Union) among German voters if history's First Prize for mayhem and mass murder goes to the Bolshevik disciples of Marx. (And that may explain why the Battle of the Historians unfolded, basically, on a Left-Right split.) On the other hand, it is by no means self-evident that Messrs Nolte and Hillgruber wrote out of love for America and the West.

For Hillgruber, the United States is ranked alongside the Soviet Union when it comes to parcelling out blame for the “destruction” of the *europäische Mitte* (the “European

centre”), i.e. Germany. The reader will look in vain for the celebration of a West German identity steeped in the country's new democratic traditions and Western affiliations (though the alliance with the West and West German democracy are definitely linked by a powerful “causal nexus”). Instead, the Revisionists try to sift pride from Germany's brief historic career as a great power as they pick among the rubble in search of a post-Holocaust identity; and so historians like Hillgruber assign the beginning of *finis Germaniae* to the Allied conspiracy against the *Reich* and the collapse of the Eastern front. Why stop so early in the calendar? Why not start with the home-made conspiracy against the democratic experiment of Weimar, which paved the way for Hitler and then for the world's war against Germany?

THE HISTORIAN Michael Stürmer has claimed: “Whoever supplies memory, shapes concepts, and interprets the past . . . will win the future”—one in which West Germans remain “the keystone in the European arch of the Atlantic system.” But though Habermas has not previously been conspicuous as an advocate of Atlanticism,¹³ he is surely right in noting that his generation's “proudest” achievement, the “unconditional acceptance of Western political culture”, cannot be buttressed with revisionist legerdemain. Indeed, that opening was won *against* that anti-Western *Mitteleuropa* ideology “which our revisionists would try to warm up with their geopolitical ballyhoo”. The only patriotism that “will not alienate us from the West” (Habermas concludes) must be mined from the country's democratic constitutional tradition.

Nor can such “ballyhoo” win a moral future for the Federal Republic, even though in “Year Two After Bitburg” West German politicians had picked up the historians' banner for some vigorous flag-waving in the electoral campaign of 1987.

“We have to tell the whole truth”, proclaimed Franz Josef Strauss, who runs the Bavarian affiliate of Helmut Kohl's Christian Democratic Party. And that truth must not be “limited to the atrocities committed in the name of Germany”. To leave out the “barbarism” of the others amounted to “historical forgery” which would “destroy Germany's national identity” and continue to feed a “permanent flood of guilt feelings”. The appeal to Right-wing nationalism, repeated *ad infinitum* in Strauss's campaign speeches, did not help: his Christian Social Union lost 400,000 votes in the January 1987 election, dropping almost one percentage point.

Nor can it really help the Germans as a whole to know that Stalin and Pol Pot share History's dock with Hitler. Even if German crimes were not “singular”, as the historian Christian Meier wrote in the concluding article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* controversy, “what would that do for us or our standing in the world? . . .” In short, can the future really be conquered by wringing solace from a refurbished past?

The Victorians had an answer worth pondering: “The happiest women, like the happiest nations, have *no* history. . . .”

¹³ On the contrary, Marxian loyalties were important to him; and when he was widely quoted to the effect that the extremists in the '68 student rebellion were “Left-Fascists”, he claimed that he had been misquoted and misunderstood. In the present debate he referred to the Soviet Kulak tragedy as “an expulsion (*Vertreibung*)”; he subsequently corrected himself and conceded that the barbarity was more correctly to be described as “destruction (*Vernichtung*)”, *Die Zeit*, 7 November 1986.