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The tiger & the young lady

by Harold James

A review of *From Weimar to Auschwitz: Essays in German History* by Hans Mommsen

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BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE

Hans Mommsen

From Weimar to Auschwitz: Essays in German History

Princeton University Press, 388 pages, $42.50

Hans Mommsen is one of Germany's most distinguished social historians, and a translation of a collection which includes his most influential essays makes an important range of ideas and interpretations available to an Anglo-Saxon audience. The essays presented in this volume originated at different times, and contain some overlapping material, but are thematically connected through their insistent probing of the great question of modern German history: the conditions for the rise of the National Socialist movement and the establishment of the National Socialist state.

It is not surprising that this issue should be at the center of discussion within the German historical profession. Nor is it peculiar that its many contributions have frequently carried a contemporary political implication. As the actual experience of Nazi terror faded, public political debate within the Federal Republic used history more and more as a way of making debating points about the

present. There existed a kind of intellectual game available to opponents engaged in political argument: the strategy involved showing that the opposing party had some sort of connection with National Socialism and as a result should incur a moral and political disenfranchisement.

On the Left, critics presented National Socialism as a phenomenon of the Right, produced by intensely reactionary anti-socialists and anti-Communists and floating on an ideological bed of nationalism, already well prepared by the German Right. The far Left thought that capitalism would inevitably produce Fascism to defend itself against the workers' movement.

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Conservatives or Christian Democrats replied by describing National Socialism as a variant of socialist collectivism. They pointed to the similarities between Nazism and Communism, and between Hitler and Stalin, and saw both as totalitarian dictators driven by ideologies. When an ecological Green party emerged, none of the established German parties hesitated in making a comparison with the back-to-earth and nature beliefs of the 1930s.

This was a political game that was easy to play in good measure because, as the best recent studies have shown, National Socialism was a broadly based and eclectic movement that sought to gain as wide a support as possible by mixing a potpourri of political theories and causes: some anti-Communist, some anti-capitalist, some anti-democratic, some radically democratic, some anti-clerical, some stressing the traditional values of family, hearth, and church (*Kinder*, *Küche*, *Kirche*).

An account that is genuinely historical will have to avoid the extremes of polemic and identification of only one strand of Nazi doctrine and practice. Yet in formulating theories of how Nazism arose, or even in saying what constituted the Nazi phenomenon, it will inevitably have a political message and agenda. Mommsen follows such a balanced course, but also knows that this is a subject which inherently raises contemporary political issues.

Mommsen's major theme is that the National Socialist phenomenon cannot be attributed to the ideas and personality of Adolf Hitler. Neither did it follow from a specifically Nazi ideology. Instead, Mommsen devotes a great deal of attention to pre-Nazi developments: especially to the pattern of youth revolts from the end of the nineteenth century against the values of civil society (or bourgeois society), when young rebels demanded authentic and healthy experience in place of what they saw as stuffy and over-civilized culture. The established parties of Imperial Germany and the Weimar Republic could not deal with the powerful sentiment of youth revolt. They had become parties of an establishment which had grown physically old. One of the most interesting essays in the collection chronicles graphically the gerontocratization of the SPD,

the socialist party which for much of the Weimar Republic obtained the largest share of the popular vote. The other parties which took part in the endless coalitions of Weimar politics were equally elderly, and photographs of the Reichstag in session capture the light gleaming off rimless spectacles and bald pates. By contrast, the new anti-democratic parties, the Communists and the Nazis, both successfully presented themselves as the parties of youth and vigor and energy, who would build a new and above all young Germany.

But it was not just a revolt of youth that produced National Socialism. In Mommsen's eyes, an equally critical component of the new politics was the extreme social defensiveness already existing in Imperial Germany but heightened by the domestic conflicts and upheavals of the First World War, and by the Soviet Revolution of 1917. In Germany in 1918 and 1919 workers and soldiers formed council governments (*Räterepublik*: *Rat*, plural *Räte*, was the German word for the Russian *soviet*), and the country plunged into civil war. The new "fanatical" anti-Bolshevism made conservative politicians accept anyone who might provide an active defense against Communism, even if this defensive movement were to be anti-liberal (German conservatives did not really mind that) and violent. Prepared by the experience of a relatively long-standing youth revolt, the German elite chose an extreme and brutal anti-liberalism.

Analyzing the rise of National Socialism for Mommsen involves less the study of why people voted for Hitler than a depiction of a cowardly and manipulative bourgeoisie who saw Hitler as a tool for their purposes. They took the part of the young lady from Riga who went for a ride on the tiger.

Mommsen continues his analysis for the years after 1933, the era of the Nazi regime. The essays on National Socialist policy, and, in particular, the essay on anti-Semitism and the origins of the Holocaust, will seem to many readers iconoclastic. But Mommsen's purpose in de-emphasizing the role of Hitler, and presenting a less demonic account of the making of Nazi policies on race, is in no sense exculpatory. Rather he wants to show how the bureaucratic decision-making process, which involved substantial numbers of civil servants and army officers who in no fashion considered themselves to be ideological or fanatical Nazis, played the key part in the formulation, planning, and carrying-out of genocide. Anti-Semitism was in this version not the driving force on the road to Auschwitz: rather the elite accepted the idea that an enemy should be fought with militant methods, and devised inhuman ways of dealing with the human dislocation caused by war.

This is of course a thoroughgoing and comprehensive indictment of the German elite. It is also implicitly hostile to those contemporaries who before 1933 did not criticize that elite, and to those (including the Allied authorities) who did not after 1945

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worry sufficiently about the reconsolidation of the position of the old establishment. The indictment is conducted with verve and intelligence, and with immense historical knowledge; and if it were true, it would constitute a devastating account of German politics and politicians before 1933 (who do indeed deeply deserve the retrospective condemnation of historians) and also in the years of the Federal Republic.

Some of the components of Mommsen's analysis have been the subject of intense scholarly (as opposed to merely political) debate in Germany and elsewhere. The first controversy is concerned with the policies of the governments immediately preceding Hitler. How did the conservative elite allow itself to be maneuvered by Hitler into supporting him as Chancellor in 1933? The explanation lies in the policies followed by the conservative Center party (the Catholic party) politician Heinrich Brüning between 1930 and 1932. It was in this period that the worsening depression drove farmers, the unemployed, and artisans and small businessmen away from the democratic parties. According to Mommsen, Brüning intentionally pursued severely deflationary policies which intensified the depression in order to bring about a constitutional reform within Germany and cut back the welfare state, and externally to end the reparation payments imposed by the 1919 Versailles Treaty. At least the foreign policy part of this account corresponds to the standard textbook treatment ofthe end ofWeimar.

Since 1979 this view has been contested, on the whole successfully, in a series of writings produced by economic historians, notably Professor Knut Borchardt of Munich, but also Dr. Theo Balderston of Manchester University and the present reviewer. In their view, Brüning had few alternatives, and like our contemporary governments exposed to depression or even only recession, he faced agonizing policy alternatives. The Keynesian view that there was a good arsenal of government policies against the depression has been quite thoroughly discredited—at least in the German case. Increased budget deficits in Germany in the early 1930s would have only further undermined confidence, and would have produced a worsening of economic crisis and no improvement.

As a result, a key part of Mommsen's argument on how the traditional elite worked to produce a Nazi government should be called into question.

A second controversy embedded in Mommsen's work concerns the character of Nazi ideology and of Hitler. John Lukacs recently called Hitler a "great revolutionary," and a young German historian, Rainer Zitelmann, has made this revolutionary quality the major theme in his analysis. Zitelmann is perhaps surprisingly the first academic in Germany to have produced a biography of Hitler, and he chronicles how the dictator wanted to transform and modernize German society. Zitelmann's Hitler tried to create a new social state, better housing, higher levels of consumption (the Volkswagen and the Autobahn were only the beginning), and equality of opportunity (of course within the racial community). In Zitelmann's view, this was a modernizing dictatorship with similar plans and similar brutality to the one created by Stalin.

For Mommsen, however, the emphasis in Nazi propaganda on modernity is nothing more than that—propaganda. It masked social defense. The Nazis were no more truly revolutionary than the youth movements of the late nineteenth century who tried to stage a revolt against bourgeois philistinism.

Perhaps neither Mommsen, who believes Nazism to be anti-modern, nor his younger critics, who want to portray Nazism as exemplifying the dangers and upheavals of modernity, are completely right. There is in the twentieth century a problem about defining modernity. Hitler did indeed believe himself to be at the forefront of a modern and scientific movement. He encouraged the technocratic approach to politics of a Fritz Todt or an Albert Speer. He thought Soviet-style politics to be the way of the future. Above all, he believed that liberal democracy was hopelessly antiquated and historically redundant. But there was an illusory element to all of Hitler's beliefs: his technocracy was efficient, but—as the war showed—not sufficient to combat superior technologies generated in liberal democracies. Looking at Hitler with the eyes of his contemporaries, he seems devastatingly modern. Retrospectively Mommsen is justified in seeing him as destructively anti-modern. Like many people in the middle of the twentieth century, Hitler was obsessed with modernity and profoundly mis-diagnosed it as involving planning, control, and manipulation.

Mommsen's work skirts around a third controversy. This concerns that part of National Socialism which is inexplicable in rational terms (and poses as a result a challenge to believers in rationalism): the centrality of racism (and in particular anti-Semitism) to Hitlerian and National Socialist politics. Hitler's modernity took the form it did because it was deeply imbued with racist concepts, which are very difficult to explain rationally in terms of the logic of social defense.

Mommsen's approach is characteristic of both the strengths and the limits of a social historical approach to major historical issues. It is always hard to use rational and rationalizing methods to describe the emergence of ideas and their peculiar power. Anti-Semitism, it is true, was not widely held as a belief in inter-war Germany, certainly in comparison with other European societies (as far as we can measure it by looking at public statements about belief: beyond that it is hard to go). Neither did it offer an obviously rational vehicle for the defense of the interest of social groups. In making both these points, Mommsen is drawing quite accurately on available historical evidence in the best empirical way. But it is not valid to go further and imply that these claims mean that anti-Semitism was not a powerful force, and did not exert an immense, obsessive, and compulsive influence on the minds of those men at the center of Germany's power structure with the genocide of the Second World War as a consequence.

We need a different kind of history to understand the thought of the individuals who perpetrated these crimes. Mommsen gives only the rational part of the picture which explains why the young lady wanted to go on the fatal ride. We should also know why the tiger wanted to be tigerish.

His conclusion is that there were fundamental weaknesses in German society (that may be analyzed rationally), and that a profound transformation—perhaps a revolution —was needed to overcome them. Hitler, who was the product of those weaknesses, could not possibly generate the modernizing impetus needed to overcome them.

Mommsen, the modern historian, does not ask some of the questions that lie at the heart of the discussion of the German question: why was German society in particular (rather than European society in general) so prone to youth revolts? Why was it German society which produced such violently explosive and destructive racism? But oddly, he does suggest answers in his final essay, which is devoted to an analysis of the work of Hannah Arendt.

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Though sympathetic to many of Arendt's observations, he does not want to follow her conclusions. But Arendt provides good answers at least in part because many of the big issues are better answered by a brilliant philosopher interested in the role of political institutions than by an acutely observing but rationally minded social historian. For instance, youth revolts are common throughout history (think of David and Absalom), but they do not always destroy society, and they can be contained in a stable institutional framework. But in Germany, stable institutions which could channel and dissipate conflict were lacking; there was before 1933 a deficit of legitimacy and a weakness of authority. Arendt's approach was to look at totalitarianism as a response to "modernity" in its manifestation as mass society in which traditionally legitimate structures and authorities disappeared. Germany appeared as the most striking instance of this case.

Mommsen speaks of Arendt's "pronouncedly elitist conservative views on democracy and politics, which set up the concept of authority as a counter to that of power and posited a concept of individual freedom based on the model of the ancient *polis*." Might not this "conservative" view, which Mommsen makes clear he rejects, hold the key to a historical as well as a political interpretation of the "German question"? Perhaps it also helps us to understand how liberal democracy could be built on an institutional basis after 1945 in Germany—and in general how it may emerge after the collapse of totalitarianisms.

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