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When Germans became the better Historians

The winners of wars write the history. The losers make the better historians. So argued the controversial political philosopher Carl Schmitt in a short essay, "*Historiographia in Nuce*: Alexis de Tocqueville." In the beginning, the victors would control the narrative about the war: how it came about, what happened, and what crimes were committed. But over time, those who suffered defeat would develop historical insights with greater complexity, nuance, and persuasive power. It was the losers, after all, who had to explain why they were on the wrong side of history. For Schmitt, Tocqueville, whom he thought of as "the greatest historian of the nineteenth century," was a prime example.

But World War II was no ordinary war. It killed more civilians than soldiers and it brought forth a genuine rupture in the norms of civilization. With the aid of foreign fascists, Germans murdered some six million Jews, some three million Soviet POWs, nearly a half a million Roma and Sinti, and as many individuals with disabilities. It also witnessed the slaughter of scores and scores of other peoples.

Who won, who lost? The ledger of suffering was long, detailed, and dismaying. It blurred what victory meant and complicated the experience of defeat. The *Sh'erit ha-Pletah*, the surviving remnant of Jews in the postwar DP camps of Germany, knew this well. "No one has died of joy. No one has gone mad with excitement, " recalled the twenty-two year-old Chava Rosenfarb when the British Army liberated her from Bergen-Belsen.

What about the Germans? They had lost the war. The loss was total. They could not pretend that they were undefeated in the field, as Friedrich Ebert claimed in 1918. The contrast with World War I, in which German armies were still in northern France when the belligerents signed the armistice, was indeed stark. In 1945, German cities were decimated and towns ruined. There was not much fuel and scarcely any food. And German men could not protect German women from being raped. In the Berlin detention center in which Carl Schmitt wrote *Historiographica in Nuce* in August 1946, he too understood Germany's defeat as total.

But did total loss beget better historical writing? If so, when? The short answer, hardly surprising, is that it did not happen immediately. There was no German Tocqueville right after the war. There was, instead, what the historian Peter Gay once called "a loss of mastery."

What could mastery, or its loss, even mean in this context? Mastery would have to mean advancing empirically supported arguments in order to provide a compelling answers to the following questions: 1. How did the Third Reich come about? 2. How did Nazi policy lead to World War II? 3. How did the internal dynamics of society and politics make the Third Reich into a violent society? 4. How can the Holocaust be explained and told? And 5. How can the Nazi mass murder of non-combatants be understood?

Mastery does not mean that the answers to these questions are definitive. The answers just need to be at the center of historical attention. They need to be sincere. And they need to be told with a wide aperture that takes in the range of historical subjects--perpetrators and victims, accomplices and bystanders, enablers of genocide and helpers

of the persecuted. There are other contexts to consider too. One is disciplinary. Political science, sociology, psychology, and philosophy also offered penetrating analyses of National Socialism, the war, and genocide. In the immediate postwar period, the great works that captured the imagination included the philosopher Karl Jaspers *Die Schuldfrage* (1946), the psychologist Viktor Frankl's *..trotzdem Ja zum Leben sagen* (1946), and the political theorist Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). By contrast, when we turn to history, we find a largely barren landscape. When and why did the discipline of history fall behind these other disciplines in the analysis of the Third Reich? When and how did it catch up?

There is also a transnational context. One of the insufficiently appreciated legacies of Nazism is that German history now counts among the most studied national histories in the world. Sizeable communities of historians of Germany work in the United States, Great Britain, France, Israel, the Netherlands, Canada, Japan, and elsewhere. For a long time, the best answers to some of the central questions that define mastery came from outside of Germany, especially from the community of the expelled. One thinks of Helmuth Plessner's lectures at the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen in the 1930s, which would become *Die verspätete Nation*; or the New York of Franz Neumann's *Behemoth*: *The Structure and Practice of National Socialism, 1933–1944* (1942, 1944), easily the most important book written on the subject in the 1940s. One also thinks of Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of European Jews*, first published in 1961.

In Germany, the road to a recovery of mastery was a long one, and in the postwar era this recovery did not fully transpire until the last two decades of the twentieth century. Perhaps more than for most countries, the initial inspiration for this recovery came from

outside--outside Germany, outside the guild of historians. It also came from the communities of foreign historians who devoted their energies to understanding the complexity of the dynamic and destructive dystopia the Nazis made. Gradually, German historians in Germany opened themselves up, listened, and began to see their history as deeply interwoven with the histories of those they persecuted. In this moment, perpetrator and victim came into a shared historical field, making it no longer possible to think of one side without the other. Germans, who long saw themselves as one of the main losers of World War II in Europe, came to understand the complexity of loss. It was then that they became the better historians.

What is the way forward? Carl Schmitt's way of conceptualizing historical writing still made sense to the philosopher-historian Reinhard Koselleck in the mid eighties, forty years after Schmitt's initial formulation. In a talk on November 2, 1984, which would later become "Erfahrungswandel und Methodenwechsel," Koselleck noted that certain methods used by historians are traceable to personal experience, especially when those experiences take on the dimensions of trauma. He then added: "It is striking that the better historians generally come from the vanquished and not from the victorious." A *Wehrmacht* soldier, Koselleck had been captured by the Russians at the end of the war and forcibly shown Auschwitz, which he apparently had never heard of. His reflection came forty years after Schmitt's. But now a new generation of historians is forty years removed again.

For them, victory or defeat is no longer a matter of personal experience, or even being close to people for whom it was. They must develop other categories. While there is considerable richness to German history, the field as such cannot hold (at least outside

of Germany) if it cannot offer compelling explanations to core questions about National Socialism and the Holocaust. There are, moreover, troubling signs. Even as interest in these fields continues to draw the greatest number of undergraduate students and interest in the wider public, the number scholars working on these subjects has declined (at least in the United States).

And yet there is still a great deal of work to be done. After witnessing genocide in Rwanda and the genocidal ethnic cleansing campaigns in Bosnia, new research in the nineties and the early twenty-first century, aided by the opening of archives in Eastern Europe, began to see violence as multilayered—as not just a narrative about perpetrators and victims, but also as a story of many layers of complicity (German and local fascist and local police and local civilian administrators) as well as many layers of resistance, aid, helping, and rescue. Granted, this research has long been more advanced in western Europe than eastern Europe. True too that in some parts of eastern Europe archives once open are now closed, and Holocaust research inhibited. Still, this new work showed that when writing about National Socialism and the Holocaust, it was no longer possible to merely write one's own history, as was the norm for a very long time. In its intellectually complex form, history, and maybe especially German history, is almost always also someone else's history.