

# Jürgen Habermas, “A Kind of Settlement of Damages: The Apologetic Tendencies in German History Writing” (July 11, 1986)

## Abstract

The starting point for the *Historikerstreit* (Historians’ Quarrel) of 1986/87 was a June 6, 1986, article by historian Ernst Nolte in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. Entitled “The Past that Will not Pass” (“Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen wollen”), the article questioned the singularity of the National Socialist genocide, otherwise known as the Shoah or Holocaust. In July 1986, philosopher Jürgen Habermas criticized this kind of historical revisionist interpretation in an article entitled “A Kind of Settlement of Damages” (“Eine Art Schadensabwicklung”). Habermas’s response opened up a second front in a contentious debate that played itself out in the feuilletons of German newspapers over the course of several months. The *Historikerstreit* was a public debate on how to interpret recent German history.

## Source

*It is a notable shortcoming that the literature about National Socialism does not know or does not want to admit to what degree all the deeds – with the sole exception of the technical process of gassing – that the National Socialists later committed had already been described in the voluminous literature of the 1920s. . . . Did the National Socialists or Hitler perhaps commit an “Asiatic” deed merely because they and their ilk considered themselves to be potential victims of an “Asiatic” deed?*

Ernst Nolte, in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, June 6, 1986

I.

The Erlangen historian Michael Stürmer argues for a functional interpretation of historical consciousness: “In a land without history, the future is controlled by those who determine the content of memory, who coin concepts and interpret the past.” In keeping with Joachim Ritter’s neoconservative image of the world, which was updated by his students in the 1970s, Stürmer envisions the processes of modernization as a kind of unavoidable settlement of damages.

[...]

Let us first observe the Cologne historian Andreas Hillgruber as he walks this tightrope. I feel confident in approaching the most recent study of this renowned historian, even though I have no special competence in the field, since the investigation evidently is addressed to laymen. Hillgruber’s study was recently released in a deluxe edition by Siedler Verlag with the title *Zweierlei Untergang* [Twofold Fall], I will record the observations of a patient subjected to a revisionist operation on his historical consciousness.

In the first part of his study Hillgruber describes the collapse of the German eastern front during the last year of the war, 1944-1945. In the first pages he mentions the “problem of identification.” With which side in the conflict should the author identify? Four possible perspectives suggest themselves. He dismisses the position taken by the would-be assassins of Hitler on July 20, 1944, as merely “preferentially ethical” and therefore inferior to the

---

“responsibly ethical” position of the local commanders, state officials, and mayors. This leaves three perspectives for consideration. Hillgruber dismisses Hitler’s perspective of perseverance and survival as social Darwinism. Nor does an identification with the victors seem possible; such a perspective of liberation would only be appropriate for the victims of the concentration camps, he claims, and not for the German nation as a whole. The historian has just one choice: “He must identify with the concrete fate of the German population in the East and with the desperate and sacrificial efforts of the German army in the eastern theater and of the German navy in the Baltic. The military forces in the East were trying to protect the German population in the East from the orgies of revenge by the Red Army, the mass rapes, the random murders, and the forced deportation, and ... to hold open the escape route to the West.”

Perplexed, one wonders why a historian in 1986 has to block out a retrospective point of view from the distance of forty years, in other words, his own perspective, a standpoint from which he cannot remove himself anyway. Additionally, his own real-time perspective offers hermeneutical advantages. It sets in relation the selective perceptions of the parties involved; it weighs them against one another and completes them from the perspective of knowledge acquired since then. Hillgruber does not want to write his presentation from this, dare one say “normal” standpoint, because, as he claims, then questions of “morality in wars of annihilation” would come into play. And they are to be ruled out. Here Hillgruber brings to mind the remark by Norbert Blüm. Blüm argued that the actions of annihilation in the camps could in fact continue only as long as the German eastern front held. This fact ought to cast a long shadow on the “picture of horror of raped and murdered women and children” that presented itself to the German soldiers who retook Nemmersdorf, for example. Hillgruber wants to present what happened in eastern Germany from the view of the brave soldiers, the desperate civilian population, also the “tried and true” higher-ups of the Nazi party (NSDAP); he wants to set himself inside the experiences of the fighters of yesteryear, at a point when they are not yet compromised and depreciated by our retrospective knowledge. This intention explains the principle behind his dividing the study into two parts: “Collapse in the East” and “Annihilation of the Jews.” These are two processes that Hillgruber precisely does *not*, despite the announcement on the dust jacket, want to show “in their gloomy interweaving.”

[...]

### III.

In the *Historische Zeitschrift* (vol. 242, 1986, pp. 465ff.) Hillgruber’s colleague from Bonn, Klaus Hildebrand, commends a work by Ernst Nolte as “showing the way” because the work does the service of removing the “seemingly unique” quality of the history of the Third Reich. As part of the process of historicizing, he categorizes “the destructive capacity of the worldview and of the regime” as part of the global development of totalitarianism. Nolte, who with his book *Faschismus in seiner Epoche* [Fascism in Its Epoch] (1963) had already found wide acclaim, is in fact cut from a different cloth than is Hillgruber.

In his contribution “Zwischen Mythos und Revisionismus” [Between Myth and Revisionism], he based the necessity for a revision on the observation that the history of the Third Reich had predominantly been written by the victors, who then made it into a “negative myth.” To illustrate, Nolte invites us to take part in a tasteful thought experiment. He sketches for us the image of Israel that would be held by a victorious PLO after the destruction of Israel: “For decades, perhaps even for a century, no one would venture ... to attribute the rise of Zionism to its spirit of resistance against European anti-Semitism.” Even the theory of totalitarianism, which predominated in German historical scholarship of the 1950s, offered no change in perspective from the negative myth initiated by the historians of the victorious nations; instead, the totalitarianism theory had only led to the Soviet Union also being

---

pulled into the negative image. A concept that lives to that extent off the contrast with the democratic constitutional state is not enough for Nolte; he attributes much to mutual threats of destruction. Long before Auschwitz, Hitler, so he claims, had good grounds to believe that his opponents wanted to destroy him – “annihilate” is the word in the English original. As proof he cites the “declaration of war” that Chaim Weizmann in September 1939 delivered on behalf of the Jewish World Congress and that then was supposed to *justify* Hitler in treating German Jews as prisoners of war – and in deporting them. A few weeks ago one could have read in *Die Zeit* (although without names being named) that Nolte served up this argument to a Jewish dinner guest, his colleague, historian Saul Friedländer of Tel Aviv.

Nolte is the officious-conservative narrator who tackles the “identity problem.” He solves Stürmer’s dilemma between the endowment of higher meaning and scholarship through an energetic decision and chooses as a point of connection for his presentation the terror of the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia. He reconstructs a background history for mass terror. As it reaches back in time it includes the “Gulag,” Stalin’s expulsion of the kulaks, and the Bolshevik revolution; he sees antecedents to mass terror in Babeuf, the early socialists, and the agrarian reformers of the early nineteenth century. In all these figures he perceives a line of revolt against cultural and social modernization, a revolt driven by the illusionary and passionate longing for the reestablishment of an understandable, autarchic world. In this context of terror stretching across the globe and over the centuries, the annihilation of the Jews appears as a regrettable, but perfectly understandable, result. It is seen as a reaction by Hitler to what he is assumed to have sensed as a threat of destruction: “The so-called annihilation of the Jews during the Third Reich was a reaction or a distorted copy, but not a first act or an original.”

[...]

Now, one could let the scurrilous background philosophy of this prominent, eccentric mind rest on its own merits, if the neoconservative historians did not feel obliged to play the game of revisionism in precisely this way.

As a contribution to this year’s Römerberg Talks, a conference that also treated the topic of the “past that will not pass” in presentations by Hans and Wolfgang Mommsen, the culture section of *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, June 6, 1986, included a militant article by Ernst Nolte. It was published, by the way, under a hypocritical pretext with the heading “the talk that could not be delivered.” (I say this with knowledge of the exchange of letters between the presumably disinvited Nolte and the organizers of the conference.) When the Nolte article was published Stürmer also expressed solidarity. In it Nolte reduces the singularity of the annihilation of the Jews to “the technical process of gassing.” He supports his thesis that the Gulag Archipelago is “primary” to Auschwitz with the rather abstruse example of the Russian civil war. The author gets little more from the film *Shoah* by Lanzmann than the idea that “the SS troops in the concentration camps might themselves have been victims of a sort and that among the Polish victims of National Socialism there was virulent anti-Semitism.” These unsavory samples show that Nolte puts someone like Fassbinder in the shade by a wide margin. If the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* was justifiably drawn to oppose the planned performance of Fassbinder’s play, then why did it choose to publish Nolte’s letter?

I can only explain it to myself by thinking that Nolte not only navigates around the conflict between the endowing of higher meaning and scholarship in a more elegant way than others but also has a solution ready for another dilemma. This other dilemma is described by Stürmer with the sentence: “In the reality of a divided Germany, the Germans must find their identity, which is no longer to be grounded in the nation state, but which is also not without nation.” The planners of ideology want to create a consensus about the revivification of a national consciousness, and at the same time, they must banish the negative images of the German nation-state from the

---

domain of NATO. Nolte's theory offers a great advantage for this manipulation. He hits two flies with one swat: The Nazi crimes lose their singularity in that they are at least made comprehensible as an answer to the (still extant) Bolshevik threats of annihilation. The magnitude of Auschwitz shrinks to the format of technical innovation and is explained on the basis of the "Asiatic" threat from an enemy that still stands at our door.

#### IV.

If one has a look at the composition of the commissions that have designed the plan for the German Historical Museum in Berlin and the House of the History of the Federal Republic in Bonn, one cannot help but get the impression that the new revisionism is to be realized in these museums in the form of displays and pedagogically effective exhibits. It is true that the expert reports submitted so far have a pluralistic face. But things will be no different with the new museums than they were with the Max Plank Institutes: The programs and memos that regularly precede the founding of a new institution have little to do with what the newly appointed directors actually make of it. That has also dawned on Jürgen Kocka, the token liberal on the Berlin expert commission: "In the end the decisive matter is what person takes charge. . . . Here, too, the devil resides in the details."

No one desires to oppose seriously meant attempts to strengthen the historical consciousness of the population of the Federal Republic. There are also good reasons for a historicizing portrayal that seeks to gain distance from a past that will not pass. Martin Broszat has written convincingly on this. Those complex connections between the criminality and the dubious normality of everyday life under Nazism, between destruction and vital productivity, between a devastating systematic perspective and an intimate, local perspective, could certainly stand being objectified and brought up to date. Then this pedantic co-optation of a short-circuited, moralized past might give way to a more objectified understanding. The careful differentiation between understanding and condemning a shocking past could also help put an end to our hypnotic paralysis. But this kind of historicization would not be guided by impulses such as the ones that provided impulses to the revision recommended by Hildebrand and Stürmer and conducted by Hillgruber or Nolte, who set out to shake off the mortgages of a past now happily made morally neutral. I do not want to impute negative intentions to anyone. There is a simple criterion that distinguishes the people involved in this dispute. The one side assumes that working on a more objectified understanding releases energy for self-reflective remembering and thus expands the space available for autonomously dealing with ambivalent traditions. The other side would like to place revisionist history in the service of a nationalist renovation of conventional identity.

Perhaps this formulation is not unequivocal enough. Those who seek to do more than revivify a sense of identity naively rooted in national consciousness, those who allow themselves to be guided by functional imperatives of predictability, consensus-formation, social integration via endowing meaning, are bound to avoid the enlightening effect of history writing and reject a broad pluralism of historical interpretations. One will hardly misrepresent Michael Stürmer if one is to understand his editorializing in the following way: "When looking at the Germans and their relationship to their history, our neighbors are bound to pose the question: Where is this all leading? . . . The Federal Republic is the centerpiece of European defense within the Atlantic system. But it is becoming evident that each generation living in Germany today has differing, even opposing, views of the past and the future. . . . The search for a lost past is not an abstract striving for culture and education. It is [an undertaking that is] morally legitimate and politically necessary. We are dealing with the inner continuity of the German republic and its predictability in foreign policy terms." In reality, Stürmer is making a plea for a *unified* understanding of history that might replace the increasing privatization of religious values with identity and social integration.

Historical consciousness as vicarious religion—isn't this overtaxing the old dream of historicism? To be sure,

---

German historians can look back on a truly national tradition in their discipline. Hans-Ulrich Wehler recently reminded us of its ideological contribution toward stabilizing the *kleindeutsches Reich* and excluding “enemies of the Reich.” Until the late 1950s the discipline had been dominated by an attitude that had been in the process of being shaped ever since the failure of the revolutions of 1848- 1849 and the defeat of liberal history writing such as that of Gervinus: “For almost 100 years, liberal, enlightened historians could only be found either isolated or in small fringe groups. The majority in the discipline thought and argued in a way that was conscious and affirmative of nationalism and influenced by the state and the power of the state.”

The fact that since 1945, at least among younger historians educated after 1945, not only a new spirit but also a pluralism of modes of understanding [*Lesarten*] and of methodologies has made itself felt is not a mishap that can simply be undone. The old attitude was really just an expression of mandarin consciousness, rampant in the discipline. And this attitude has fortunately not survived the Nazi period. By its impotence against or even complicity with the Nazi regime, the discipline showed itself to be without real substance. The resultant self-reflection by the discipline influenced more than just the ideological premises of German historiography; it also intensified the methodological consciousness of the contextual dependence of *all* history writing.

However, it would be a misunderstanding of this hermeneutic insight if the revisionists of today assume that they can illuminate the present with the spotlights of arbitrarily constructed prehistories and choose from these options a particularly suitable notion of history. The intensified methodological consciousness also means the end of a closed understanding of history and precludes any conception of history that might be prescribed by government historians. The unavoidable pluralism of modes of understanding [*Lesarten*] is a reflection of the structure of open societies. This pluralism provides us with the opportunity to more clearly understand our own identity-forming traditions and their ambivalences. Precisely this is necessary for a critical appropriation of ambivalent traditions and to shape a historical consciousness that is as incompatible with closed and organic images of history as it is with all forms of conventional identity.

What is today being lamented as a “loss of history” is not just an aspect of deliberately repressing and ignoring; it is not only an aspect of being overly focused on an encumbered history that seems to have come to a standstill. If the traditional national symbols have lost their power for younger people, if a naive sense of identification with one’s own history has given way to a more tentative way of dealing with history, if the discontinuities are felt more strongly and continuities are not celebrated at every turn, if national pride and a collective sense of self-worth are forced through the filter of a universalist orientation of values—to the degree that these things are true we can speak of evidence for the formation of a postconventional identity. In Allensbach this evidence is described with forecasts of doom. But this evidence seems to reveal one thing: that we have not gambled away the opportunity that the moral catastrophe could also mean for us.

The unconditional opening of the Federal Republic to the political culture of the West is the greatest intellectual achievement of our postwar period; my generation should be especially proud of this. This event cannot and should not be stabilized by a kind of NATO philosophy colored with German nationalism. The opening of the Federal Republic has been achieved precisely by overcoming the ideology of Central Europe that our revisionists are trying to warm up for us with their geopolitical drumbeat about “the old geographically central position of the Germans in Europe” (Stürmer) and “the reconstruction of the destroyed European Center” (Hillgruber). The only patriotism that will not estrange us from the West is a constitutional patriotism. Unfortunately, it took Auschwitz to make possible to the old culture nation of the Germans binding universalist constitutional principles anchored in conviction. Those who want to drive the shame about this fact out of us with phrases such as “obsession with guilt” (Stürmer and Oppenheimer), those who desire to call the Germans back to conventional forms of their

---

national identity, are destroying the only reliable foundation for our ties to the West.

Source of English translation: Jürgen Habermas, "A Kind of Settlement of Damages: The Apologetic Tendencies in German History Writing," in *Forever in the Shadow of Hitler*. James Knowlton. Copyright © 1993. Used by permission of Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group. All rights reserved.

Source of original German text: Jürgen Habermas, "Eine Art Schadensabwicklung. Die apologetischen Tendenzen in der deutschen Zeitgeschichtsschreibung," *Die Zeit*, July 11, 1986.

Recommended Citation: Jürgen Habermas, "A Kind of Settlement of Damages: The Apologetic Tendencies in German History Writing" (July 11, 1986), published in: German History Intersections, <<https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/knowledge-and-education/ghis:document-151>> [May 13, 2025].