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Edited by Hartmut Lehmann and James van Horn Melton

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Introduction

Continuities in German Historical Scholarship, 1933–1960

JAMES VAN HORN MELTON

The year 1945 was long viewed as a caesura in German history. Germany's military defeat, and its subsequent occupation, partition, and political and economic reconstruction, seemed to represent a radical break with the past. The idea of 1945 as a "*Stunde null*," a zero hour when German history, freed from the burden of its past, began anew, had obvious appeal. To the vanquished Germans it promised historical redemption amid the rubble of defeat; to the triumphant allies it seemed to frame the finality of their victory.

But however useful in its postwar context, *Stunde null* was at heart an ahistorical concept. Germany after 1945 was not a tabula rasa, least of all in the composition of its intellectual and academic elites. Here the continuities are particularly striking in the case of the German historical profession, the subject of this book. In what was to become the Federal Republic of Germany, most historians who had occupied academic chairs under the National Socialist regime retained their positions after 1945. Even those scholars who were suspended after the war were often able to resume their careers in the 1950s, while conversely, few of those who had fled the Nazis returned to German academic life after the war. Another path of continuity was the generation who did not obtain academic posts until after 1945, but who had nonetheless received their historical training during the Nazi years. In one way or another, their experiences prior to 1945 profoundly shaped their subsequent lives, work, and careers.

The indisputable evidence of professional continuity after 1945 led the late Werner Conze to write in 1977 that "the structure of the [West] German professorate remained virtually unchanged up to the

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end of the 1950s. Relative to the period prior to 1945, the themes and methods of instruction . . . represented no fundamental break. Much went on as before, as if nothing decisive had occurred.”¹ Conze’s younger colleague, the Bielefeld historian Hans-Ulrich Wehler, evoked a similar image of German historians conducting their business as usual after 1945: “If one surveys the fifteen years prior to 1960, when the historical discipline remained fundamentally a conservative domain, it becomes clear that this period in fact brought no break with tradition.”²

Conze and Wehler made these observations in the late 1970s, at the end of a period of change and upheaval in German universities. It is therefore understandable why the period from 1945 to 1960 might have seemed to them conservative or even sterile by comparison. The decade of historiographical acrimony launched by the publication in 1961 of Fritz Fischer’s controversial study of Wilhelminian foreign policy seemed to stand in sharp contrast to the relative quiescence and consensus that had prevailed in the 1950s. *Relative* is the key word here, for the decade of the 1950s was by no means devoid of substantive debate. This was especially true in the field of contemporary history (*Zeitgeschichte*), where the appearance of Karl Dietrich Bracher’s *Auflösung der Weimarer Republik* [*Dissolution of the Weimar Republic*] in 1955 set off a debate over the role of social-science categories in historical analysis. But to understand why the post-Fischer era seemed to stand in such bold relief to the preceding period, one must also look at the dramatic institutional growth of West German universities during the 1960s. From the 1960s to the mid-1970s, the proliferation of new universities, institutes, academic chairs, and middle-level teaching positions brought greater professional mobility for a rising generation of younger scholars less directly connected with prewar traditions and approaches. This institutional expansion also served to decentralize the historical profession, multiplying the sources of academic patronage and thereby weakening the clientage networks that had traditionally dominated the discipline.³

1 Werner Conze, “Die deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft nach 1945,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 225 (1977), 12.

2 Hans-Ulrich Wehler, “Geschichtswissenschaft heute,” in *Stichworte zur Geistigen Situation der Zeit*, ed. Jürgen Habermas, vol. 2 (Frankfurt, 1979), 723 [for the English-language version see Wehler, “Historiography in Germany Today,” in *Observations on the Spiritual Situation of the Age* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984)]. Verdicts similar to those of Conze can be found in George Iggers, *The German Conception of History* (Middletown, Conn., 1968), 252–62.

3 On these networks, see Wolfgang Weber, *Priester der Klio. Historisch-sozialwissenschaftliche Studien zur Herkunft und Geschichtswissenschaft 1800–1970* (Frankfurt, 1984). See also Ernst

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But it was above all the self-conscious break with older traditions of diplomatic and political history that seemed to represent a “paradigm shift” in the West German historical profession during the 1960s and 1970s. Drawing from theorists as disparate as Weber, Marx, Habermas, and Hilferding, the “historical social science” of Hans-Ulrich Wehler and the so-called Bielefeld school demanded a more critical approach to the German past.⁴ Wehler attacked the neo-Rankean historicist tradition in toto, alleging its neglect of social history, hostility to theory, unquestioned acceptance of the “primacy of foreign policy,” and complicity with the tradition of illiberalism and authoritarianism that he saw as the products of Germany’s uneven historical development.

Although Wehler emphasized the extent to which historical social science had broken with the traditions of German historicism, he did acknowledge historiographical antecedents. He traced the new concern with sociological themes back to the “progressive” but essentially subterranean tradition of social history that included Eckart Kehr (1902–33), the iconoclastic young historian of the Weimar era, and liberal emigrés like Hans Rosenberg (1904–87), whose work on Prussian and Wilhelminian history informed much of Wehler’s own view of the Second Empire.⁵ But the fact that Kehr and Rosenberg, both professional outsiders, figure so prominently in the self-constructed genealogy of the Bielefeld school, further reinforces the image of a German historical profession that up to the 1960s remained methodologically retrograde, implacably hostile to social history, and stubbornly mired in a new-Rankean perspective that subordinated structural analysis to a narrative of high politics and diplomacy.

The essays presented here focus on the development of German-language historical scholarship from the triumph of National Socialism in 1933 to the late 1950s. They originated out of a conference held at Emory University in the spring of 1990, cosponsored by the German Historical Institute of Washington, D.C., and the Goethe

Schulin, *Traditionskritik und Rekonstruktionsversuch. Studien zur Entwicklung von Geschichtswissenschaft und historischem Denken* (Göttingen, 1979), 140–43, and Wehler, “Geschichtswissenschaft heute,” 739–40, on the institutional changes of the 1960s and 1970s. Wehler’s figures show that between 1960 and 1975, the number of academic chairs in the universities of the Federal Republic increased from 80 to 210. The number of *Dozent* positions rose from 90 to 230, and the number of *Assistenten* from 50 to 380.

4 For a useful introduction, see Roger Fletcher, “Recent Developments in West German Historiography: The Bielefeld School and Its Critics,” *German Studies Review* 7 (1984):451–80; Georg Iggers, “Introduction,” in *The Social History of Politics: Critical Perspectives in West German Historical Writing since 1945* (New York, 1985); idem, *New Directions in European Historiography*, rev. ed. (Middletown, Conn., 1984).

5 Wehler, “Geschichtswissenschaft heute,” *passim*.

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Institute of Atlanta. In jointly planning the conference, Hartmut Lehmann and I hoped to address a number of questions that seemed to us critical for understanding the state of German historical scholarship at the end of our century. What was the impact of National Socialism on German-language scholarship? How did historical scholarship under the Nazi regime differ from the scholarship that was produced both before and after it? How, if at all, did changes in the discipline during the interwar period anticipate later trends in the direction of social history? To what extent did the “German catastrophe” of 1945 inspire a genuine revision of German history, and in what ways did older perspectives endure and continue to shape historical writing?

In addressing these and other questions, this collection of essays focuses on a small group of historians whose careers in varying degrees spanned the period before and after 1945. Owing to the fundamentally different circumstances that prevailed in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), the essays are confined to prominent historians who after the war settled in what was to become the Federal Republic of Germany and Austria.⁶ The contributors include students of some of the historians discussed in the book, and it is hoped that this choice of authors will bring a more personal perspective to the essays. At the same time, the essays are intended to be case studies, not encomia. Hence, in order to avoid the kind of scholarly hagiography that is always a danger in biographical essays of this sort, we have included critical responses by other scholars who were present at the original conference.

What is the collective portrait of the profession that emerges from these essays? Although the contributors disagree about the profession’s capacity for self-renewal and innovation, they all basically

6 On historical scholarship in the former German Democratic Republic, see Andreas Dorpalen, *Germany History in Marxist Perspective: The East German Approach* (Detroit, 1985); Gunther Heydemann, *Geschichtswissenschaft im geteilten Deutschland. Entwicklungsgeschichte, Organisationsstruktur, Funktionen, Theorie- und Methodenprobleme in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und in der DDR* (Frankfurt, 1980); idem, “Zwischen Diskussion und Konfrontation—Der Neubeginn deutscher Geschichtswissenschaft in der SBZ/DDR,” in *Einführung in Fragen an die Geschichtswissenschaft in Deutschland nach Hitler 1945–1950*, ed. C. Cobet (Frankfurt, 1986); Albrecht Timm, *Das Fach Geschichte in Forschung und Lehre in der Sowjetischen Besatzungszone seit 1945* (Bonn, 1965); Alexander Fischer, “Neubeginn in der Geschichtswissenschaft. Zum Verhältnis von ‘bürgerlichen’ und marxistischen Historikern in der SBZ/DDR nach 1945,” *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 31 (1980); Werner Berthold, “Zur Geschichte der Geschichtswissenschaft der DDR. Vorgeschichte, Konfrontation und Kooperationen,” in *Deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg*, ed. Ernst Schulz (Munich, 1989).

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corroborate the conventional profile of the profession: German historians, before as well as after 1945, were predominantly men of deeply conservative political beliefs. It is telling, as Winfried Schulze notes, that even though not a single full professor had been a member of the Nazi Party prior to 1933, relatively few historians lost their positions or resigned on grounds of conscience after 1933. The same can be said of senior Austrian historians after the *Anschluss* of 1938: At the University of Vienna, not a single full professor of medieval or modern history lost his position or resigned after the Nazi seizure of power.⁷ Needless to say, the fact that relatively few historians in Germany and Austria were affected by the advent of National Socialism is no index of the regime's tolerance. Rather, dismissals were unnecessary simply because the profession on the whole sympathized with many elements of the National Socialist program. There were of course exceptions to the prevailing pattern of complicity and conformity, most notably the liberal Catholic historian Franz Schnabel. As Lothar Gall's essay reminds us, Schnabel refused any accommodation with the regime and lost his position. On the whole, however, there was precious little outward opposition to National Socialism among German historians. Few had viewed the Weimar Republic sympathetically, and many scorned its parliamentary regime as Western and hence un-German.⁸ Karl Alexander von Müller, who headed the profession's flagship journal as editor of *Historische Zeitschrift* during most of the Nazi period, was right to boast in 1936 that "the [German] historical discipline does not come empty-handed to the new German state and its youth."⁹ This is not to say that the regime ever succeeded in transforming the profession into a mere propaganda vehicle. As the failure of Walter Frank's regime-sponsored *Reichsinstitut für Geschichte des neuen Deutschlands* proved, the very conservatism that had predisposed historians to welcome the regime also helped neutralize many of its efforts to impose ideological uniformity on the profession.¹⁰ A good deal of the schol-

7 Gernot Heiss, "Von Österreichs deutscher Vergangenheit und Aufgabe: Die Wiener Schule der Geschichtswissenschaft und der Nationalsozialismus," in *Willfähige Wissenschaft: Die Universität Wien 1938 bis 1945*, ed. Gernot Heiss, et al. (Vienna, 1989), 51. Here we should not overlook those below the level of full professor who did lose their positions, most notably Henrich Benedikt, Friedrich Engel-Janosi, and Hugo Hantsch.

8 See Bernd Faulenbach, *Ideologie des deutschen Weges. Die deutsche Geschichte in der Historiographie zwischen Kaiserreich und Nationalsozialismus* (Munich, 1980), 248–57.

9 Quoted in Winfried Schulze's essay in this book, Chapter 1, p. 27.

10 See Helmut Heiber, *Walter Frank und sein Reichsinstitut für Geschichte des neuen Deutschlands* (Stuttgart, 1966).

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arship generated after 1933 differed little from what had come before, and because so few historians ventured to criticize the regime publicly, most could confidently expect a minimum of political interference as long as they possessed the requisite non-Jewish ancestry.¹¹

There is no question, then, that the bulk of the profession was rightist in outlook and did little or nothing to resist the Nazi regime. But as a number of these essays attempt to show, the advent of National Socialism in no way precluded significant methodological innovations. Indeed, these authors argue that German-language scholarship during the Third Reich marked a radical break with the traditions of political and diplomatic history that had dominated German historiography since 1871. Much has been written about the pioneering role of the *Annales* school in France, which began to flourish in the 1930s. Far less attention has been given to analogous tendencies in German-language scholarship, above all the movement known as “folk history” (*Volksgeschichte*). As Marc Raeff notes in his essay on Hermann Aubin, the focus of folk history was basically the same as that of early *Annales* scholarship. Like Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, folk historians were preoccupied with the study of peasant landholding patterns, demography, kinship, and popular culture. Folk history also shared the regional approach of the *Annales* school, and built on a rich tradition of regional history (*Landesgeschichte*) dating back to the late eighteenth century.¹² It has in fact been suggested that the regional perspective of Bloch and Febvre was in part stimulated by their experience at the University of Strasbourg, which, as a former German university, had a library of *Landesgeschichte* unsurpassed in Europe.¹³

11 As Georg Iggers has written, “the majority of German historians . . . went their merry way with little interference from the Nazis. Interference was not necessary because on very fundamental questions they were close to the Nazi position.” Iggers, “Introduction,” in *The Social History of Politics*, 17.

12 For useful comparisons, see Irmeline Veit-Brause, “The Place of Local and Regional History in German and French Historiography: Some General Reflections,” *Australian Journal of French Studies* 16 (1979), and Franz Irsigler, “Zu den gemeinsamen Wurzeln von ‘histoire regionale comparative’ und ‘vergleichender Landesgeschichte’ in Frankreich und Deutschland,” in *Marc Bloch aujourd’hui. Histoire comparée et sciences sociales*, ed. Hartmut Atsma and André Burguière (Paris, 1990). On the relationship between folk history and *Landesgeschichte*, see Rudolf Kötzschke, “Landesgeschichte und Heimatsgedanke,” *Neues Archiv für sächsische Geschichte* 48 (1927).

13 See Reinhard Elze’s comments in the *Annali dell’ Istituto storico italo-germanico in Trento* 13 (1987): 149–50. Compare the observations of Fernand Braudel, who wrote in 1972: “Is it by chance that Henri Berr, Lucien Febvre, Marc Bloch, and myself all came from eastern France? That the *Annales* began at Strasbourg, next door to Germany and to German

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Whatever their methodological similarities, folk history and the early scholarship of the *Annales* school differed radically in their politics. Bloch and Febvre were moderate republicans who opposed the fascist currents spilling over both sides of the Rhine.¹⁴ Folk history, on the other hand, originated on the far right of the Central European political spectrum, and was closely identified with the vehemently pan-German repudiation of the Versailles treaty. Folk historians subordinated the concept of the nation-state, long the central organizing principle of German historiography, to that of the *Volk*. This conceptual shift did much to stimulate the study of what we would today call social history. But in context it also expressed the pan-German insistence that the Bismarckian, Prussocentric solution of 1871 had been incomplete, for it had excluded that part of the *Volk* in Austria and Eastern Europe who still lived outside the borders of the German state. What folk history did in effect was to historicize the political solution of 1871, which now figured as a stage in German historical development rather than its fulfillment. The expansionist ideology implied in this historicization explains why practitioners of *Volksgeschichte* found such a willing patron in the National Socialist regime, which was especially interested in fostering the study of German communities in the east. *Ostforschung* was to be promoted in the Third Reich by a number of special institutes with overtly political and expansionist aims, and several of the scholars examined in this book (notably Hermann Aubin, Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, Hans Freyer, and Theodor Schieder) participated in related projects during the early stages of their careers.

The unwholesome features of folk history, especially the overt racism and anti-Semitism of some of its leading adherents (for example, Adolf Helbok and Erich Keyser), make it hard for us today to see the movement in any other than a negative light. At the Emory conference, several participants not only stressed the theoretical deficiencies of folk history, but also warned against overlooking its willing complicity with a vicious and barbarous regime (see the pointed remarks by Georg Iggers and Charles Maier). Others, how-

historical thought?" Fernand Braudel, "Personal Testimony," *Journal of Modern History* 44 (1972): 450; also cited in Irsigler, "Zu den gemeinsamen Wurzeln von 'histoire regionale comparative' und 'vergleichende Landesgeschichte,'" 73. On Bloch's high regard for German *Landesgeschichte*, see Veit-Brause, "The Place of Local and Regional History," 453.

14 Carole Fink, *Marc Bloch: A Life in History* (New York, 1989), 100–103, 179–82.

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ever, argue that what Jürgen Kocka has called the “ideological regressiveness” of folk history¹⁵ points to an important fact: The kind of social history that we tend to associate with the *Annales* and to regard as democratic by its very nature had different roots in Germany.¹⁶ These authors agree that the odious origins of folk history should not be whitewashed, but neither should they obscure the innovative features of an approach that combined history, sociology, demography, and ethnography in an effort to produce a comprehensive “total history.”

What seems clear in any case is that *Volksgeschichte* posed the most formidable challenge to the reigning paradigm of German political history since the appearance of Karl Lamprecht’s five volume *Deutsche Geschichte* (1891–95). Indeed, it is no accident that the emergence of folk history in the interwar period was accompanied by a renewed interest in Lamprecht’s work. Roger Chickering notes how folk historians could draw inspiration from various aspects of Lamprecht’s scholarship, including his pan-German emphasis on *Volk* over *Staat*, his early work in the field of *Landesgeschichte*, and his interest in patterns of rural settlement and landholding. The Nazi regime itself looked favorably on Lamprecht’s work, no doubt in part because of his pan-German approach.¹⁷ Scholars have largely overlooked the Lamprecht revival of the Nazi period, much as they have overlooked the resurgence of interest in social history that marked the discipline in general between 1933 and 1945.¹⁸

15 Jürgen Kocka, “Ideological Regression and Methodological Innovation: Historiography and the Social Sciences in the 1930s and 1940s,” *History and Memory* 2 (1990).

16 See also the introduction by Howard Kaminsky and James Van Horn Melton to their translation of Otto Brunner, *Land and Lordship: Structures of Governance in Medieval Austria* (Philadelphia, 1992), xiii–lxi, xliii–xliv.

17 When in 1937 the Saxon education ministry urged the folk historian Adolf Helbok to assume a chair at the *Institut für Kultur- und Universalgeschichte* (the Leipzig institute founded by Lamprecht), he was told that “for some time we have desired to expand the Leipzig history faculty, adding to its body of *political* historians a cultural and folk historian capable of reviving the traditions of Lamprecht.” Cited in Adolf Helbok, *Erinnerungen: Ein lebenslanges Ringen um volksnahe Geschichtsforschung* (Innsbruck, 1964), 116–17.

18 Dieter Groh, for example, wrote that the Nazi period only “strengthened the rule of those writing the histories of heroes, wars, and the state”; “Strukturgeschichte als ‘totale Geschichte’?,” *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 58 (1971), 300. Hartmut Kaeble echoes this judgment in arguing that under the Nazis, “an entire generation of German historians ignored social history; for them, the field was as good as lost”; “Sozialgeschichte in Frankreich und der Bundesrepublik: *Annales* gegen historische Sozialwissenschaften?,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 13 (1987), 81. See also David Crew, “Social History in Western Germany,” *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 29 (1989): 385: “Before 1933, German Marxism, sociology, and *Volkskunde* . . . all appeared to provide rich intellectual and methodological nourishment for the germination of an indigenous German social history. But then came the Third Reich. . . .”

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One might press this last point even further: It was precisely the patronage and sponsorship of the Nazi regime that explains why folk historians could challenge the prevailing traditions of political history without suffering the professional marginalization that had been Lamprecht's fate at the turn of the century. It was of course a different story after 1945, when that very same sponsorship deeply discredited *Volksgeschichte*. The rapid eclipse of folk history after the Second World War points to a piquant irony of postwar German scholarship. On the one hand, folk history, methodologically the most innovative historiographical current of the interwar period, emerged from the war irreparably compromised. On the other hand, those historians who were least compromised by Nazi involvements and who therefore became the dominant figures in the profession after 1945 – notably Friedrich Meinecke, Gerhard Ritter, and Hans Rothfels – were those who most closely identified with older, nineteenth-century traditions of political, diplomatic, and intellectual history. This paradox helps to explain why, in the short run at least, the defeat of Germany in 1945 did more to restore the hallowed traditions of German historicism than it did to revise them.

True, military defeat did provoke a period of introspection into the roots of the “German catastrophe” and the reasons for Germany’s “wrong historical turn” (*Irrweg*).¹⁹ This phase culminated in Gerhard Ritter’s keynote address to the Munich *Historikertag* in 1949, where the Freiburg historian chastised the German historiographical tradition for its glorification of power, narrow concern with diplomatic history, and neglect of social and economic phenomena.²⁰ But for all of its pathos and anguished soul-searching, this self-critical mood proved relatively transitory and brought little in the way of actual change or revision in the discipline. As far as Ritter himself was concerned, although Klaus Schwabe and Thomas Brady sharply disagree on the extent to which Hitler’s ascent to power led Ritter to

19 Some representative titles: Alexander Abusch, *Der Irrweg der Nation* (Berlin, 1945); Karl Siegfried Bader, *Ursache und Schuld in der geschichtlichen Wirklichkeit* (Karlsruhe, 1946); Otto Gablentz, *Die Tragik des Preussentums* (Munich, 1948); Fritz Helling, *Der Katastrophenweg der deutschen Geschichte* (Frankfurt, 1947); Friedrich Meinecke, *Der deutsche Katastrophe* (Zurich, 1946); Gerd Tellenbach, *Die deutsche Not als Schuld und Schicksal* (Stuttgart, 1947). For other examples, see appendix 4 in *Einführung in Fragen an die Geschichtswissenschaft in Deutschland nach Hitler 1945–1950*, 55–56, and Winfried Schulze, *Deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft nach 1945*, *Historische Zeitschrift*, Beiheft 10 (Munich, 1989), 46–47, n. 2.

20 Published as “Gegenwärtige Lage und Zukunftsaufgaben deutscher Geschichtswissenschaft,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 170 (1950).

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revise his views, they concur that Ritter did not change his approach to history after 1945.

Demographic attrition was partly to blame for the fact that the profession remained relatively unchanged during the postwar decade. The generation of Germans born between 1910 and 1920 – those who would otherwise have entered the profession during the postwar decade – had been hit hard by the war. Many were casualties of the conflict, while the exigencies of military service interrupted the education and careers of those who survived. Professionally, then, the impact of this middle generation of historians was belated if not attenuated. Hence those in the position to help revive and reconstruct the profession after 1945 – scholars like Meinecke, Ritter, and Rothfels – were largely older figures who had occupied leading positions before the war. The essays by Klemens von Klemperer and Jonathan Knudsen suggest that while Rothfels and Meinecke were aware of the shortcomings of the neo-Rankean tradition, both temperamentally and methodologically they ultimately identified more with the nineteenth century than they did with the twentieth. What led them to oppose National Socialism was less a commitment to parliamentary democracy than it was a principled conservatism that feared and distrusted the entry of “the masses” into the political arena. Notwithstanding their appeals for a reform of the discipline after 1945, Meinecke, Ritter, and Rothfels all remained committed to the individualizing approach of traditional historicist scholarship and resistant to more generalizing methods and categories.²¹ Hence the historians who emerged after 1945 with the greatest moral and professional authority were those most deeply anchored in German historiographical tradition. Here again, Franz Schnabel is an important exception. But as Lothar Gall observes, the very trait that enabled Schnabel to distance himself from the Prussocentric, nationalist traditions of the profession – his universalist, liberal-Catholic *Weltanschauung* – also tended to limit the range of his influence after 1945.

By the early 1950s, then, the process of restoration seemed complete. Earlier calls for a fundamental reorientation of the historical

21 See, for example, Ritter's critique of the *Annales* school in his “Zur Problematik gegenwärtiger Geschichtsschreibung,” in *Lebendige Vergangenheit. Beiträge zur historisch-politischen Selbstbesinnung* (Munich, 1958). It should also be noted that in 1958 Ritter succeeded in blocking the publication of a German translation of Hans Rosenberg's *Bureaucracy, Aristocracy, Autocracy: The Prussian Experience 1660–1815* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), a critical analysis of the Prussian bureaucratic tradition. See Wehler, “Geschichtswissenschaft heute,” 721.