

The Revisionist Scholar Ernst Nolte Provokes the Historikerstreit (June 6, 1986)

Abstract

With his attack on the “black-and-white” treatment of the past, the revisionist historian Ernst Nolte unleashed a fierce controversy (known as the *Historikerstreit* or historians’ quarrel) about German responsibility for the Holocaust. He emphasized that the Bolsheviks pioneered many of the criminal methods later used by the Nazis, who were only responding to the Red Terror.

Source

The Past That Will Not Pass: A Speech That Could Be Written but Not Delivered

[...]

Black-and-White Images

There are good reasons for this. The more unequivocally the Federal Republic and Western nations in general develop toward social-welfare societies, the more disturbing becomes the image of the Third Reich with its ideology of warlike self-sacrifice; its maxim of “canons instead of butter”; and the Edda quotations, such as “Our Death Will Be a Festive One,” loudly chanted at school celebrations. All people today are pacifists by conviction, but they cannot look back from a safe distance upon the bellicosity of the Third Reich because they know that year in and year out both superpowers spend far more for their arms than Hitler spent from 1933 to 1939. Thus a deep-seated insecurity remains. We prefer to confront our enemies from a position of certainty rather than from the confusion of the present.

[...]

But has it only been the stubbornness of the *pays réel* of normal, everyday Germans who have set themselves against this non-passing of the past and have wanted a line to be drawn so that the German past might be seen as not essentially different from other pasts?

Is there not a core of truth in many of these questions and arguments that in a sense erect a wall against the desire to ceaselessly deal with National Socialism? I am offering some of these arguments and questions in order to conceptualize this “failing,” which, in my opinion, is the decisive one, and to outline this process of “coming to grips with the past,” which has little to do with the much-evoked desire to finally draw a line under the German past.

It is especially those people who most frequently and most negatively speak of “interests” who fail to allow the question whether with this non-passing of the past interests are also at play, for example, the interests of a new generation in the age-old struggle against “the fathers”—or interests of the persecuted and their heirs in having a permanent special status and the privileges that go with it.

The talk about “the guilt of the Germans” all too blithely overlooks the similarity to the talk about “the guilt of the Jews,” which was a main argument of the National Socialists. All accusations of guilt that come from Germans are dishonest since the accusers fail to include themselves or the group they represent and in essence simply desire to administer the coup de grace to their old enemies.

[...]

For the historian the most regrettable result of the non-passing of the past is that the simplest rules that are in effect for every past appear to be suspended: Every past is knowable in its complexity; the connectedness in which the past is interwoven should be made more visible; black-and-white images of politically involved contemporaries should be correctable; earlier histories should be subject to revision.

But in the case of the Third Reich, this rule seems to be “dangerous for the people”: Could it not lead to a vindication of Hitler or at least to exculpation of the Germans? Might it not allow for the possibility that the Germans could again identify with the Third Reich, as the great majority did between 1935 and 1939, and that they might fail to learn the lesson imposed upon them by history?

These questions can be answered briefly and apodictically: No German can desire to justify Hitler, even if only because of his March 1945 order to annihilate the German people. Historians and journalists cannot guarantee that the Germans will learn lessons from history—but that is guaranteed by the total shift in the relationships of power and by the obvious and evident results of two great defeats. The Germans can of course still learn false lessons, but only in one way, a way that would be novel and “anti-Fascist.”

It is true that there has been no shortage of efforts to transcend the level of polemic and to draw a more objective picture of the Third Reich and its Führer. It will suffice to mention the names of Joachim Fest and Sebastian Haffner. Both focused on the domestic German situation, however. I would like to attempt, using a few questions and key words, to suggest the perspective in which this past should be viewed if it is to be treated with the equality that is a principal postulate of philosophy and of any historical scholarship that desires to highlight differences.

[...]

Gulag Archipelago and Auschwitz

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: mass deportations and executions, torture, death camps, the extermination of entire groups using strictly objective selection criteria, and public demands for the annihilation of millions of guiltless people who were thought to be “enemies.”

It is likely that many of these reports were exaggerated. It is certain that the “White terror” also committed terrible deeds, even though its program contained no analogy to the “extermination of the bourgeoisie.” Nonetheless, the following question must seem permissible, even unavoidable: 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? Was the Gulag Archipelago not primary to Auschwitz? Was the Bolshevik murder of an entire class not the logical and factual prius of the “racial murder” of National Socialism? Cannot Hitler’s most secret deeds be explained by the fact that he had *not* forgotten the rat cage? Did Auschwitz in its root causes not originate in a past that would not pass?

One does not have to have read Melgunov’s now-vanished book to ask such questions. But one fears to pose them. I have long feared to pose them. They are seen as bellicose anti-Communist slogans or as products of the Cold War. They also do not quite fit into the discipline of history, which is often forced to choose narrower questions. But these questions rest on simple truths. To intentionally ignore truths may have moral reasons, but it also violates the ethos of the discipline.

This ethos would be violated if historians were to stop at such facts and questions and not seek to place them in a greater context—such as the qualitative ruptures in European history that begin with the industrial revolution and that have always inspired an agitated search for the “guilty parties” or for the

“originator” of what is seen as a threatening development. Only in this framework can it become clear that despite all similarities the acts of biological annihilation carried out by the National Socialists were qualitatively different than the social annihilation that Bolshevism undertook. No one murder, and especially not a mass murder, can “justify” another, and we will be led astray by an attitude that points only to the *one* murder and to the *one* mass murder and ignores the other, even though a causal nexus is probable.

Those who desire to envision history not as a mythologem but rather in its essential context are forced to a central conclusion: If history, in all its darkness and its horrors, but also in its confusing novelty, is to have a meaning for coming generations, this meaning must be the liberation from collectivist thinking. That should also mean the decisive turn to a liberal and democratic political order that allows and even encourages criticism insofar as it takes aim at acts, ways of thinking, and traditions, and thus also at governments and organizations of all kinds. Organizations and governments, however, are obliged to stigmatize criticism of existing states of affairs as impermissible. Individuals can free themselves from these stigmas only with great difficulty. This means criticism of “the” Jews, “the” Russians, “the” Germans, or “the” petit-bourgeoisie. To the degree that the debate about National Socialism is characterized by this kind of collectivist thinking, one should draw a line. It cannot be denied that if this happens, thoughtlessness and self-satisfaction will have a heyday. But it does not have to be that way, and truth *does not have to be* made dependent upon utility. A more comprehensive debate, one that would have to mostly consist of thinking about the history of the past two centuries, might cause the past about which we are talking here to pass—as is suitable for every past. And this kind of a debate would also appropriate the past, making it our own.

Source of English translation: Ernst Nolte, “The Past That Will Not Pass: A Speech That Could Be Written but Not Delivered,” in *Forever in the Shadow of Hitler? Original Documents of the Historikerstreit Controversy Concerning the Singularity of the Holocaust*. Translated by James Knowlton and Truett Cates. Atlantic Heights, NJ: Humanities Press, 1993, pp. 18–23.

Source of original German text: Ernst Nolte, “Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will: Eine Rede, die geschrieben, aber nicht mehr gehalten werden konnte,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, June 6, 1986.

Recommended Citation: The Revisionist Scholar Ernst Nolte Provokes the Historikerstreit (June 6, 1986), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/two-germanies-1961-1989/ghdi:document-1064>> [July 10, 2025].