

George L. Mosse on his Father's Liberal Worldview and his Underestimation of National Socialism (Retrospective Account, 2000)

Abstract

Throughout his life, the historian George L. Mosse (1918-1999) dealt intensively with the National Socialist era, and not only in his research. Born in 1918 to a wealthy Jewish publishing family in Berlin, he fled with his mother and siblings to Switzerland in 1933 before being sent to a British boarding school. He emigrated to the United States in 1939. George L. Mosse received his doctorate from Harvard University and later became a formative figure in twentieth-century history through his research on National Socialism, fascism and nationalism. Mosse's father, Hans Lachmann-Mosse, was an influential Jewish publisher in the Weimar Republic. He had taken over the management of the Mosse publishing group, one of the largest German press companies of the time, from his father-in-law Rudolf Mosse in 1920. Among other things, Lachmann-Mosse became the publisher of the daily newspaper *Berliner Tageblatt*, one of the most widely read liberal newspapers of the Weimar Republic. This text is taken from George L. Mosse's memoirs, which he completed two weeks before his death and which were published posthumously. In the excerpt, he describes how his father Hans Lachmann-Mosse underestimated the consequences of the National Socialists coming to power. Mosse describes his father's false sense of security and the conviction held by many Jewish liberals of his generation that the democratic system of the Weimar Republic would be robust enough to fend off antisemitic attacks by right-wing extremists and that they themselves would be protected from persecution by their social position and the rights associated with it.

Source

Like many liberals of his generation, however, my father could bring himself only with difficulty to take the Nazis seriously. He used to say that Hitler did not belong in the front part of the newspaper, but in the *Ulk*, the comic supplement. More telling, and demonstrating the serious underestimation of the Nazis which was so widespread at the time, was a passage in a letter which my father wrote to my sister in February 1933, after Hitler had been Reichs chancellor for ten days. He asserted that since that time the sales of "our newspapers" had increased considerably; if sales continued to increase, the influence of the newspapers would grow, and in any case, the movement which brought Hitler to power would fail because of the dissatisfaction of the masses who would not get employment. And though he wavered at times, he hoped nevertheless for several weeks that the *Berliner Tageblatt* would again be given the right to criticize and become a leading newspaper once more.

[...]

In this last year before Hitler came to power, however, the deadly seriousness of the political situation could no longer be ignored, and in April 1932 my father wrote to my sister that these indeed were terrible times and that the Nazis could not be fought with mere logic. But this was a momentary cry of despair and did not touch his Enlightenment worldview, which remained intact throughout his life. Today I realize that my father's attitude toward the approaching storm was typical of many, perhaps most, German Jews of his standing, that they shared the illusions which for them presented the best hope of being truly accepted in Germany. After all, the Enlightenment and its rationalism had led to Jewish emancipation. My sister, of a different generation, told him more than once how the Nazi influence made

itself felt even at the left-wing social-work organization where she worked. I eventually went to at least one Nazi mass meeting and witnessed the enthusiasm and élan of the crowd. But for my father, the irrational, like all religion, was “humbug,” as he used to tell me, without substance, nothing but smoke and mirrors. Here political tensions were added to the family’s other problems.

Source: George L. Mosse, *Confronting History: A Memoir*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000, pp. 41–42.

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