

University of New Mexico

UNM Digital Repository

History Faculty Publications

Scholarly Communication - Departments

1986

German Intellectual History

Charles E. McClelland

University of New Mexico, cemcc@unm.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/hist_fsp



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McClelland, Charles E.. "German Intellectual History." *Central European History*, 19 (1986), 164-173 (1986).
https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/hist_fsp/14

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Scholarly Communication - Departments at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

German Intellectual History

by CHARLES E. MCCLELLAND

[Draft of a conference paper at the American Historical Association annual meeting 1986, later published in *Central European History*, 19 (1986), 164-173.]

When I was asked to survey American contributions to German intellectual history in the past century within a highly confined space, I realized there were only two feasible approaches. One was to make a very long list of major contributions and to eschew annotation and commentary. Such a list would be very useful, if tedious to read. The second way, the one I have chosen, is more general and necessarily subjective: to reflect briefly on the status of German intellectual history in the American historical profession and how that status was created.

Intellectual history, German or otherwise, has declined in popularity in recent years, although it does not seem to have declined in academic vigor. There are even signs that intellectual history is currently recovering some of its former popularity. This in turn may correlate with a certain disillusionment or fatigue with a multitude of economic (including Marxist) and socio-statistical interpretations of history. The continued academic vigor of intellectual history for the future is more problematical, if only because fewer and fewer academic positions are available for emerging young experts in this area. This would appear, however, to be a problem lying ahead for the entire area of German history as taught in North America, not merely for its intellectual-history subdivision.

A recent survey of historical dissertations produced in American universities, based on Dissertation Abstracts from 1978 through 1983, casts some light on these questions, if only for a brief time-span and a relatively recent period. Overall, Central European dissertations comprised about 21 percent of all dissertations on European subjects. Except for 1983, the last year counted, the number fluctuated between a low of 30 and a high of 47 dissertations. Only 19 were reported in 1983. Of all dissertations in Central European history, over 19 percent were, however, in intellectual and cultural subfields—the second most popular area after social history (with 26.5 percent), and a hair ahead of traditional political history (18 percent).¹

Similarly, for a leading specialized journal such as *Central European History*, a palpable increase in the number of manuscripts submitted in the area of German intellectual history can be documented when comparing the first and second decades of the journal's existence.² It would be quite interesting to compare such figures with similar ones for Germany. It is a fair, if subjective, assumption that American universities produce as many (if not perhaps more) dissertations on German intellectual history (discounting pure Germanistik) as their German

1 Boris A. Teske, "Recent Dissertations in Central European History," Conference Group for Central European History, Newsletter (April, 1985), 13-15.

2 According to the editor, who used a rather broad definition, from 1968 through 1977 16 percent of the articles published dealt with intellectual history. From then through the current issue the proportion is 30 percent.

counterparts, even today.

This sort of information about research publications could perhaps be quantified to give a less impressionistic picture. It would presumably yield more reliable indicators than, for example, counting chairs or other relatively perennial teaching positions in North American universities. Many such positions require diversification, e.g., offering courses on general history of Central Europe or European intellectual history. Certainly many of the leading German historians who emigrated to America rather than live under fascism were equally at home in intellectual and, for example, diplomatic history. Their tradition has to a large degree continued into the present. Let us move beyond the question of the popularity and scholarly vigor of German intellectual history as a subdiscipline in America. Even if the turn of the wheel of fashion may indeed be bringing a decline in teaching and research on German intellectual history, it has a long way to descend before it is extinguished. Of all the intellectual history fields involving European cultural entities, the position of German intellectual history as a professional exercise is perhaps the most enviable one. French, Italian, Spanish, and Russian (not to mention Polish or Scandinavian) intellectual history are far less vigorously represented in American academia than German.

Why is this so? American historians have made many respectable contributions to European intellectual history, especially in the last half-century of the existence of the American Historical Association.

But why so many, and in such quality, as those to the field of German intellectual history? First we must attempt to dispel at least some of the usual confusion about what "intellectual history" means. It is fair to say that this is an Anglo-Saxon, even largely American conception without exact translation in the German world. One can think of Parrington or Perry Miller. One can also think of the Cambridge Modern History at the beginning of this century, with its notion that intellectual history ought to supplement "normal," i.e., *res gestae* history. Then there is the "history of ideas," as represented by Lovejoy in the interwar period and carried on to this day in such organs as *The Journal of the History of Ideas*, currently headed up by the German refugee intellectual Paul O. Kristeller. Somewhat later there originated the "sociology of knowledge," the study of "intellectuals" as a social subgroup, including the application of social-history methods to cultural institutions. Sociology, psychology, and other social sciences have also greatly enriched the understanding and scope of American "intellectual historians." And what of the history of science, philosophy, literature, and fine arts? These take us out of the normal scope of professional historians, but they are also important to professional "intellectual historians." Significantly, a seemingly disproportionate number of the historical journals in these subdisciplines have been or are currently being edited by scholars who have been deeply involved with German intellectual history at one time or another.

However idiosyncratically the sub-discipline of intellectual history developed in America, it drew much of its methodological inspiration from Germany, where scholarly traditions by the late nineteenth century favored an idealistic interpretation of the past. *Kulturgeschichte*,

Geistesgeschichte, Ideengeschichte were also concepts widely used in Germany before World War I. While they do not singly or collectively completely cover the idea of "intellectual history," and to some degree are even mutually exclusive, they are testimony to attempts in Germany to deepen the Rankean tradition even further by saturating historical interpretation with large cultural and intellectual leading motifs. Indeed the familiar German terms mentioned above were originally bound up with methodological currents that suffused the entire professional practice of the historians' craft in Germany."

By contrast, if "intellectual history" was a "field" in Anglo-Saxon parlance, it was one simply added to other, older ones such as political and economic history. There were no major further methodological implications, whereas in Germany, historicism triumphantly claimed to see "ideas" in every aspect of the historical past. Wilhelm Dilthey's distinction between Geisteswissenschaften and Naturwissenschaften, as well as his prescription of the method of Verstehen for the historian, implied that the study of history is essentially the study of minds and ideas. There could be, therefore, no clean sundering of "intellectual" and, say, economic history, and indeed the "materialistic" presuppositions of the latter made it suspect. The Methodologists around the beginning of the twentieth century confirmed the triumph of historicism. It also, ironically, confirmed the defeat of Ruprecht's agitation for Kulturgeschichte as a separate field: Ruprecht's most serious followers were perhaps the American New Historians. But his attempt to introduce material culture studies into historical interpretation appeared too crass to German non-idealists and to the politically conservative historical establishment at the beginning of this century.

Much of the revulsion in postwar Germany, east and west, against historicism has called into question the idealist interpretation of history. Marxist orthodoxy rejects the primacy of ideas out of hand, while non-Marxist historians have been more interested in switching to analysis of the broader social and political forces that historicism wilfully ignored.

Thus the arrogation of "ideas in history" by the German historicists, coupled with the discrediting of historicism after the Second World War, militated against the creation of a separate subdiscipline of intellectual history in Germany. In the United States, by contrast, "intellectual history" went on as a respectable if hardly central field in the discipline, pursuing its own ends, borrowing methods from outside the historical guild, but not imposing new interpretative canons on the mainstream of American historiography, which remained abidingly political in orientation. This distinction between America and Germany should be kept in mind, because it helps explain why the American historical profession was able to make so many contributions to German intellectual history: (1) America developed such a field, while Germany did not; and (2) the role of ideas in history was dealt with in the two societies in very different ways.

America's contributions to German intellectual history have not rested merely on the large volume of studies by German émigrés and their American students. Undoubtedly another reason for the vitality of German intellectual history in America is tied to the willingness and ability of American specialists to learn from their colleagues and continually pose new questions and employ new models and techniques in answering them. America has also had a

considerable impact on methodological approaches among historians of Germany here and abroad. In some new areas of intellectual history, such as psychohistory, Americans have even created precedents that have not yet been adopted by their German counterparts.

The study of the institutional settings of cultural production and consumption, ranging from the educational system to censorship, has contributed to a redefinition of the boundaries of "intellectual history" itself. German historians themselves have been influenced methodologically and otherwise by the very vigorous exchange of American and German students and professors since World War II, especially in the last three decades. Since my generation first studied "intellectual history" in Germany a quarter-century ago, much has changed. Not only do historians appear to be pursuing intellectual (and especially intellectual/social) history more vigorously than ever; so are many of their colleagues in other fields, such as sociology or German literature. To a large if not exclusive degree, this has come about through Anglo Saxon influence. Such mutual fructification has become so commonplace that it is almost unthinkable to do without it.

This situation has not always obtained, to be sure. For the answer to the question: "What did American professional historians contribute to the corpus of 'German intellectual history' during the first half-century of the American Historical Association?" is "little," which one must hasten further to qualify with "late."

This was not because American historians were always parochial or uninterested in intellectual currents, but because they had different priorities in research and teaching.³ During that first half-century, American historians were still coming to grips with Europe as a separate entity and trying to relate America and Europe intellectually in terms of shared heritage, which mostly meant a British heritage. The great American works were mostly syntheses and texts rather than scholarly monographs on modern European history, let alone German intellectual history. While some of them still make interesting reading today, few could be considered classics comparable to those produced by their colleagues in Germany, and some make us wince with their blatant biases.

It is characteristic of the American professional historical mentality at that time that the first doctoral dissertation on a modern European theme ever approved at Princeton University (which since Woodrow Wilson's day had considered itself very knowledgeable about Europe) appeared about the beginning of World War II. Its author, incidentally, was Gordon Craig, who, it is to be hoped, is not the first nor the last president of the American Historical Association with a strong interest in Germany and its intellectual history. To find its first president from among the ranks of scholars known principally as specialists in German (and indeed to a high degree in German intellectual) history, the AHA turned to an émigré from Nazi persecution, Hajo Holborn.⁴ To be sure, Americans before the 1930s had often interested themselves in German Geist. One must never overlook the influence of people like Emerson, nor the thousands of Americans

3 Leonard Krieger, "European History in America," in John Higham, et al., *History: The Development of Historical Studies in the United States* (Princeton, 1965), 238–67.

4 Lewis A. Coser, *Refugee Scholars in America* (New Haven, 1984), 278.

who studied history, philosophy, and theology, but mostly philology in Germany in the nineteenth century.⁵ German historical method was well known and respected among the founders of the American Historical Association.

Such typical works as Preserved Smith's *Age of the Reformation* (1920) and *History of Modern Culture* (1930) dealt with the intellectual currents in Germany in considerable depth, and historians of "thought" had not been willing to bypass the great thinkers writing in German. Nor did American medievalists overlook the Holy Roman Empire. But their efforts were designed more to introduce Americans to a broader and less provincial world, not to do original research. As far as German intellectual history was concerned, translations from the German, not the other way around, dominated by far.

With that, we can let the case of "little" and "late" rest. Even so, the prestige of German academic and intellectual life, and perhaps the fact that so many Americans were of German background, made access to the world of the German mind easier: German was a language widely taught in American schools before 1917, German scholarship and science were deeply respected in America, and German historical method was the accepted canon among American professional historians. Thus the reception of German refugee intellectuals and historians after 1933 was a special one in America.

As Stuart Hughes wrote nearly a decade ago, "the migration to the United States of European intellectuals fleeing fascist tyranny has finally become visible as the most important cultural event-or series of events-of the second quarter of the twentieth century." ⁶ Germans and Austrians made up two-thirds of this European intellectual migration.⁷

If one could describe the contribution of American historians to German intellectual history in the first fifty years of the AHA's existence as "little and late," one can only describe the second half-century as a spectacular period of catching up and surpassing. The contributions of the new "Americans" who settled here as a result of the forced emigration and of American natives who were taught or influenced by them have been impressive.

For many German refugees, the experience of America was a difficult one professionally and culturally. This was especially true of writers, musicians, and other intellectuals and professional people who keenly felt the absence of their cultural roots and the alien feel of American society. This was probably less true of historians, who found relatively unencumbered access to the profession in terms of teaching and publishing. It could also be, as Lewis Coser suggests, that proportionally fewer historians left Central Europe than artists, doctors, scientists, economists, or psychiatrists.⁸

5 Carl Diehl, *Americans and German Scholarship, 1770—1870* (New Haven, 1978).

6 H. Stuart Hughes, *The Sea Change: The Migration of Social Thought, 1930—1965* (New York, 1975), 1.

7 *Ibid.*, 2.

8 Coser, *Refugee Scholars*, 278. Quantifiable biographical information, at least for the Jewish

For the American historical world, however, this emigration had a major and desired impact. Historians from Germany strengthened the methodological rigor for which their best American colleagues were already striving. As a by-product, they also injected into the American historical establishment a habit of thinking about the past that might broadly be called "intellectual." And while they did not create intellectual history, they underpinned its fledgling beginnings. As Laura Fermi wrote, "the émigré historians made the greatest contribution ... in two areas), because Americans had not yet paid sufficient attention to them: intellectual history and world history." ⁹

Hitler's influence did not of course stop with the expulsion of some of Germany's best minds. The spectacle of books being burned in the land of Dichter und Denker gave a mighty impetus to a reexamination of many European, but especially German, cultural and intellectual traditions. The debate about a German Sonderweg, which West German historical circles have rediscovered recently (thanks in large part to their British colleagues denying there was one) is really not a renewal of Mann's or Troeltsch's World War I reflections, even though these lived on in American and German-American minds. The almost existential acuteness of the Sonderweg problem peaked principally in the United States and in large part as an intellectual-history question: where and when had German culture taken a turn away from the presumed "mainstream" of western civilization?

German intellectual history has never been placed more under scrutiny, and under more brilliant scrutiny, than by the victims of German history who landed on these shores. With a handful of exceptions among the Germans themselves, and even including Madame de Staël, it is hard to think of another time when the roots of German thought underwent deeper scrutiny than in the United States between about 1935 and 1970.

One of the reasons must have to do with the encouragement the American Historical Association has for many years provided to intellectual history in general by opening its meetings and journal to this field. The significance to German intellectual history lies in the fact that America's historical profession implicitly encourages the organization of the discipline to include the intellectual history of foreign countries - a type of specialization practically unknown in German speaking universities.

A scan of the American Historical Review over the past half-century indicates an overall tendency toward increasing interest in the history of modern Germany in general and of the German mind in particular. In the 1930s, the AHR published two articles on modern Germany, and none on intellectual history. The 1940s witnessed nine on Germany, plus one on intellectual history. In the 1950s, the tally had risen to thirteen and four, respectively. In the

emigration from Germany, is only now being published as a first result of a massive project of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences; see also Herbert A. Strauss, ed., *Jewish Immigrants of the Nazi Period in the USA* (New York, 1985).

⁹ Laura Fermi, *Illustrious Immigrants: The Intellectual Migration from Europe, 1930/41*, 2d ed. (Chicago, 1971), 347.

1960s, to seventeen and three; and in the 1970s, to fifteen and six. To place this in perspective, only one article in ten devoted to modern European history concerned Germany in the 1930s, but roughly a quarter in the succeeding decades of the AHR. And, whereas modern German intellectual history hardly appeared there at all in the 1930s and 1940s, articles on that subject have made up five to ten percent of all modern European historical articles in subsequent decades, reaching a high point in the 1970s. One could cite more specialized journals, too, but the AHR must remain the major reference point for the thousands of professional historians in this country.

One might say that this was the American Historical Association's contribution to a much broader and long overdue process of dealing with the extra-American world. The AHA, and the United States, absorbed a kind of global discussion about the "German mind" that no other country in modern history had taken so seriously. It was not merely the refugee German historians, and not even "intellectual historians," that forced this debate. The fact that Hitler spoke German and was so successful in appealing to a part of the German mind that nobody had been prepared to acknowledge after the towering achievements of German Kultur was one natural impetus. The search for intellectual antecedents spurred a renewed, if sometimes tendentious, interest in German thought.¹⁰

But an intense interest in German intellectual history has survived the waning of the original impetus of "explaining" why the powerful Germans have had a different mentality, and how this may have led to world-historical events. The American historical profession, as represented by the AHA, has not only provided a refuge for German intellectuals, but has encouraged and kept vital a subdiscipline of German history that is a unique creation of American academic tradition and German-oriented content.

If the American historical profession, as represented by the American Historical Association, came late with little to German history and its most modest handmaiden, intellectual history, it appears to have made up for its earlier negligence. That is a proud chapter in its century of existence.

10 One thinks of such perverse classics as Peter Viereck's *Metapolitics: The Roots of the Nazi Mind* (New York, 1941) or William Shirer's perennially republished *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*.

OTHER RELEVANT WORKS Robert Boyers, ed., *The Legacy of the German Refugee Intellectuals* (New York, 1972). Bernd Faulenbach, ed., *Geschichtswissenschaft in Deutschland* (Munich, 1974). Jarrell C. Jackman and Carla M. Borden, eds., *The Muses Flee Hitler* (Washington, D.C., 1983).