

## MEMORIAL

### Hans Mommsen (1930–2015)

**H**ANS Mommsen passed away on November 5, 2015—on his eighty-fifth birthday. Mommsen had been a driving force in the German historical establishment for more than fifty years and one of its most compelling. As a specialist on the history of the Weimar Republic and Third Reich, he helped shape the research agenda and mode of inquiry of successive generations of German historians on both sides of the Atlantic for the better part of a half-century. If judged by the sheer number of articles and books he published in the English language, it would be hard to imagine a German historian of his generation who had a more profound effect on the study of German history in the United States than Hans Mommsen. But his influence did not rest solely on the quality and force of his scholarship. It rested also on the moral passion that he brought to the study of German history. Mommsen was, in every sense of the word, an engaged historian who felt passionately about the issues he addressed in his teaching and scholarship. They were not abstract ideas or concepts but part of a moral inquiry into the German past that would, he hoped, be rich in their moral implications for understanding the German present and shaping the German future. But passion is not necessarily an ingredient of good historical scholarship and must always be tempered, as it was in Mommsen's case, by a respect for the sources and fidelity to what a careful and objective analysis of those sources will reveal. Passion can also exacerbate differences and lead to differences that, over time, can become hardened and difficult to heal. Once described as the *enfant terrible* of the German historical profession, Mommsen earned a reputation as the consummate polemicist who neither asked for nor gave quarter in the defense of what he saw as right and true.

Hans Mommsen was one of my oldest and closest professional friends for more than forty years. I first met him in the spring of 1973, when he visited Canisius College to give a lecture on German Social Democracy in the last years of the Weimar Republic. The visit ended up with Hans inviting me to a symposium on “Industrielles System und politische Entwicklung in der Weimarer Republik” that he and several of his colleagues at the University of the Ruhr in Bochum were organizing for the summer of 1973. I had spent two years on a Fulbright Scholarship at the University of Bonn, but this was my initiation into the broader field of Weimar scholarship. Hans subsequently sponsored my application for a research fellowship from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, which resulted in a two-year stay at the

I would like to express my gratitude to Tom Banchich, Bernd Weisbrod, Andy Daum, Hans-Dieter Kreikamp, and Nancy Rosenbloom for having read and commented on preliminary drafts of this essay. I am particularly indebted to Bernd Weisbrod for his extraordinarily thoughtful response of April 6, 2018, to my request for assistance.

University of the Ruhr. Hans was also the primary reader for the book I published in 1988 on the German liberal parties in the Weimar Republic, and he enthusiastically endorsed my proposal for a book on the 1932 presidential elections in a report to Cambridge University Press. I was also co-translator of his magnum opus on the history of the Weimar Republic, *Die verspielte Freiheit. Der Weg der Republik von Weimar in den Untergang*, for the University of North Carolina Press.<sup>1</sup> I visited Hans and his wife Grete frequently in Bochum and then later after his retirement in Munich and Feldafing. My last visit was in April 2015. It was clear that Hans was not doing well at the time, and news of his death seven months later did not come as a surprise.

To say that Hans Mommsen has had a profound influence on my life and career would be an understatement. And to suggest that that does not color my assessment of his life and career would be disingenuous. But I do not think that the extraordinary generosity that he showed me over the course of our long friendship was in any way unique. For as much as Hans was known for the tenacity and spirit with which he defended his point of view, he was also known for the enormous generosity and encouragement that he provided to younger scholars like me—particularly from this side of the Atlantic—when they were just learning to negotiate the challenges of presenting papers and publishing their first work. As one of my former students at Canisius—a student who subsequently went on to receive his doctorate in modern German history and who was fortunate enough to find a permanent teaching job in his field—observed on learning of Hans’s death: “It may sound silly, but I felt like I had met a rock star when he took the time to talk with me in the halls of Churchill Tower.” No one could have asked for a better exemplar as mentor than Hans Mommsen.

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Hans Mommsen was born in Marburg on November 5, 1930. His great-grandfather was the renowned historian Theodor Mommsen, who received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1902 for his work on ancient Rome. His father Wilhelm, also a historian, had been a member of the German Democratic Party (Deutsche Demokratische Partei) during the Weimar Republic and a staunch defender of the republican system of government. But after 1945, Mommsen’s father found himself excluded first from a role in the military government and then from his professorship at the University of Marburg because of intrigues by enemies who accused him of sympathies for the Nazi regime.<sup>2</sup> Hans Mommsen later remembered this as the most bitter experience of his life and as something that hardened his relationship to the historical establishment in postwar Germany.<sup>3</sup> None of this, however, kept Hans or either of his two brothers, Karl and Wolfgang, from pursuing careers as academic historians.

<sup>1</sup>Hans Mommsen, *Die verspielte Freiheit. Der Weg der Republik von Weimar in den Untergang 1918–1933* (Berlin: Propyläen Verlag, 1989) [in English translation as *The Rise and Fall of Weimar Democracy*, trans. Elborg Forster and Larry Eugene Jones (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996)].

<sup>2</sup>On problems that his father faced after World War II, as well as the hardships that this created for his family, see Hans Mommsen, “Daraus erklärt sich, daß es niemals zuvor eine derartige Vorherrschaft alter Männer gegeben hat wie in der Zeit von 1945 bis in die 60er Jahre,” in *Versäumte Fragen. Deutsche Historiker im Schatten des Nationalsozialismus*, ed. Rüdiger Hohls and Konrad H. Jarausch (Munich: DVA, 2000), 163–67. On the postwar difficulties of Mommsen’s father, see Anne Christine Nagel, “Von der Schwierigkeit, in Krisenzeiten liberal zu sein. Der Fall Wilhelm Mommsen,” in *Liberalismus als Feindbild*, ed. Ewald Grothe and Ulrich Sieg (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2014), 229–51.

<sup>3</sup>In conversation with the author in the mid–1970s. See also Mommsen’s reflection on this in Peter Köpf, *Die Mommsens. Von 1848 bis heute—die Geschichte einer Familie ist die Geschichte der Deutschen* (Hamburg: Europa Verlag, 2004), 297.

Hans studied medieval history at the University of Marburg before transferring to the University of Tübingen, where he received his doctorate with a dissertation written under the direction of Hans Rothfels. He then went to the University of Heidelberg, where he served as an assistant to Werner Conze from 1963 to 1968 after a brief stint at the Institute for Contemporary History in Munich. In 1968 Mommsen was appointed to the chair in contemporary European history at the newly established University of the Ruhr in Bochum, where he remained until his mandatory retirement in 1995. Along the way, Mommsen held research appointments at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Princeton, the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin, St. Antony's College in Oxford, and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., as well as visiting professorships at Harvard, the University of California, Berkeley, and Georgetown. After his retirement in 1995, Mommsen moved to the outskirts of Munich, where his wife Grete had begun to make a career for herself as a Soviet and Russian specialist in the Seminar for Political Science at the University of Munich.<sup>4</sup>

Mommsen's antipathy toward the major trends in German historical writing since the middle of the nineteenth century was abundantly apparent in an article he published at the very onset of his career on the relationship between political science and history in the *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* in 1962. Here Mommsen leveled a bitter attack against the German school of historical scholarship as it had reconstituted itself in West Germany after the end of World War II, and against the reaffirmation of the idealistic methodologies that, with Leopold von Ranke and Wilhelm Dilthey, had become axiomatic for the study of historical phenomena. In particular, Mommsen deplored the way in which the study of history and the new social sciences—particularly political science—had developed in sharp opposition to each other, not only in the last decades before the outbreak of World War I but throughout the Third Reich and then again after 1945. What Mommsen found so problematic about this development was that the German approach to the study of history, with its emphasis on the state and the uniqueness of each historical event, as well as its Rankean assertion that “all epochs” were “equally immediate before God,” had the effect of shielding German political institutions from criticism that might have arisen from comparison with the democratic institutions that had established themselves in Western Europe and North America. In other words, Mommsen attacked the close alliance that had developed between the German historical profession and the defenders of the political status quo in Germany both before and after 1933. What Mommsen sought instead was to overcome the historic antagonism between history and the social sciences, and to infuse the study of the former with the methods and critical perspectives of the latter, in the hope that this would lead to the reform and rejuvenation of the historical sciences in Germany.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup>See the useful overviews of Mommsen's career in Bernd Weisbrod, “Hans Mommsen (1930–2015),” *Historische Zeitschrift* 303, no. 3 (2016): 748–59; Norbert Frei, “Sensibler Skeptiker und streitbarer Geist. Hans Mommsen 1930–2015,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* (GG) 42, no. 3 (2016): 535–47; Moshe Zimmerman, “Hans Mommsen (1930–2015): A History of Cumulative Radicalization,” *Yad Vashem Studies* 44, no. 1 (2016): 35–52. See also the contributions of Jane Caplan, Neil Gregor, Nicolas Stargardt, and Bernd Weisbrod in the forum “Hans Mommsen (1930–2015),” *German History* 35, no. 2 (2017): 272–89.

<sup>5</sup>Hans Mommsen, “Zum Verhältnis von politischer Wissenschaft und Geschichtswissenschaft in Deutschland,” *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* (VfZ) 10, no. 4 (1962): 341–72. In a similar though less pointed vein, see idem, “Historical Scholarship in Transition: The Situation in the Federal Republic of Germany,” *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 100, no. 2 (1971): 485–504. On

By no means was Hans Mommsen the only voice calling for the rejuvenation of the historical sciences through a synthesis of the social sciences and traditional modes of historical analysis. Seven years before the appearance of Mommsen's essay, Karl Dietrich Bracher, a political scientist at the Free University of Berlin who was eight years older than Mommsen, published *Die Auflösung der Weimarer Republik: Eine Studie zum Problem des Machtverfalls in der Demokratie*, a book that would run through three more editions by 1960. Bracher's study became an immediate classic and anticipated—and may very well have informed—Mommsen's call for a synthesis of political science and history. Not only did Bracher employ a structural mode of analysis to explain the paralysis and ultimate collapse of Germany's democratic institutions, but he also argued that the systemic breakdown of the late Weimar Republic had created a situation in which the agency of individual historical actors was suddenly invested with much greater causal efficacy than might otherwise have been the case.<sup>6</sup> Bracher thus rescued the principle of individual agency and moral responsibility from the more deterministic models of historical analysis embraced not just by Marxists but also by cultural historians like George Mosse and Fritz Stern.

In the meantime, Mommsen had entered the fray in 1966 with a book titled *Beamtenum im Dritten Reich*, which took issue with one of the fundamental tenets of the hallowed Prussian tradition, namely, the sanctity of the civil bureaucracy and its claim that it represented the welfare of the state as a whole against the clash of antagonistic social and economic interests in civil society. Mommsen demonstrated in great detail just how the Hegelian illusion that the civil bureaucracy somehow stood above the conflicts of civil society had left the former defenseless against Nazi efforts to subvert its professional integrity and transform it into a complicit appendage of the new regime.<sup>7</sup> What this also suggested—and this may have ultimately been even more important—was that the pattern of complicity in the crimes of the Third Reich extended much deeper than those who preferred to blame everything on Adolf Hitler and his narrow circle of advisors were prepared to admit.

At this point it would have seemed that Bracher and Mommsen were more or less on the same page in their respective approaches to the failure of Weimar democracy and the rise of Nazism. Both were at the forefront of progressive forces in the German academic establishment that were pressing the academy to make a thorough accounting of itself and its role in the Third Reich. Both recognized the imperative of achieving a synthesis of history and political science, not by subordinating one discipline to the other but by seeing what each could learn from the other in the interests of rejuvenating the study of recent and contemporary German history. Both approached the study of recent German history from a structuralist

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Ranke, see Georg G. Iggers, *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1968), 63–89.

<sup>6</sup>Karl Dietrich Bracher, *Die Auflösung der Weimarer Republik. Eine Studie des Machtverfalls in der Demokratie*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Villingen/Schwarzwald: Ring-Verlag, 1960), esp. 686–732. Although only eight years separated Bracher and Mommsen, the two clearly belonged to two different generations. Bracher served in World War II, was taken prisoner in North Africa, and spent the remainder of the war in Kansas, whereas Mommsen was fourteen when the war ended. There was, then, a definite difference of perspective here that could also be seen in the fact that, despite their scholarly differences (discussed later), Mommsen always treated Bracher with deference and even hoped to share with him editorship of the *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* after Hans Rothfels's death in 1976.

<sup>7</sup>Hans Mommsen, *Beamtenum im Dritten Reich. Mit ausgewählten Quellen zur nationalsozialistischen Beamtenpolitik* (Stuttgart: DVA, 1966).

point of view that sought to identify the long-term factors that had shaped the course of German history—but without robbing real historical actors of the capacity for free choice, and thus freeing them from responsibility for the consequences of their actions. Finally, both assigned ultimate responsibility for the failure of Weimar democracy and the establishment of the Third Reich to Germany's functional elites, which were not only determined to subvert the institutions of republican government but also entered into a compact with the devil to achieve their destruction.<sup>8</sup>

Relations between the two scholars nevertheless began to take a sharp turn for the worse with the publication of Bracher's *Die Deutsche Diktatur* in 1969. Bracher's central thesis for the period after the so-called Röhm purge in the summer of 1934 was that the simultaneous liquidation of the SA leadership and the elimination of those conservatives who had had the temerity to plot Hitler's removal from office had resulted in the total consolidation of power in the hands of Hitler and the Nazi elite. As a result, the Nazi state had become a totalitarian regime that was subject to Hitler's will and that existed first and foremost for the purpose of transforming that will into reality. The key to understanding the decision-making process in the Third Reich lay, therefore, in understanding the intentions of Hitler and his immediate entourage as articulated in National Socialist ideology. In its essence, the Nazi state was nothing more and nothing less than an elaborate apparatus fused together by National Socialist ideology and created for the purpose of translating Hitler's political will into political reality.<sup>9</sup>

Mommsen took issue with the totalitarian model that Bracher used to explain the Nazi state and with the emphasis that he placed on Hitler's intentions as the driving force in the decision-making process of the Third Reich. Mommsen's essentially twofold critique of Bracher's portrayal of the Nazi state focused on what he saw as its conceptual and moral limitations. On a conceptual level, Mommsen argued that Bracher's model of the Nazi state was too simplistic and thus rejected its Hitler-centric interpretation of the decision-making process in the Third Reich. The idea that the Nazi state was some sort of a monolith that served as the mechanism for the implementation of Hitler's political agenda was, to Mommsen, incompatible with what the most recent studies in political science had revealed about the internal structure of regimes like the Third Reich. Far from being the cohesive and carefully articulated instrument for the realization of Hitler's political fantasies that Bracher had always assumed it to be, the Nazi state was, upon closer examination, a conglomeration of semiautonomous power blocs that were in constant conflict with each other in a struggle over resources, policy, influence, and access to Hitler. These conflicts were waged with a brutal intensity that, in at least one case—the Röhm purge—erupted in open violence. What this suggested, Mommsen argued, was that the Third Reich was not so much a totalitarian state as a “polycracy,” where rivalries among the different agencies and power blocs in the regime were allowed to run their course up until the point where they threatened Hitler's hold on power. Then and only then would Hitler intervene—and then, only when it was

<sup>8</sup>*Functional elites* is a term that Mommsen used in his English-language publications. In the narrowest sense of the phrase, it refers to the professional elites in the civil service, diplomatic corps, and legal system, less directly to the economic elites in business, commerce, and industry, and only loosely to the nobility and large land owners.

<sup>9</sup>The outlines of this argument are developed in Karl Dietrich Bracher, *Die deutsche Diktatur. Entstehung, Struktur, Folgen des Nationalsozialismus* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1969), esp. 270–84, 381–93.

absolutely necessary to rein in conflicts that would have otherwise threatened his position as leader of the Nazi state.<sup>10</sup>

Mommsen's second objection to Bracher's conception of the Nazi state as a totalitarian regime was as much moral as it was scientific. Mommsen's own work on the German bureaucracy in the Third Reich had convinced him that the pattern of acquiescence, if not complicity, of the German populace in the crimes of the Third Reich was much broader than Bracher's Hitler-centric explanation of the decision-making process in the Nazi state allowed. The latter—and this lay at the heart of Mommsen's critique—provided a convenient excuse that made it possible not just for the elites but also for ordinary Germans to escape responsibility for the crimes that had been committed both at home and throughout the rest of Europe.

Mommsen never embraced the principle of Germany's collective guilt, but he nevertheless felt that those Germans who had committed or abetted the crimes of the Third Reich should be held accountable for their actions. Bracher, by contrast, was far from alone in identifying Hitler and his circle of acolytes as the driving force behind all that happened in the Third Reich, including the murder of six million Jews between 1941 and 1945. This was, after all, the legal strategy that had governed the postwar trials of Nazi war criminals at Nuremberg and elsewhere. But it seemed to Mommsen that blaming all the horrendous crimes that had been committed in the name of the Third Reich on Hitler and his immediate entourage made it all too easy for those who had been complicit in the commission of those crimes to avoid responsibility for their actions. In Mommsen's view, responsibility for the crimes of the Third Reich was by no means limited to the relatively small number of people who were directly involved in their commission; it extended much further down the chain of command to include those who might have been only marginally involved, as well as those who, through their inaction, had allowed those crimes to occur.<sup>11</sup> From Mommsen's perspective, Bracher's embrace of the totalitarian model and his Hitler-centric approach to the formulation and implementation of Nazi policy had the practical effect—though clearly this was never his intention—of providing lower- and mid-level Nazi officials with the cover they needed to deny responsibility for the crimes of their Nazi overlords. As one might expect, Bracher took umbrage at Mommsen's critique of his conception of Hitler and his place in the Third Reich, and consequently responded with a sharp counterattack that revealed just how far apart the two had moved.<sup>12</sup>

Nowhere were the lines between the two positions more sharply drawn than at a now renowned conference, “The National Socialist Regime and German Society,” which took place at Cumberland Lodge in May 1979, with Mommsen and Klaus Hildebrand as

<sup>10</sup>For the most concise statement of what he meant by “cumulative radicalization,” see Hans Mommsen, “Der Nationalsozialismus. Kumulative Radikalisierung und Selbstzerstörung des Regimes,” in *Meyers Enzyklopädisches Lexikon* (Stuttgart: Lexikon Verlag, 1975), 16:785–90. See also the informative essay by Ian Kershaw, “‘Cumulative Radicalization’ and the Uniqueness of National Socialism,” in *Von der Aufgabe der Freiheit. Politische Verantwortung und bürgerliche Gesellschaft im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert. Festschrift für Hans Mommsen zum 5. November 1995*, ed. Christian Jansen, Lutz Niethammer, and Bernd Weisbrod (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1995), 323–36.

<sup>11</sup>The moral dimension of Mommsen's critique of Hitler-centric approaches to the history of the Third Reich has not received the attention it deserves in recent discussions of his contributions to German historical scholarship (see note 4), but it was appropriately recognized in Richard Evans, *West German Historians and the Attempt to Escape from the Nazi Past* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), 75.

<sup>12</sup>Karl Dietrich Bracher, *Zeitgeschichtliche Kontroversen. Um Faschismus, Totalitarismus, Demokratie* (Munich: Piper, 1984), 63–79.



the principal antagonists.<sup>13</sup> Hildebrand, a specialist in the history of German foreign policy and the author of *Vom Reich zum Weltkrieg* (1969), was an unabashed intentionalist who argued that the chaotic nature of the regime itself had not, in any way whatsoever, affected Hitler's position as head of the Nazi state—or the extent to which his ideological fixations had shaped the policies of the regime.<sup>14</sup> What was perhaps even more irritating to Mommsen was Hildebrand's assertion that to emphasize the chaotic structures of the governmental machine at the expense of the ideological and totalitarian character of the Nazi regime only trivialized the character of Hitler and National Socialism. The practical effect of this, Hildebrand argued, was to normalize the dictatorship and thus relativize its crimes. Hildebrand went on to accuse the “revisionists”—a pejorative term he extended not just to Mommsen but to all those who took issue with Hitler-centric explanations of the Third Reich—of becoming so fixed in their disregard for the ideological assumptions of Hitler and the leaders of the Nazi state that they had turned a blind eye to the most conspicuous horrors perpetrated by the regime, namely, the genocidal war against Russia and the willful extermination of the Jews.<sup>15</sup>

Whether this was simply hyperbole or, more likely, an attempt to impugn the intentions of those with whom Hildebrand disagreed, Mommsen resisted the temptation to respond in kind and focused on the scholarly issues at stake. He insisted that the history of the Third Reich could not be reduced to the role of Hitler alone, and called for closer attention to the conditions and structures that had made his rise to power possible in the first place. Mommsen drew particular attention here to the role that Germany's functional elites had played not only in installing Hitler as chancellor on the premise that they could somehow control him once he was in power, but also to their complicity in the crimes of the Third Reich—not the least of which was the systematic murder of European Jewry between 1941 and 1945. Mommsen coined the phrase “cumulative radicalization” to explain how this had happened: a process by which rivalries within the polycratic structure of the Third Reich were almost invariably resolved in favor of those factions calling for a more radical course of action. At the same time, the “hollowing out” (*Aushöhlung*) of the moral substance of Germany's functional elites in the economy, civil service, and military had left them incapable of resisting the direction in which the regime was headed.<sup>16</sup>

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As the fight between these two camps raged on for the better part of the next two decades, Mommsen refocused his attention on the fate of the Weimar Republic. In July 1973, he and two of his colleagues at the Ruhr University in Bochum—Dietmar Petzina and Bernd Weisbrod—organized an international symposium on the industrial system and political

<sup>13</sup>For an excellent overview and analysis of the dispute at the time, see Tim Mason, “Intention and Explanation: A Current Controversy about the Interpretation of National Socialism,” in *Der “Führerstaat”: Mythos und Realität. Studien zur Struktur und Politik des Dritten Reiches/The “Führer State”: Myth and Reality. Studies on the Structure of Politics of the Third Reich*, ed. Gerhard Hirschfeld and Lothar Kettenacker (Stuttgart: Allen and Unwin, 1981), 23–42.

<sup>14</sup>Klaus Hildebrand, *Vom Reich zum Weltreich. Hitler, NSDAP und koloniale Frage 1919–1945* (Munich: W. Fink, 1969).

<sup>15</sup>Klaus Hildebrand, “Monokratie oder Polykratie? Hitlers Herrschaft und das Dritte Reich,” in Hirschfeld and Kettenacker, “*Führerstaat*,” esp. 77–79, 96–97.

<sup>16</sup>Hans Mommsen, “Hitlers Stellung im nationalsozialistischen Herrschaftssystem,” in Hirschfeld and Kettenacker, “*Führerstaat*,” 45–46, 55–56, 70–72.

development in the Weimar Republic that essentially defined the parameters of future research on the social, economic, and political history of Weimar Germany for the next thirty years. Having just returned from a year at Princeton, which he would later highlight as one of the formative experiences of his career, Mommsen was intensely interested in learning what American historians had to say about modern German history.<sup>17</sup> This was why he did what he could to remain on top of the current state of North American scholarship on topics of interest to him.<sup>18</sup> Among the American scholars he invited were Gerald Feldman, Charles Maier, and Henry A. Turner, all of whom would go on to publish significant works on the Weimar Republic over the course of the next ten years. Mommsen, who was always supportive of up-and-coming scholars in the field, also made a point of inviting a number of younger historians who were very much at the beginning of their careers and would thus benefit from exposure to those who had already established themselves as Weimar specialists.

The symposium attracted over seventy participants from West Germany, the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. In his introductory remarks, Mommsen stated that the task of the gathering was to explore the fundamental significance of the social and economic problems of the interwar period for the crisis-ridden development of the Weimar Republic and the rise of fascism as a mass political movement; this would, he believed, address a fundamental deficit in the German-language scholarship. The task of the symposium was also to bring “macroeconomic factors, technological developments, demographic shifts, forms of industrial organization and interest representation, and changes in the importance of different sectors of the economy ... together into a comprehensive analysis” that could then “be related to the development of the political system.” By bringing together specialists from the various fields of social, economic, and political history, Mommsen hoped for an open discussion and an exchange of contrary points of view that would help illuminate “the structural conditions that [had] led to the crisis of Weimar democracy ... and thus facilitated the rise of fascism or made it unavoidable.”<sup>19</sup>

As noted earlier, the Bochum symposium set an ambitious agenda for students of the Weimar Republic for at least the next three decades. For his own part, Mommsen contributed to that agenda with a series of articles on the chancellorship of Heinrich Brüning that appeared in the early and mid-1970s.<sup>20</sup> Here Mommsen took issue with the way in which most of the historical literature had portrayed Brüning since 1945 as the last remaining

<sup>17</sup>Hans Mommsen in an interview with Sabine Möller in 1998; see “Es geht darum, einen Prozess zu erklären und nicht in moralischer Empörung steckenzulieben,” in *Auf den Trümmern der Geschichte. Gespräche mit Raul Hilberg, Hans Mommsen und Zygmunt Bauman*, ed. Harald Welzer (Tübingen: Edition diskord, 1999), 69.

<sup>18</sup>On the importance that Mommsen attached to his contacts with American scholars, see his conversation with Barbara Stambolis, “Die Aufgabe meiner Generation war naheliegend,” *Neue Politische Literatur* 55, no. 2 (2010): esp. 187.

<sup>19</sup>Mommsen’s introductory remarks in *Industrielles System und politische Entwicklung in der Weimarer Republik. Verhandlungen des Internationalen Symposiums in Bochum vom.12.-17. Juni 1973*, ed. Hans Mommsen, Dietmar Petzina, and Bernd Weisbrod (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1974), 21–22.

<sup>20</sup>Hans Mommsen, “Staat und Bürokratie in der Ära Brüning,” in *Tradition und Reform in der deutschen Politik. Gedenkschrift für Waldemar Besson*, ed. Gotthard Jasper (Frankfurt/Main: Propyläen Ullstein Verlag, 1976), 81–137 [in English translation as “State and Bureaucracy in the Brüning Era,” in Hans Mommsen, *From Weimar to Auschwitz*, trans. Philip O’Connor (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 79–118]; idem, “Heinrich Brüning’s Politik als Reichskanzler: Das Scheitern eines Alleinganges,” in *Wirtschaftskrise und liberale Demokratie. Das Ende der Weimarer Republik und die gegenwärtige Situation*, ed. Karl Holl (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978), 16–45 [in English translation as “Heinrich



bulwark of Weimar democracy against the rising tide of Nazi radicalism. On the contrary, Mommsen argued, Brüning's deflationary fiscal policies—as well as his determination to use the hardship they had entailed for diverse sectors of German society as leverage to force the Allies into making concessions on the issue of reparations—only accelerated the dissolution of the Weimar Republic and left its supporters defenseless against the rising popularity of radical parties like the National Socialists. At the same time, Mommsen revealed what he saw as a fatal contradiction in Brüning's overall political strategy. Here the problem was that the radicalizing effects that the chancellor's restrictive fiscal and economic policies had had upon the material substance and morale of the civil service had undercut his efforts to overcome the paralysis of Germany's parliamentary institutions by investing the civil bureaucracy with a greater role in shaping national policy. The public service sector was one of the primary casualties of Brüning's efforts to reduce the size and footprint of the German state. Not only did this intensify the antipathy that many civil servants—particularly those at its upper levels—already felt toward the republican institutions that Germany had inherited from the November Revolution, but it also radicalized public employees who saw their paycheck cut by an average of 20 percent. This fatal flaw in Brüning's political strategy, Mommsen claimed, had doomed to failure what little chance there might have been for an authoritarian stabilization of the republic.<sup>21</sup>

At no point in his discussion of Brüning's failure as chancellor did Mommsen succumb to a facile determinism that would have excused Brüning's behavior as an inevitable consequence of the situation in which he found himself. Mommsen had, for example, little patience with the so-called *Sonderweg* thesis and the way in which it attributed the calamitous course of German history in the first half of the twentieth century to a fundamental liberal deficit in Germany's political development that could be traced back to the beginning of the previous century.<sup>22</sup> In many respects, this was just another version of German exceptionalism that he had criticized so sharply at the beginning of his career. Accordingly, the political path that Brüning chose had more to do with the peculiarities of the chancellor's own personality than with long-term historical forces that had somehow robbed him of the capacity for meaningful choice. The paralysis of Weimar democracy may have meant that there was no alternative to government by presidential decree, but this did not mean that there were no alternatives to the fiscally conservative policies Brüning had embraced without regard for their impact upon German society as a whole.<sup>23</sup> Here Mommsen was situating a theory of personal agency and responsibility within a mode of historical inquiry that identified the structural determinants of historical change, but without sacrificing the principle of personal responsibility. From this perspective, the choices made by Brüning were only one set in a long series of choices that ultimately spelled the doom of Weimar democracy.<sup>24</sup>

Mommsen would return to this conundrum in his magnum opus on the Weimar Republic, *Die verspielte Freiheit*, which appeared in German in 1989 and in English translation seven years later. The choice of title is especially interesting because it suggests that the chance

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Brüning as Chancellor: The Failure of a Politically Isolated Strategy,” in Mommsen, *From Weimar to Auschwitz*, 119–40].

<sup>21</sup>Mommsen, “Stellung der Beamtenschaft,” 165.

<sup>22</sup>Mommsen, *Rise and Fall of Weimar Democracy*, viii.

<sup>23</sup>This seems clear from the argument Mommsen makes in “Staat und Bürokratie,” 102–3, 110–12.

<sup>24</sup>For the closest that Mommsen comes to articulating this position, see *ibid.*, 88–89.

to establish a German democracy after the collapse of 1918 had somehow been “gambled away” by a combination of political incompetence and external forces that had severely limited the space for meaningful democratic action. Mommsen never accepted the argument that the Weimar Republic was doomed from the start, but instead remained true to the spirit and substance of the 1973 Bochum symposium by focusing on the structural factors that had placed the institutions of Germany’s new republican order under such stress that they eventually collapsed. The structural problems that besieged the Weimar Republic had been inherited from the Second Empire and were largely a result of the extremely rapid pace of industrialization that Germany had experienced between 1860 and 1914.<sup>25</sup> But the founders of the Weimar Republic, Mommsen reminded us, had made mistakes of their own—for example, by investing the Reich presidency with special emergency powers that were used in 1932–1933 to destroy the republic itself.

One of the structural legacies of the Second Empire to which Mommsen devoted particular attention was the weakness of the German party system, which the Weimar National Assembly’s decision to adopt a new electoral law based upon the principle of proportional representation only exacerbated. The new electoral law greatly intensified the fragmentation of the German party system along the lines of economic self-interest, which made it increasingly difficult for Germany’s political leadership to forge a consensus on the conduct of national policy.<sup>26</sup> No less important for the fate of Weimar democracy was the unremitting hostility of Germany’s conservative elites in the military, industry, large landed agriculture, and civil bureaucracy. With few exceptions, these groups had never reconciled themselves to Germany’s defeat in World War I or to the results of the revolution of 1918–1919, which was why they remained implacably opposed to the new republican order.<sup>27</sup>

Mommsen attributed the complicity of Germany’s conservative elites in the destabilization and ultimate collapse of the Weimar Republic to what he perceived as a “hollowing out” of the moral substance of Germany’s traditional bourgeois culture. Here Mommsen was referring to a process of moral decay and exhaustion that had been going on within the ranks of Germany’s traditional elites for a half-century or more and that had only been intensified by the traumatic effects of war, defeat, revolution, national disgrace, inflation, and governmental gridlock during the Weimar era. The moral decay of Germany’s traditional elites, Mommsen argued, could be seen in their embrace of violence as a way of effecting social and political change, and in their attraction to the myth of a “conservative revolution” and to the idea of a German national awakening through a political catharsis that would restore the nation in body and soul.<sup>28</sup> To be sure, this argument remained undeveloped beyond general outlines and never received the systematic treatment it deserved. Yet, Mommsen’s sensitivity to the moral dimension of what had happened to the Weimar Republic and to the role that Germany’s conservative elites had played in its demise would remain central to his reading of modern German history.

<sup>25</sup>Mommsen, *Rise and Fall of Weimar Democracy*, viii.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 62–67.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 67–69, 253–59, 402–4, 408.

<sup>28</sup>Hans Mommsen, “Die deutschen Eliten und der Mythos des nationalen Aufbruchs von 1933,” *Merkur* 38, no. 1 (1984): 97–102.

Mommsen's 1989 history of the Weimar Republic represented a stinging indictment of Germany's conservative elites, not only for the part they played in sabotaging their country's experiment in parliamentary democracy, but also for their role in the installation of the Hitler cabinet in 1933. But not even this would have been possible, Mommsen insisted, if there had been an Allied presence in Germany. It was not until after the last Allied troops left the Rhine in the late summer of 1930—this was, after all, the crowning achievement of Gustav Stresemann and Brüning's foreign policy—that Germany's traditional elites were free from external restraints that would have kept them from replacing Germany's democratic institutions with an authoritarian system of government more in line with their values and interests. But by then, Germany's conservative elites had become too weak politically; moreover, they lacked the mantle of popular legitimacy that would have been necessary to impose their will on the German nation. After pinning their hopes on Paul von Hindenburg and the experiment in government by presidential decree, Germany's conservative elites orchestrated, in a moment that demonstrated their moral bankruptcy, the transfer of power to Hitler in the misguided illusion that they could harness the energy and dynamism of the Nazi movement to their own political agenda.<sup>29</sup>

It is at this point in his book, however, that Mommsen departs from the structural mode of analysis that had earlier informed his study of the Weimar Republic to focus more intently on the responsibility of individual historical actors: a structural analysis of Weimar politics was, in Mommsen's view, the best analytical strategy for explaining the paralysis and breakdown of Germany's democracy, but he did not believe that it offered a satisfactory explanation for the series of events that culminated in Hitler's appointment as chancellor. The final sections of the book on the actual transition from authoritarian to fascist dictatorship offer a detailed reconstruction of the events that took place in late 1932 and early 1933, but with less focus on the structural determinants of historical change than on the motives and actions of the individual players. In the final analysis, it was not structural factors that had been responsible for the systemic breakdown of Weimar democracy, Mommsen believed, but rather the miscalculations and political cupidity of men like Hindenburg, Franz von Papen, Kurt von Schleicher, and Alfred Hugenberg that delivered the German state into the hands of Hitler and his supporters.<sup>30</sup>

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Mommsen's history of the Weimar Republic was originally intended as part of more ambitious study that would end in 1950 with the reestablishment of German democracy.<sup>31</sup> But the sheer length of *Die verspielte Freiheit* made that impossible; as a result, Mommsen never wrote a comprehensive history of the Third Reich. In large part, this reflected some of the difficulties that Mommsen experienced in dealing with a period in Germany history that, for him, was incomparably more complicated than the Weimar Republic. But it was the complexities of the moral issues that a study of the Third Reich would touch upon that also gave him pause. His dilemma was reflected in the very title he gave to an interview

<sup>29</sup>Mommsen, *Rise and Fall of Weimar Democracy*, 512–34. See also idem, "Die nationalsozialistische Machteroberung. Revolution oder Gegenrevolution?" in *Europäische Sozialgeschichte. Festschrift für Wolfgang Schieder*, ed. Christof Dipper, Lutz Klinkhammer, and Alexander Nützenadel (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2000), 41–56.

<sup>30</sup>Mommsen, *Rise and Fall of Weimar Democracy*, 490–544. See the perceptive comment by Fritz Stern in his review of *Die verspielte Freiheit*, in *VfZ* 38, no. 3 (1990): 496.

<sup>31</sup>Frei, "Sensibler Skeptiker," 541.

with Sabine Möller in 1999: “It is a question of explaining a historical process and not getting bogged down in moral outrage.”<sup>32</sup>

Mommsen may not have succeeded in pulling together a complete history of the Third Reich, but he nevertheless wrote extensively on various aspects of Nazi Germany, including his monumental, thousand-page study of Volkswagen and its labor force in the Third Reich—an intellectual tour de force written in collaboration with Manfred Grieger that will remain one of Mommsen’s most enduring achievements. His interest in the history of the German working class dated back to his earliest days as a historian and was intimately related to his decision to accept the chair in history at the University of the Ruhr.<sup>33</sup> It is easy to forget that, among other things, Mommsen was a first-rate labor historian who published widely on the history of the German labor movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>34</sup> Critics who were expecting another general indictment of Germany’s functional elites, similar to the one Mommsen had levelled in the closing chapters of his book on the Weimar Republic, were caught off guard by the discernment and subtlety with which he analyzed the relationship between Volkswagen’s corporate leadership and the Nazi regime. Germany’s automakers, it turns out, were skeptical about the profitability of Hitler’s dream of building an inexpensive “people’s car” that would bind the average German to the Nazi regime. As a result, it was not until 1937 that Ferdinand Porsche, an ethnic German from northern Bohemia who received German citizenship in 1934 and subsequently joined both the NSDAP and the SS, received a commission from Hitler to begin production.<sup>35</sup> The way in which all this played out only confirmed Mommsen’s argument about the chaotic and idiosyncratic character of the decision-making process in the Third Reich.

This could also be seen in Volkswagen’s use of slave labor. Here Mommsen and Grieger argued that the use of slave labor provided by the SS was not so much an expedient dictated by wartime shortages, but rather part of a calculated strategy by the firm’s leadership to secure a place for Volkswagen in the German war economy. The moral culpability of Volkswagen’s corporate leadership for the crimes of the Third Reich lay not so much in its contribution to the German war effort as in its deliberate exploitation of forced labor as a way of ingratiating itself with the SS. To drive this point home, Mommsen and Grieger relied on interviews with 170 former Volkswagen workers recorded shortly after the war to document the everyday experiences of slave laborers. The latter, who arrived from all over Europe—initially from Italy, but then from Denmark, Holland, France, the Soviet Union, Ukraine, and Poland—were all housed and treated according to the racial hierarchies of the Third Reich. As the end of the war drew near, conditions in the work camp quickly deteriorated, with a corresponding increase in the level of brutality necessary to keep the workers in line. In this respect, experiences at the Volkswagen works were not substantially different from those in hundreds of other work camps throughout the Third Reich.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>32</sup>See the interview with Sabine Möller cited in note 17.

<sup>33</sup>Frei, “Sensibler Skeptiker,” 539–40.

<sup>34</sup>See, e.g., Hans Mommsen, *Die Sozialdemokratie und die Nationalitätenfrage im habsburgischen Vielvölkerstaat* (Vienna: Europa-Verlag, 1963); idem, *Arbeiterbewegung und nationale Frage. Ausgewählte Aufsätze* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979); idem, *Arbeiterbewegung und industrieller Wandel. Studien zu gewerkschaftlichen Organisationsproblemen im Reich und an der Ruhr* (Wuppertal: Hammer Verlag, 1980).

<sup>35</sup>Hans Mommsen and Manfred Grieger, *Das Volkswagenwerk und seine Arbeiter im Dritten Reich* (Düsseldorf: ECON-Verlag, 1966), 51–91.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 713–800, 859–75.

Two other areas of the Third Reich in which Mommsen took a special interest were the resistance against Hitler and the Holocaust. Very early in his career, Mommsen had established himself as one of Germany's leading authorities on the history of the German resistance. This was not without its awkward moments, for, in doing so, Mommsen found himself taking a position that was at odds with that of his former mentor at the University of Tübingen, Hans Rothfels.<sup>37</sup> A German Jew who had left Germany in 1939 to teach at the University of Chicago, and the author of a highly acclaimed book on the German opposition to Hitler that appeared in 1949, Rothfels placed a strong emphasis on the moral dimensions of the anti-Hitler resistance that Mommsen found difficult to accept without serious qualification.<sup>38</sup> In his first major publication on the topic, Mommsen distanced himself from Rothfels's position as tactfully as possible by suggesting that the resistance's social views and plans for a new German order after the defeat of Nazism were informed by a mixture of nostalgia for the Prussian tradition and an elitism that had made them particularly ill-suited to face the problems that Germany was almost certain to face after the end of the war.<sup>39</sup> Without identifying his mentor by name, Mommsen rejected Rothfels's identification of the resistance with the "best of the Prussian tradition," and argued in subsequent essays that the very concept of the resistance needed to be broadened to include, at the very least, those on the Left who had also struggled at considerable risk to their well-being to bring about an end to the Nazi regime and its reign of terror. Among those whom Mommsen championed in particular were Julius Leber, Wilhelm Leuschner, and Adolf Reichwein, all three of whom lost their lives in the struggle against Nazism.<sup>40</sup>

As much as Mommsen sought to upgrade the role of the political Left in the struggle against Nazi rule, he also conceded that the only group in German society that possessed the means to remove Hitler from power had been the military. And here Mommsen posed a question that extended not just to the leaders of the military resistance to Hitler but also to their allies in the civilian sector: if, in the final analysis, men like Ludwig Beck, Henning von Tresckow, and Carl Goerdeler ended up sacrificing their lives in the ill-fated attempt to assassinate Hitler on July 20, 1944, why had they waited so long to take action? Why was it, as Jeremy Noakes phrased it rhetorically in the introduction to a collection of Mommsen's essays on the resistance, "too little, too late, and for the wrong

<sup>37</sup>On Mommsen's relationship with Rothfels, see pp. 167–76 of the interview ("Daraus erklärt sich") cited in note 2. See also Hans Mommsen, "Hans Rothfels: Historiker zwischen den Epochen," in *Zur Geschichte Deutschlands im 20. Jahrhundert. Demokratie, Diktatur, Widerstand* (Stuttgart: DVA, 2010), 333–48.

<sup>38</sup>Hans Rothfels, *Die deutsche Opposition gegen Hitler. Eine Würdigung* (Krefeld: Scherpe Verlag, 1949). On Rothfels, see Jan Eckel, "Hans Rothfels—An Intellectual Biography in the Age of Extremes," *Journal of Contemporary History* 42, no. 3 (2007): 421–46.

<sup>39</sup>Hans Mommsen, "Gesellschaftsbild und Verfassungspläne des deutschen Widerstandes," in *Der deutsche Widerstand gegen Hitler. Vier historisch-kritische Studien*, ed. Hans Buchheim (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1965), 73–167 [in English translation as "Social Views and Constitutional Plans of the Resistance," in Hermann Graml, Hans Mommsen, Hans-Joachim Reinhardt, and Ernst Wolf, *The German Resistance to Hitler*, with an introduction by F. L. Carsten (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), 55–147].

<sup>40</sup>See his essays on Leber, Leuschner, and Reichwein in Hans Mommsen, *Alternatives to Hitler: German Resistance under the Third Reich*, trans. Angus McGeoch (Princeton, NJ: I. B. Tauris, 2003), 194–217, 227–37; also see idem, *Der 20. Juli und die deutsche Arbeiterbewegung* (Berlin: Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand, 1985) [in English translation as "20 July 1944 and the German Labor Movement," in Mommsen, *From Weimar to Auschwitz*, 189–207].

reasons”?<sup>41</sup> Nowhere was Mommsen’s penchant for asking the uncomfortable question more evident than here. The problem is not just that the answer to this question is far from simple, but that it goes to moral core of the resistance itself. And the answer to this question becomes even more difficult, in as much as Mommsen reminds us that many of those in the conservative resistance to Hitler—including no less a figure than Goerdeler himself—had served the regime in one capacity or another, and that many of the resistance’s military leaders—including Tresckow, who, for all practical purposes, was the heart and soul of the military resistance—had been complicit in the atrocities perpetrated against civilians and Jews in Poland and during the early stages of the invasion of the Soviet Union.<sup>42</sup> And Tresckow, Mommsen argues further, only found the resolve to join the resistance after the failure to capture Moscow in December 1941 had revealed the ultimate hopelessness of Germany’s military situation in the East. This, in turn, raises the larger question of whether the conservative resistance to Hitler was not, first and foremost, a product of the realization that Germany was, in fact, losing the war. In other words, would the resistance have ever acted if Germany had *not* been losing the war? While Mommsen never questioned the moral resolve of those who found their way into the resistance, or the courage of those who actively conspired to overthrow Hitler, his work on the German resistance is a cautionary tale for those who seek to celebrate the resistance while turning a blind eye to the darker side of some of its most prominent members.<sup>43</sup>

In addressing the question of Tresckow’s involvement in the early stages of mass murder on the Eastern Front, Mommsen was returning to his earlier interest in the Holocaust. To be sure, Mommsen could not be considered a Holocaust scholar in the narrow sense of the term. He came to the topic relatively late in his career, never did archival research on the Holocaust, and continued to view it from the perspective of one who had devoured an enormous amount of secondary literature on the Holocaust without ever working through the unpublished archival materials on which much of it was based. His first major piece on the Holocaust was published when he was in his early fifties and was written in response to the extraordinary claims that Klaus Hildebrand and his supporters had made at Cumberland Lodge in the spring of 1979. Mommsen’s response appeared first in *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* in 1983, with the cryptic title “Die Realisierung des Utopischen,” and then three years later in a slightly longer English translation. Here Mommsen categorically rejected the arguments that Hitler and his acolytes had had a plan for dealing with Germany’s so-called Jewish problem when they took control of the state in 1933, and that the subsequent implementation of Nazi policy toward the Jews was haphazard and sporadic. Mommsen conceded that Hitler’s authority doubtlessly served to legitimate “the cumulative intensification of [the] persecution” of Jews during the Third Reich, but he also argued that Hitler rarely played a direct role in its formulation or implementation. And when he did intervene, Mommsen argued, it was generally to moderate the radical legislative proposals emanating from extremist elements in the party organization. Hitler’s chronic indecisiveness and his reluctance to intervene in the polycratic conflicts that were rampant in the Nazi regime meant that these conflicts were almost invariably

<sup>41</sup>Jeremy Noakes, “Introduction,” in Mommsen, *Alternatives to Hitler*, 2.

<sup>42</sup>Mommsen, “Anti-Hitler resistance and the Nazi persecution of the Jews,” in Mommsen, *Alternatives to Hitler*, 253–76.

<sup>43</sup>The war and other factors that inhibited the resistance in its efforts to overthrow the regime are explored in Mommsen, “German society and resistance to Hitler,” in Mommsen, *Alternatives to Hitler*, 23–41.



resolved in favor of those factions that favored the more radical course of action. This was precisely the pattern, Mommsen concluded, that the course of events took following the April 1933 boycott of Jewish stores and businesses and the purge of the civil service that spring, through the adoption of the Nuremberg Laws in the fall of 1935, the November pogrom of 1938, and the so-called aryanization of Jewish businesses and economic assets, to the onset and subsequent course of the Holocaust from 1941 through the end of World War II.<sup>44</sup>

Mommsen's reading of the Holocaust was controversial for a number of reasons, not the least of which was its portrayal of Hitler as a "weak" leader who had little direct involvement in the implementation of the Holocaust and who often remained uninformed about the details of what was happening on the ground. Mommsen's critics were quick to seize upon his portrayal of Hitler as a largely ineffective leader as a way of avoiding having to address the more substantive and challenging aspects of his argument. An offer in the mid-1980s to write an introduction to a new German edition of Hannah Arendt's 1961 report on the Jerusalem trial of the infamous Nazi war criminal, Adolf Eichmann, was a welcome opportunity to clarify and restate the general outlines of the argument that had become so embroiled in controversy.<sup>45</sup> Arendt's study, which appeared in serial form before being published in 1963 as *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, quickly became the focal point of a controversy that was as vicious as anything Mommsen himself had ever experienced. Mommsen detected in Arendt a kindred spirit who not only shared his views on the general structure and decision-making process of the Third Reich, but who, more important, also had the moral courage to state things the way she saw them regardless of the hostile reaction they were almost certain to provoke from prosecution authorities, the Israeli and German governments, and her Jewish friends back in New York City. To be sure, Mommsen questioned Arendt's knowledge of the sources and her mastery of the literature available at the time, and he thought that her book contained "many statements" that had not been "sufficiently thought through."<sup>46</sup> At the same time, he suggested that the "severity of her criticism and the unsparing way in which she argued seemed inappropriate given the deeply tragic nature of the subject with which she was dealing."<sup>47</sup> But what was perhaps most remarkable about Mommsen's piece was the extraordinary empathy it displayed toward Arendt and the struggle she had with her German-Jewish identity. If Arendt was, as Mommsen concluded, "a child of existential philosophy," she was also "inescapably Jewish," even if she consciously rejected both the patina of the assimilated Jew and the nationalism of Israeli Zionists.<sup>48</sup> Instead, she intentionally chose for herself the role of the outcast, the pariah, the rebel, "who was reliant solely on his or her conscience" and who, "at the very minimum ... was scrupulously accountable" for all that he or she did.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>44</sup>Hans Mommsen, "Die Realisierung des Utopischen. Die 'Endlösung der Judenfrage' im Dritten Reich," GG 9, no. 3 (1983): 381–420 [in English translation as "The Realization of the Unthinkable: The 'Final Solution of the Jewish Question' in the Third Reich," in *The Policies of Genocide: Jews and Soviet Prisoners of War in Nazi Germany*, ed. Gerhard Hirschfeld (London: Allen and Unwin, 1986), 93–144].

<sup>45</sup>Hans Mommsen, "Hannah Arendt und der Prozeß gegen Eichmann," in Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem. Ein Bericht von der Banalität des Bösens* (Munich: Piper, 1986), 9–48 [in English translation as "Hannah Arendt and the Eichmann Trial," in Mommsen, *From Weimar to Auschwitz*, 254–78]. I am grateful to Bernd Weisbrod for having alerted me to the importance of this text in his letter of April 8, 2018.

<sup>46</sup>Mommsen, "Arendt and the Eichmann Trial," 255.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 271.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, 275.

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, 278.

This would remain Mommsen's most personal work, one in which he revealed more clearly than anywhere else the strong moral imperative that informed his life's work—which always went hand in hand with a categorical respect for the sources and an unconditional fidelity to what an analysis of those sources revealed. Nowhere was this more evident than in the so-called Goldhagen controversy of the mid-1990s. In 1996 the Harvard political scientist Daniel Goldhagen caused a sensation with the publication of *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* and its blanket indictment of the German people for the crimes that had been committed against European Jewry during the course of World War II.<sup>50</sup> At the heart of Goldhagen's argument lay the contention that antisemitism—and, moreover, a particular form of antisemitism he labelled “eliminationist antisemitism”—had so deeply permeated every sector of German society that the Holocaust or something approximating it was virtually unavoidable. For Goldhagen, there was a direct line of continuity from the anti-Judaism of medieval Christianity through Martin Luther and his diatribes against the Jews, to Nazism and the mass murder of European Jewry.<sup>51</sup> What disturbed Mommsen most about Goldhagen's work was the fanfare that accompanied the author's triumphant book tour through Germany in the summer of 1996—and what this said about the political maturity of the German public. At the same time, Mommsen had profound methodological and conceptual reservations about Goldhagen's work, and was particularly critical, among other things, of his failure to recognize, in his use of the term *eliminationist antisemitism*, the differences between the three basic variants of German antisemitism, namely, the cultural antisemitism of Germany's conservative elites, the anti-Judaism of the Catholic Church, and the racist or *völkisch* antisemitism of Hitler and the more radical elements within the Nazi movement. Whereas, Mommsen conceded, the first two might have kept their adherents from protecting Jews against the wrath of the Nazi state, only the last was truly responsible for the brutal atrocities perpetrated against the Jews in Germany and Nazi-occupied Europe. Mommsen further criticized Goldhagen for his use of the totalitarian model of the Nazi state to create a chain of command from Hitler at the center, through intermediaries like Heinrich Himmler, Reinhard Heydrich, and Adolf Eichmann, to the men in the field who actually committed the murders. From Mommsen's perspective, this was little more than a watered-down version of the Hitler-centric approach to the Third Reich that he had criticized so sharply in the past. Reiterating his long-standing opposition to such models for explaining the decision-making process in the Third Reich, Mommsen vigorously reaffirmed the concept of “cumulative radicalization,” a process that had expressed itself most vividly in the formulation and implementation of the regime's racial policies.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>50</sup>On the Goldhagen phenomenon, see in particular the remarks by Mary Fullbrook and Jeffrey K. Olick in the forum “Holocaust Scholarship and Politics in the Public Sphere: Reexamining the Causes, Consequences, and Controversy of the *Historikerstreit* and the Goldhagen Debate,” *Central European History (CEH)* 50, no. 3 (2017): 384–86, 388–91.

<sup>51</sup>Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1996), esp. 27–128.

<sup>52</sup>For Mommsen's criticism of Goldhagen, see Hans Mommsen, “Conditions for Carrying Out the Holocaust: Comments on Daniel Goldhagen's Book,” in *Hyping the Holocaust: Scholars Answer Goldhagen*, ed. Franklin Littell (East Rockaway, NY: Cummings and Hathaway, 1997), 31–43; also see his interview with Adi Gordon, Amos Morris Reich, and Amos Goldberg of the Shoah Research Center at Yad Vashem, Dec. 12, 1997 ([http://www.yadvashem.org/odot\\_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20%203850.pdf](http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20%203850.pdf)).

Coming on the heels of the *Historikerstreit* of the mid-1980s and the revelation that some of Germany's most prominent postwar historians, including Mommsen's own mentor Werner Conze, had been complicit in shaping the resettlement schemes for Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe,<sup>53</sup> Mommsen was deeply concerned that the Goldhagen phenomenon, and the way in which it allowed the German public to expiate its guilt for what had happened to German and European Jewry, would only contribute to a "normalization" of the Holocaust and thus make it easier for Germans to relativize, if not explain away, the sins of the Nazi past.<sup>54</sup> In this regard, Mommsen could only have felt vindicated by the fact that Ian Kershaw, Christopher Browning, Hans-Ulrich Wehler, and other prominent historians also took a strong stand against Goldhagen and his reading of the Holocaust.<sup>55</sup> Mommsen was further agitated by the publication of Nicolas Berg's 2003 book on the historical reception of the Holocaust in Germany, in which Berg alleges that West German historians had been conspicuously slow in placing the murder of European Jewry on their research agenda—a claim that Mommsen did not dispute but one that he certainly intended to address.<sup>56</sup> At the same time, Mommsen noted in a December 1997 interview with the Shoah Research Center that the differences between the "intentionalist" and "structuralist" positions were "withering away," and that "the traditional distinction between the intentionalist and the functionalist schools [had] lost much of its relevance." What had once separated his arguments from those of Christopher Browning and Raul Hilberg paled in significance, he continued, when compared to the new "divergence between the younger generation" and his own that was now making "itself felt in the realm of Holocaust research."<sup>57</sup>

It is hard to determine just how much of this played a role in Mommsen's decision to write a book on the Holocaust that would, aside from various anthologies of previously written essays, turn out to be his last book. The opportunity came with an invitation from Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag to contribute a volume on the Holocaust in a series on "twenty days in the twentieth century." The day Mommsen chose for his volume was July 17, 1942, the first day of a two-day visit of SS-*Reichsführer* Heinrich Himmler to Auschwitz, where he observed the gassing of a trainload of Dutch Jews who had just

<sup>53</sup>On Conze's activities during the Third Reich, see Ingo Haar, "German *Ostforschung* und Antisemitismus," in *German Scholars and Ethnic Cleansing, 1920-1945*, ed. Ingo Haar and Michael Fahlbusch (New York: Berghahn, 2005), esp. 11-14. For Mommsen's own reflections on Conze and his activities in the Third Reich, see pp. 176-80 of the interview ("Daraus erklärt sich") cited in note 2.

<sup>54</sup>This was a concern that Mommsen expressed on a number of occasions; see, e.g., Hans Mommsen, "Die Last der Vergangenheit," in *Stichworte zur 'Geistigen Situation der Zeit'*, ed. Jürgen Habermas (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1979), 1:164-84; also see his more recent statements on the matter in "Neues Geschichtsbewußtsein und Relativierung des Nationalsozialismus," in "*Historikerstreit*." *Die Dokumentation der Kontroverse um die Einzigartigkeit der nationalsozialistischen Judenvernichtung*, ed. Rudolf Augstein (Munich: Piper, 1987), 174-88; "Aufarbeitung und Verdrängung. Das Dritte Reich im westdeutschen Geschichtsbewußtsein," in *Ist der Nationalsozialismus Geschichte? Zu Historisierung und Historikerstreit*, ed. Dan Diner (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1987), 74-88.

<sup>55</sup>Istvan Deak, "Holocaust Views: The Goldhagen Controversy in Retrospect," *CEH* 30, no. 2 (1997): 295-307.

<sup>56</sup>Nicolas Berg, *Der Holocaust und die westdeutschen Historiker. Erforschung und Erinnerung* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2003), 270-322. For Mommsen's reaction, see his essay "Changing Historical Perspectives on the Nazi Dictatorship," *European Review* 17, no. 1 (2009): 73-80.

<sup>57</sup>See the 1997 interview with Mommsen cited in note 52. In a similar vein, see Richard Bessel, "Functionalists vs. Intentionalists: The Debate Twenty Years on or Whatever Happened to Functionalism and Intentionalism," *German Studies Review* 26, no. 1 (2003): 15-20.

arrived. On the following day, Himmler informed the camp commandant, Rudolf Höss, that Eichmann's deportation program would continue and even increase from month to month.<sup>58</sup> For Mommsen, July 17, 1942, was the day that what one of his favorite historians, Karl Schleunes, had called the "twisted road to Auschwitz," would end.<sup>59</sup> Much of Mommsen's explanation of how Germany had arrived at that point was not necessarily all that new. It revisited much of what Mommsen had previously written on Germany's path to the mass murder of European Jewry, and his argumentation was thus already familiar to those who had already studied his work. Mommsen remained committed to the concept of "cumulative radicalization" as the key to understanding the decision-making process in the Third Reich, and he continued to view the Third Reich not as a totalitarian dictatorship but rather as a regime divided by factional rivalries that pitted one agency against another.

At the heart of this argument lay Mommsen's view of Hitler and his role in orchestrating the mass murder of European Jewry. Mommsen never disputed the centrality of antisemitism in Hitler's worldview or the obsessive force it had assumed throughout his life and political career. In this respect, Mommsen agreed with Brigitte Hamann and Ian Kershaw that Hitler's antisemitism was not the product of his Vienna years or his experiences during World War I, but rather that it had originated in the immediate postwar period as a reaction to the trauma of Germany's military defeat and in his uncritical embrace of the "stab-in-the-back legend" as an explanation for that defeat. By the time of his entry into politics in 1920–1921, Hitler had fully absorbed the entire panoply of antisemitic tropes and stereotypes that had come to define "the Jew" as the archenemy of the German people—as an enemy that, in the mind of Hitler and his minions, had to be expunged from the German nation. But Mommsen insisted that when Hitler assumed the chancellorship in January 1933, he had no clear idea what he would now do as leader of the German nation to eradicate that menace. As a result—and this went to the essence of Mommsen's argument—Nazi policy toward the Jews was erratic, contradictory, episodic, and totally lacking in any grand design or carefully articulated strategy. The initiative in all matters related to Jewish affairs, the argument continues, seems to have been left to other members of Hitler's immediate entourage: Joseph Goebbels in the case of the April 1933 boycott, Wilhelm Frick in the case of the April 1933 laws and the expulsion of Jews from the civil service, Frick again in the promulgation of the Nuremberg Laws in 1935, Hermann Göring in the aryanization of Jewish property, and Goebbels again at the time of the November pogrom in 1938. In Mommsen's own words:

Hitler always functioned as the ideological motor in the "Jewish question," whereas he played completely different roles in the practical implementation of antisemitic measures. Tactical considerations, as well as concerns for the preservation of his personal prestige, played a role, as did an instinctive reaction to changed situations. It was characteristic of him that the "Jewish question" always stood in a visionary, propagandistic horizon. It is striking that the obligatory antisemitic tirades in his speeches were far removed from the concrete circumstances of Jewish persecution.

<sup>58</sup>Hans Mommsen, *Auschwitz, 17. Juli 1942. Der Weg zur europäischen "Endlösung der Judenfrage"* (Munich: DTV, 2002), 7. This book was republished twelve years later as Hans Mommsen, *Das NS-Regime und die Auslöschung des Judentums in Europa* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2014).

<sup>59</sup>In this respect, see Karl Schleunes, *The Twisted Road to Auschwitz: Nazi Policy toward German Jews, 1933–1939* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970).

The study of especially his late statements on this complex suggest that, for Hitler, their propaganda effect and, with it, the function of an ideologically informed picture of the enemy, stood completely in the foreground. Even in internal conversations, it seems that Hitler never took a concrete position on the extermination policy toward the Jews. He always preferred to address the substance of the matter in ideological metaphors, without mentioning the existence of systematic mass murder ...<sup>60</sup>

This is a remarkable statement for Mommsen because it suggests a subtle, but by no means insignificant, softening of the position that he had earlier taken against Bracher, Hildebrand, and the “intentionalists” at Cumberland Lodge in 1979. Hitler remained the “ideological motor” in the search for a solution to Germany’s “Jewish question,” but left it to his subordinates to attend to the details of translating vague and imprecise statements of his intentions into practical policy. But this did *not* mean that the regime had decided upon the mass extermination of German, let alone European, Jewry—or that a plan for such an eventuality was ever in place at any point in time prior to and including the systematic shooting of Soviet Jews in connection with the German invasion of the Soviet Union. Hitler’s infamous speech of January 30, 1939—where he prophesied that, “if international Jewish finance should plunge the nations of the world into another world war, that would end not with the Bolshevization of the earth and with it the victory of Jewry, but with the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe”—cannot be taken, Mommsen argued, as an indication of Hitler’s intention to undertake the murder of European Jewry, but rather as an expression of his frustration about the refusal of the Western democracies to help Germany solve its “Jewish problem” by closing their borders to Jewish immigrants.<sup>61</sup> By the same token, Mommsen argued that, at the time Hitler decided to launch the invasion of the Soviet Union, there was still no clarity over just how Germany would proceed with its “final solution for the Jewish question.”<sup>62</sup> To be sure, plans for Jewish resettlement along the border separating Nazi- and Soviet-occupied Poland, or to the island of Madagascar, had gotten nowhere. This was why, in the days leading up to the planned invasion, Himmler and Heydrich began to press forward with their own plans for a more comprehensive solution to the “Jewish question” in Europe. There was therefore no evidence, Mommsen claimed, that Hitler had either directly or indirectly been involved in the decision-making process that led to the formation of the four SS-*Einsatzgruppen* that Heydrich put together in the spring of 1941, or that he had approved the instructions Heydrich subsequently issued to them. Here Mommsen found himself in essential agreement with Christopher Browning’s conclusion that the initiative for the mass murder of Soviet Jewry in the summer of 1941 came from men on the ground acting on their own initiative and, more often than not, without any direct instructions from above.<sup>63</sup>

Mommsen also took issue with the claim by Christian Gerlach—an unabashed intentionalist and the author of a revealing article on Hitler and the origins of the final solution—that Hitler’s reference to his January 1939 “prophecy” in a speech delivered to a group of Nazi

<sup>60</sup> Mommsen, *Auschwitz*, 38.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 90–91. For a fuller statement of this argument, see Hans Mommsen, “Hitler’s Reichstag Speech of 30 January 1939,” *History and Theory* 9, no. 1–2 (1997): 147–61.

<sup>62</sup> Mommsen, *Auschwitz*, 90–91.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 113–17. In this respect, see Christopher R. Browning, “Beyond Intentionalism and Functionalism: The Decision for the Final Solution Reconsidered,” in *The Path to Genocide: Essays on Launching the Final Solution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 86–121.

party leaders on December 12, 1941, suggested that the Rubicon had been crossed, and that Hitler was at the very least aware of the plans that were being developed for the murder of European Jewry.<sup>64</sup> Mommsen countered that no one else at the meeting seemed to have noted the import of what was being said, and that there was, in fact, no evidence that Hitler was, in any way whatsoever, involved in the preparations for the conference that took place in the Wannsee Villa on January 20, 1942. The driving force behind the dramatic escalation in the Nazi deportation and murder of Jews that occurred in the following months was, he argued, Himmler and a relatively homogeneous cohort of high-ranking officials in the Reich Security Main Office (RSHA) led by Heydrich and Eichmann. It was not until the completion of the three Operation Reinhard camps in the spring of 1942, and the conversion of Auschwitz into a camp with the capacity to receive and murder literally thousands of deportees every day, that a plan for the mass murder of European Jewry was finally in place. The principal focus of Heydrich's remarks at the Wannsee conference, Mommsen argued further, was not the extermination of the Jews but rather the exploitation of Jewish slave labor for the German war effort against the Soviet Union.<sup>65</sup> As far as Hitler and his role in the escalation of the regime's murderous policies toward the Jews after the Wannsee conference were concerned, Mommsen contended that the Nazi leader had had little to do with these developments except to legitimate them with both public and private statements that bore little relation to the reality at hand.<sup>66</sup> In Mommsen's view, the concept of "cumulative radicalization" remained the only viable tool for understanding the decision-making process that had led to the onset of mass murder in the first place, and that continued to drive the process until the end of the war.<sup>67</sup>

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It is not easy to assess the career of someone as prolific or as controversial as Hans Mommsen. At the very least, one can say that he was one of the most important German historians of the postwar period and that he—along with Karl Dietrich Bracher, Heinrich August Winkler, Hans-Ulrich Wehler, and Jürgen Kocka, as well as Mommsen's twin brother Wolfgang—belonged to a generation that took it upon themselves to chart a new course in German historical scholarship following the horrors of the Third Reich. This was an obligation that Mommsen took seriously and that informed his historical writing from his 1962 essay in the *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* on the relationship between political science and the study of history, to his final book on the road to Auschwitz.<sup>68</sup> This required, among other things, a frontal attack against the Prussian tradition in historical writing and against the idealistic philosophical assumptions that lay at its heart. What Mommsen sought was an infusion of the methods and insights from the emerging discipline of political science into historical scholarship, in the hope that this might spark a rejuvenation of the historical sciences in Germany.

<sup>64</sup>Christian Gerlach, "The Wannsee Conference, the Fate of German Jews, and Hitler's Decision in Principle to Eliminate All European Jews," *Journal of Modern History* 70, no. 4 (1998): 759–812.

<sup>65</sup>Mommsen, *Auschwitz*, 159–63.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, 163–64.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, 177–89.

<sup>68</sup>Mommsen's sense of generational responsibility is clearly stated in the interview with Stambolis cited in note 18, as well as in his retrospective on the life and career of Martin Broszat: "Zeitgeschichte als 'kritische Aufklärungsarbeit'. Zur Erinnerung an Martin Broszat (1926–1989)," *GG* 17, no. 2 (1991): 141–57.



Mommsen's own particular talent lay in his careful analysis of politics and, in particular, of the way that changes in social and economic structures affected developments in the political arena. This was, after all, the methodological concept that informed his history of the Weimar Republic, as well as his analysis of the polycratic structure of the Nazi regime and the process of "cumulative radicalization." In this respect, it is important to remember that Mommsen's rejection of Hitler-centric models for explaining the decision-making process in the Third Reich stemmed not just from empirical evidence suggesting that this was not the way things worked in the Third Reich, but also from a moral concern that blaming everything on Hitler and his entourage had the practical effect of exculpating the vast majority of those who had served in the middle and lower echelons of the Nazi regime from any responsibility for its crimes. The moral dimension of Mommsen's critique of Hitler-centrism may have been more implicit than his scholarly reservations were, but it was nevertheless very much at the heart of his project.

In focusing on the structural determinants of historical change, Mommsen was nevertheless careful to avoid a crude reductionism that robbed historical actors of their agency and moral responsibility. Questions of moral agency lay very much at the heart of Mommsen's entire *oeuvre*, and not just in his work on the German resistance during the Third Reich. At no point was the moral dimension of Mommsen's work more apparent than in his ringing indictment of Germany's conservative elites for their complicity—first in sabotaging Germany's experiment with democracy; then in hoisting Hitler into office and making their separate peace with the Nazi dictator once it became clear that their hopes of controlling him were illusory; and, finally, in going along quietly with the crimes of the Third Reich, up through and including the mass murder of European Jewry. The cultural antisemitism—or, what Shulamit Volkov identifies as antisemitism as a "cultural code"—that existed at the upper levels of German society since the middle of the nineteenth century not only inured Germany's conservative elites against the crimes the Third Reich committed against German Jews between 1933 and 1939, but also, and even more tragically, reduced them to the status of bystanders to—if not actual perpetrators of—the atrocities the Nazi regime later committed against Jews throughout Europe during World War II.<sup>69</sup> At the heart of all this lay what Mommsen identified as the "hollowing out"—also referred to as the "deracination"—of Germany's traditional bourgeois culture, a process that began with the rise of Romanticism and the abandonment of reason at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and that reached its apogee with a full-scale assault on reason by Germany's intellectual elites in the last decades before the outbreak of World War I. But because cultural and intellectual history lay outside Mommsen's primary field of interest, this is a theme that remained largely undeveloped in his published work. The important point here is that Mommsen saw the rise of Hitler and the crimes of the Third Reich as part of a larger process of moral decay that extended deep into the fabric of German history and the culture of its educated elites.

As a historian, Mommsen was not without his blind spots. For example, his history of the Weimar Republic ignored the enormous wealth of Weimar culture, concentrating instead on Weimar politics and on the social and economic structural forces that shaped its general contours.<sup>70</sup> Though he never admitted this in print, Mommsen tended to regard

<sup>69</sup>Shulamit Volkov, *German, Jews, and Antisemitism: Trials in Emancipation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 65–90.

<sup>70</sup>In this respect, see Peter Gay's review of Hans Mommsen, *The Rise and Fall of Weimar Democracy*, in *The Historian* 60, no. 1 (1997): 178–79.

culture and ideology as dependent variables in the process of historical change, thus never ascribing to them the causal efficacy posited in much of the current historical writing on the Weimar Republic and Third Reich. The extent to which Mommsen's insensitivity to the role of culture and ideology in shaping the context in which politics plays out, and the fact that his fixation on politics as politics represented a real deficit in his reading of the Weimar Republic, are issues that remain open to debate. In any event, it places his work at odds with some of the more recent trends in German historical scholarship. In the last years of his life, Mommsen felt increasingly estranged from the younger generation of German historians and from the paradigm shifts that were taking place within the profession. He was concerned that this might be part of a "normalization" process that would "relativize" the Third Reich and its crimes against the German people, the Jews, and the rest of the world. Mommsen was an engaged historian, and the history he wrote can only be fully understood in the context of the times in which he lived. He was always a voice calling upon his fellow Germans to address the hard truths of the past, no matter how painful this might have been. It is a voice that will be sadly missed.

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