

## MEMORIAL

### Fritz Stern (1926–2016)

**F**RITZ Stern, who passed away on May 18, 2016, just a few weeks after his ninetieth birthday, had a most illustrious and influential career as a scholar and public intellectual. He was born into an upper-middle-class family in what was then Breslau in Prussian Silesia, now Wrocław in Poland. His father was an esteemed physician; his mother, unusually at the time, had studied physics and mathematics at Breslau University and later ran a kindergarten. Another influential figure was his uncle and godfather, the famous chemist and Nobel laureate Fritz Haber, whose first name Fritz's parents took for their son.

Originally raised in Jewish families, Fritz Stern's paternal grandparents converted to Protestantism and Fritz and his sister were baptized. There is thus the question of the family's sociocultural identity. The Sterns were certainly well integrated into Breslau society, both socially and professionally. They owned a spacious, single-family dwelling that contained furniture designed by Hans Poelzig, an architect involved in the *Deutscher Werkbund*. The men in the family enjoyed equal voting rights, and members of all generations participated in the cultural life of the city. Stern's father had loyally served in World War I and was awarded the Iron Cross. In short, the family identified with Germany and, after 1918, with its parliamentary democratic republic. They observed Christmas and Easter, decorated their Christmas tree, and sang carols, but otherwise lived secular lives. Although the family had witnessed growing Nazi violence by the late 1920s, they tried to protect their children from it; it was, as Stern later put it, "only Nazi antisemitism [that] made me conscious of my Jewish heritage."<sup>1</sup> Personal experiences of racism, in school and elsewhere, reinforced his sense of exclusion. Beginning in 1936 the Sterns began to plan their flight from Germany, but it took until the autumn of 1938, just before the Nazis' November pogrom, to obtain the necessary visas and affidavits to reach the United States via Holland.

The trauma of escape and adaptation to a different society preoccupied Fritz Stern throughout his long life as a member of the "second generation" of refugees from Nazism who had experienced the dictatorship of Adolf Hitler as teenagers. Visiting Wrocław in 1999, he recorded that he had no feeling of a homecoming because he had earlier suffered

I would like to thank Renate Bridenthal, Istvan Deak, Walter Goldstein, Norbert Frei, Marion Kaplan, Andrew Port, and Elisabeth Sifton for their advice on this Memorial.

<sup>1</sup>Fritz Stern, quoted in Chris Hedges, "Warning from a Student of Democracy's Collapse," *New York Times*, Jan. 6, 2005. For a full account of Stern's family and childhood, see his memoir *Five Germans I Have Known* (New York: Farrar Strauss & Giroux, 2006), where the biographical details that follow can also be found. The German translation, *Fünf Deutschland und ein Leben* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2007), became a bestseller in the Federal Republic.

so much.<sup>2</sup> Nor did he feel any regrets that the city was now Polish and that most Germans had fled or been expelled in 1945. To have escaped from the regime's policies of persecution and murder left deep scars, and he grappled with their meaning throughout the postwar decades, particularly after the full horrors of the Holocaust had become known. Later the family learned that an uncle and his wife had been deported to Theresienstadt and murdered in Auschwitz.

Stern understandably felt extremely bitter about what had happened. Having resumed his education in New York, he wrote some firmly anti-German articles for the school newspaper and, though at first still an enemy alien, began to identify strongly with the country that had offered him and his family a new home. Although his parents continued to speak German at home, they refused ever to set foot on German soil again. Their son, whose English was rapidly improving, became a serious high school student who earned grades impressive enough to gain him admission to Columbia College, from which he graduated with honors and admission to Phi Beta Kappa in 1946. He had become an avid reader not only of the *New York Times* but also, it is worth noting, of *Aufbau*, the German-Jewish refugee newspaper published in that city. Relatives advised him to study medicine, but he opted for history and was admitted to the PhD program at Columbia University. There he came under the mesmerizing influence of three teachers: Lionel Trilling, Jacques Barzun, and Richard Hofstadter. Paul Lazarsfeld and Franz Neumann also sat on the committee for his doctoral dissertation, which he successfully defended in 1953 and published several years later under the title *The Politics of Cultural Despair*.<sup>3</sup> His research interests at this point reflected the influence of the former three scholars, whose work might be broadly defined as cultural-intellectual history of the kind popular among many Columbia students to this day.

Stern made modern Germany in a European context his main focus, and he spoke with deep admiration of the influential non-Jewish refugee historian Hajo Holborn. A member of the “first generation” of refugee scholars, Holborn had been trained by Friedrich Meinecke in the German tradition of intellectual history; after his arrival in the United States, he taught at Yale University and began writing about the history of sociopolitical movements in the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> As early as 1948, Stern also befriended Leonard Krieger, a historian who, like Holborn, had worked for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the country's foreign intelligence arm during the war. In 1967, Stern and Krieger coedited *The Responsibility of Power: Historical Essays in Honor of Hajo Holborn*.<sup>5</sup> Both remained in touch with other wartime OSS recruits such as Carl Schorske and H. Stuart Hughes.

<sup>2</sup>Stern, *Five Germanys*, 5.

<sup>3</sup>Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961). Translations into German (1963), Japanese (1988), and French (1990) followed. Between Stern's completion of his doctoral dissertation and its publication, he edited *The Varieties of History* (New York: Meridian, 1956)—a selection of extracts from the works of major historians through the ages that has remained a useful volume for courses on the history of historical writing.

<sup>4</sup>Hartmut Lehmann and James Sheehan, eds., *An Interrupted Past: German-Speaking Refugee Historians in the United States after 1933* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). For a sequel volume covering refugee historians who came to the United States as children, including Fritz Stern, see Andreas Daum, Hartmut Lehmann, and James Sheehan, eds., *The Second Generation: Emigrés from Nazi Germany as Historians* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2016).

<sup>5</sup>Fritz Stern and Leonard Krieger, eds., *The Responsibility of Power: Historical Essays in Honor of Hajo Holborn* (New York: Doubleday, 1967).

*The Politics of Cultural Despair* analyzed the political-cultural writings of the Wilhelmine right-wing intellectuals Paul de Lagarde, Julius Langbehn, and Arthur Moeller van den Bruck. The book is still in print in a second edition and listed on syllabi in undergraduate and graduate courses in the United States—even if the line that Stern drew here from these three authors to the mass politics of the Third Reich was too straight. After all, once social historians came along to ask more precisely who these “masses” actually were, their work led to a more nuanced interpretation of the sociological bases of Nazism and of contemporary voting behavior.<sup>6</sup> Although Stern later became critical of the notion that Germany had taken a “special path” into the twentieth century and of the idea of a direct link between the Nazi seizure of power and the murder of the European Jews, the articles that he published in the 1960s continued to revolve around the peculiarities and weaknesses of modern German history.<sup>7</sup> This was perhaps best captured in the title of his collection *The Failure of Illiberalism*.<sup>8</sup> It contained ten essays on such diverse topics as the “political consequences” of the “unpolitical German,” Konrad Adenauer during the Weimar Republic, and Stern’s first visit to Berlin after 1945.

By the 1960s, Stern had added another string to his bow with his defense of Fritz Fischer’s controversial work on the origins and course of World War I. When Fischer’s official subsidy for a lecture tour in the United States was withdrawn at the instigation of the West German Foreign Office and Fischer’s critics, Stern helped to organize an invitation funded by American institutions. No less important, the Fischer controversy shifted his interest from intellectual elites to the role of political and military ones. In 1968 Stern published a long essay on Reich chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg and the “limits of responsibility.”<sup>9</sup> Instead of being the historian of the broad sweep, as in his first book, here he was the careful interpreter of the diaries of Kurt Riezler, Bethmann’s private secretary at the beginning of World War I. Stern’s support of Fischer’s trip had been about the Hamburg historian’s right to advance his arguments about the July Crisis of 1914 and Wilhelmine foreign and military policies during the war, but he now took a less harsh view of the chancellor than Fischer had done. To him, Bethmann was not a warmonger, but a man of personal integrity with a great sense of responsibility. And yet, pressured by radical conservative politicians and the military, Bethmann had clearly played a role that had contributed to the disastrous course of German history in the early twentieth century. He embodied the paradoxical and tragic case of a basically moral man who became the executor of reckless German power politics.

As is the case for all historical research, Fritz Stern’s first publications have to be seen in the larger context of the scholarly paradigms of the early postwar years. These had been profoundly shaped by the experiences of the interwar period and World War II. Fascism was

<sup>6</sup>See, e.g., Thomas Childers, *The Nazi Voter* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984); Richard F. Hamilton, *Who Voted for Hitler?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981); Nathan Stoltzfus, *Hitler’s Compromises: Coercion and Consensus in Nazi Germany* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016).

<sup>7</sup>See the conversation between Fritz Stern, Helmut Schmidt, and Theo Sommer recounted in Helmut Schmidt, “Freiheit ist meine Leidenschaft,” *Die Zeit*, Feb. 1, 2006, in which Stern said that he was at least hesitant to draw a straight line from 1933 to the Holocaust.

<sup>8</sup>Fritz Stern, *The Failure of Illiberalism: Essays on the Political Culture of Modern Germany* (New York: Knopf, 1972), also published two years later in German translation by Ullstein Verlag.

<sup>9</sup>Fritz Stern, *Bethmann Hollweg und der Krieg: Die Grenzen der Verantwortung* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1968).

viewed not as a product of monopoly capitalism, as it was in the Soviet bloc, but as a mass movement of millions of ordinary Germans. In line with most historians in the non-Communist community of scholars, Stern viewed fascism as totalitarian. Its right-wing radical variant had been defeated in 1945, and now its left-wing Stalinist variant had to be fought. Hannah Arendt's study *The Origins of Totalitarianism* had been among the first to examine this concept in a comparative perspective.<sup>10</sup> American and West European historians of Germany, while accepting this larger analytical framework, were interested not merely in the Nazi period itself but also in its origins. Were there developments in interwar Germany that had their roots in the pre-1914 monarchy and that later culminated in Nazism and ultimately the Holocaust? In *The Politics of Cultural Despair*, Stern had made a tenuous connection between Hitler's Third Reich and the ideas of Langbehn, Moeller van den Bruck, and Lagarde.

One might argue that there was a logic to Stern's shift away from the intellectual history of illiberalism to the study of Bethmann and Germany's political and military elites, and yet an unexpected turn came when he gained access to fresh archival sources in the 1960s. It was the discovery in the attic of the Rothschild Bank in Paris of the papers of the banker Gerson von Bleichroeder, on the one hand, and, on the other, of Bleichroeder's correspondence with Reich chancellor Otto von Bismarck in the stables of the latter's estate in Friedrichsruh near Hamburg that generated a new and very different project. The original plan had been to write, together with the Harvard economic historian David Landes, a double biography of Bismarck and his banker. But Landes withdrew from the project, which, given the large number of documents to be scrutinized, helps explain why Stern's *Gold and Iron* took so long to complete and appeared only in 1978.<sup>11</sup> By that time it had become a 650-page tome that received high praise and was widely read, especially in West Germany.

In the end, *Gold and Iron* was much more than a biography of two influential and powerful men. Stern found it difficult to achieve a balance between them simply because Bismarck was so clearly the towering figure of his age. While Bleichroeder was influential and made the chancellor a wealthy man, he remained a discreet adviser in the background. There were occasions when he advised the chancellor in international affairs or pleaded with him to use his diplomatic weight—for example, to protect the Romanian Jewish minority from antisemitic persecution. However, the book came to have a much greater significance for an understanding of the Bismarckian age and the German Empire. Stern's concern was to highlight the precarious effects of Bleichroeder's wealth, which had allowed for a remarkable upward mobility among the bourgeoisie that was nevertheless constantly threatened by the very conservative socioeconomic and political structures of the Hohenzollern monarchy. For the author, these two men embodied forms of modernization that were fast becoming anachronistic and being undermined by nationalistic arrogance and illiberalism.

Although Stern did not postulate a straight line of continuity from Bismarck to Hitler, he emphasized the fragility of Bismarck's creation and warned that readers should not be misled by its splendid façade, behind which lurked a much harsher reality. That reality included the growth of the racist antisemitism from which the Bleichroeder family suffered. Even worse,

<sup>10</sup>Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1951).

<sup>11</sup>Fritz Stern, *Gold and Iron: Bismarck, Bleichroeder, and the Building of the German Empire* (New York: Knopf, 1977). The volume ran through several impressions and was also translated into German (1978), Italian (1989), French (1990), and Dutch (1992).

this growth was greatly accelerated by the nationalists' search for scapegoats and by Germany's defeat in 1918, which the antirepublican Right refused to accept. Finally, there was also the social injustice and discrimination to which the working class continued to be subjected. As Stern's analysis indicates, his own political liberalism and defense of freedom against totalitarianism and autocracy were tempered by reservations about liberal capitalism—reservations that he would discuss more explicitly toward the end of his life.

Following the publication of *Gold and Iron*, Fritz Stern returned to the writing of essays, a form of scholarship that probably was his real forte. His collection *Dreams and Delusions* appeared in 1987.<sup>12</sup> Dedicated to his Princeton University colleague Felix Gilbert, the volume assembled pieces Stern had written on the “dream of peace” and the “lure of power,” on Franco–German and German–American relations, and on American historical writing and teaching about modern Europe. Another compilation, entitled *Verspielte Grösse*, came out in 1996.<sup>13</sup> It was in many ways a mirror image of the 1987 volume, starting from a remark that Raymond Aron had made when he and Stern took a walk in divided Berlin in April 1979. The twentieth century, the French sociologist suggested, could have been “Germany's century.”<sup>14</sup> But this opportunity had been gambled away in two world wars that had destroyed the country's cultural and scientific achievements, so many of which had been created by Germany's Jewish minority. German history thus appeared as a tragedy of Greek proportions from which the country, given the burden of the Holocaust, could never recover.

It was but a small step from this notion of the frittering away of potential greatness to Stern's 1999 volume of essays, *Einstein's German World*, which was much more than a mourning of the loss brought about by the flight from Nazism of Albert Einstein and other famous scholars and intellectuals.<sup>15</sup> More specifically, it contained a critical examination of Fritz Haber, Stern's uncle and godfather. Together with Carl Bosch, Haber had developed an industrial process of nitrogen fixation that enabled not only the production of fertilizer for the benefit of humanity but also the continued production of explosives for the German military after 1915, when the British blockade halted the import of Chilean saltpeter into Germany. An ardent German nationalist, Haber, unlike his colleague and friend Einstein, had signed the appeal of ninety-three academics and intellectuals extolling the alleged superiority of German *Kultur* and supporting the war that would secure its victory.

By the time Stern wrote these essays, he had journeyed far from his earlier condemnation of Wilhelmine rightist writers and the Nazi “masses” to reach a critical assessment of Imperial Germany's educated elites that did not spare his uncle, who had toyed with German nationalism and thus helped produce a nightmare. Haber personally supervised the preparations for the first poison gas attack, which was launched at Ypres in Belgium in the spring of 1915 using a compound he had developed. His obsession with laboratory research and politics eventually drove his wife, Clara Immerwahr—who had a doctorate in chemistry from

<sup>12</sup>Fritz Stern, *Dreams and Delusions: The Drama of German History* (New York: Knopf, 1987), also translated into German (1988), French (1989), Japanese (1996), and Dutch (1994, with selections from both this volume and *The Failure of Illiberalism*).

<sup>13</sup>Fritz Stern, *Verspielte Grösse: Essays zur deutschen Geschichte des 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1996).

<sup>14</sup>Raymond Aron, quoted in *ibid.*, 11.

<sup>15</sup>Fritz Stern, *Einstein's German World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), also translated into French (2001), Polish (2001), Catalan (2003), Portuguese (2004), Chinese (2004), and Spanish (2005).

Breslau University, the first awarded to a woman—to take her life a few days after the attack. Depressed about her uncaring and workaholic husband and learning of his involvement in gas warfare, which she considered a perversion of science, she shot herself with his revolver.

Clara's tragedy ended there, while her husband's lay in the future. After 1918, Haber continued his hectic life trying to organize research and build the IG Farben chemical conglomerate. Throughout the 1920s he worked tirelessly to reintegrate German scientists into the international community of scholars. Yet none of these achievements helped him when the Nazis came to power. Witnessing the dismissal of Jewish and other scholars, he resigned from his position at the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gesellschaft and emigrated to Cambridge. Fellow chemist Chaim Weizmann hoped that Haber might assume the directorship of a newly founded research institute in Palestine, but Haber decided to take a break in Switzerland while making up his mind; he died of a heart attack in a hotel in Basel in January 1934. Looking back on Haber's tumultuous career, Stern wrote of the "flawed greatness" of his uncle and godfather but refused to condemn him for the "lamentable choices" he had made.<sup>16</sup> Instead, he used Haber's biography to highlight the complexity of human life and pleaded for a more balanced view than that found in other evaluations of Haber's career. Pursuing the interest in the relationship between psychology and politics he had expressed earlier in *Dreams and Delusions*, he harkened back to Haber's deprived childhood after his mother had died during his birth and to other personal setbacks, arguing that Haber had repressed these traumas through fervent nationalism and devotion to science.

To gain an even fuller appreciation of Fritz Stern's journey as a historian and public intellectual, one has to go back to the 1950s and relate his shifting scholarly interests to changes in the larger political environment and his responses to them. In 1954 he accepted a visiting professorship at the Free University in West Berlin, which gave him an opportunity to interact directly with a post-Nazi generation of students. He arrived, understandably, with "mixed emotions."<sup>17</sup> He had conversations with the historian and political scientist Karl Dietrich Bracher, who apparently shared his skepticism that authoritarian attitudes had been replaced by a firm popular support of parliamentary democracy. When asked to comment on a survey that the Fulbright Commission had undertaken, he noted with alarm that students were apolitical and ignorant about the regime that had been defeated in 1945. At the same time, in a 1955 article for *Commentary* written after his time teaching in Berlin, he reported that "my own hatred did not survive my proximity to the Germans. I left Germany in August purged of hatred—though not disloyal to the feelings of the past and full of forebodings to[ward] the future."<sup>18</sup> The fact that he was in Berlin at the time of the twentieth anniversary of the July 1944 plot to kill Hitler and was thus able to learn more about the anti-Nazi resistance also seems to have helped him to clarify his thoughts about the Germans.

If Stern had begun to feel more comfortable with Germans of his own generation who had manifestly kept their distance from the Nazi regime or even courageously opposed it, the 1960s saw the rise of a younger generation whose members began to criticize Germany's

<sup>16</sup>Fritz Stern, "Fritz Haber: Flawed Greatness of Person and Country," *Angewandte Chemie International Edition* 51, no. 1 (2012): 2–9.

<sup>17</sup>Stern, *Five Germanys*, 209.

<sup>18</sup>Fritz Stern, "The Fragmented People That Is Germany," *Commentary* 19 (1955): 137.

postwar policies of pragmatic reconstruction and deliberately rational stabilization in the West—policies that Stern viewed, against the backdrop of the Cold War struggle against the Soviet Union and dogmatic communism, as one of the country's great successes. His memory of the 1930s, including the experience of both Stalinist and fascist totalitarianism and of the irrationalism of young Nazis, also helps explain why Stern perceived the left-wing radicalism of the student movements of the 1960s and 1970s as a resurgent totalitarianism hell-bent on the destruction of both parliamentary democracy and the type of managed Keynesian social market economy that he cherished. In the United States, and not least at his own Columbia University, such radicals also began to oppose American foreign policy in Vietnam and elsewhere.

When the Columbia protests resulted in the nonviolent occupation of buildings on campus, Stern, averring the threat of a leftist revolution, joined colleagues—some of whom, such as Paul Kristeller, were also refugees from Nazism—to combat it vigorously. He had welcomed the civil rights movement of the early 1960s, but once police tactics led to violent clashes, the question, in his view, was not who had triggered them, but who now posed a fundamental threat to the principles of a free society. He showed little appreciation of the fissures between those students who advocated an escalation of violence and those who rejected it. Just as in the United States, some of Stern's colleagues in Europe, such as the West German sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf, pleaded for a continuing dialogue with the leaders of the student movements, but for Stern this was a futile exercise. When by the late 1970s the pushback by authorities had been successful, he felt that the elites of Western Europe and North America had avoided the mistakes of the 1930s and acted before it was too late. It was only much later that he conceded that he had underestimated the rigidity of university structures as one of the underlying causes of student unrest.<sup>19</sup>

It would be wrong to interpret Stern's positions of the 1970s as reactionary. Nor was he a protagonist of the kind of neoliberalism that achieved its political breakthrough in the United States under Ronald Reagan and in Britain under Margaret Thatcher. He did not want to dismantle the welfare state and privatize and deregulate the economy. To him, the preservation of individual liberty had priority over social concerns and solidarity. It was a position that could be found not only among educated West Germans and Americans who had distinct memories of the era of unfreedom of Europe in the 1930s and early 1940s but also among those who had been imprisoned in defense of liberty in Eastern Europe after 1945. By the 1980s—thanks to his political views and, not least, to the success of *Gold and Iron* in West Germany—Stern was receiving a growing number of invitations to discuss not so much his actual scholarly research on the course of modern German and European history as the larger political implications of his work. He was on his way toward becoming “the non-historians' historian,” as David Blackbourn put it in 2000.<sup>20</sup>

The most striking occasion when Fritz Stern assumed this expanded role was his speech on June 17, 1987, before the federal parliament of West Germany on the occasion of the

<sup>19</sup>Stern, *Five Germanys*, 275.

<sup>20</sup>David Blackbourn, “Bitter as Never Before,” review of *Einstein's German World*, by Fritz Stern, *London Review of Books*, Feb. 3, 2000. See also Richard J. Evans, “Scholarship in Exile,” review of *Dreams and Delusions*, by Fritz Stern, *Times Literary Supplement*, Sept. 1, 1988; Thomas Laqueur, “Lectures about Heaven,” review of *Five Germanys*, by Fritz Stern, *London Review of Books*, June 7, 2007.

thirty-fourth anniversary of the 1953 East German uprising.<sup>21</sup> For three decades West Germans had interpreted this revolution as an expression of the East Germans' desire to bring about the unification of a divided country. Now Fritz Stern came along to tell the West German public that what the insurgents had in fact fought for was *freedom* and the removal of a repressive Communist regime. He also anticipated further unrest and reforms in the East. After the reunification of the two Germanys, he came back to the theme of freedom and the development of post-1989 Europe in several lectures that may be seen as digests of his evolving thoughts on German history, transatlantic relations, and American politics. The widening scope of his public statements was also related to his appointment as senior advisor to Richard Holbrooke, the US ambassador to Germany, from October 1, 1993, to mid-January 1994. He obtained a leave of absence from Columbia and moved to Bonn to take up the post, staying on as a consultant until 1996. These official positions gave him access to confidential documents on German–American relations and greatly expanded his contacts in Germany. Living and traveling in the country, he met innumerable politicians, civil servants, academics, and businessmen. This also enabled him to intensify friendships that he had established in the 1970s—with Marion Countess Dönhoff of *Die Zeit*, for example. This was the time when he became a senator of the Deutsche Nationalstiftung, a member of the German–American Academic Council, and a trustee of the German Marshall Fund. He was also asked to join Helsinki Watch as well as the Trilateral Commission, and he became a board member of the Einstein Forum in Potsdam and of the Historial de la Grande Guerre at Péronne in northern France. He received numerous prizes and honorary degrees and was awarded the Grand Cross of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic in 2006.

In 1993, Fritz Stern was invited to deliver the Tanner Lecture at Yale University in two parts, which gave him an opportunity to present something like a balance sheet of his views on modern European history.<sup>22</sup> The first part, titled “Mendacity Enforced,” started in the nineteenth century and then offered a grand tour through World War I, the Russian Revolution, Mussolini’s Fascist regime, the Third Reich, World War II, and the Holocaust, as well as postwar Western and Eastern Europe all the way up to 1989—the year when the “chain of horrors” had finally been broken. He extolled the role of East European intellectuals such as Adam Michnik and Václav Havel, who had fought to end mendacity because they wanted to “live in truth.” After striking a more optimistic note, he proceeded to warn against Western triumphalism and, though he deemed free markets more efficient than a planned economy, against unregulated capitalism and greed. The second part of the lecture, titled “Freedom and Its Discontents,” focused almost exclusively on post-1989 Germany and urged that, while the process of integration would not be easy, both East and West should seize the moment and overcome their differences. The end of division had revealed the sinister activities of the Stasi, but it was still an opportunity to draw on the benefits of this—in his view—first successful revolution in German history.

<sup>21</sup>For the full text of Stern’s speech to the Bundestag, see Fritz Stern, “Remembering the Uprising,” trans. Edna McCown, with an introduction by Timothy Garton Ash, *New York Review of Books*, Dec. 3, 1987.

<sup>22</sup>Fritz Stern, “Mendacity Enforced,” pt. 1, and “Freedom and Its Discontents,” pt. 2, in *The Tanner Lectures in Human Values*, ed. Grethe B. Peterson (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1994), 15:141–214.

It may be that in speaking before an American audience, Stern adopted this approach to allay suspicions of German reunification that persisted in the West. After all, ever since the 1960s many politicians and academics on that side of the Atlantic had been harboring suspicions of Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik*, which Stern had supported from the start. He had argued along conciliatory lines when, in 1990, British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, deeply unhappy about the sudden emergence of a blockbuster Germany in the heart of Europe, invited him and four other prominent historians (Gordon Craig, Hugh Trevor-Roper, Norman Stone, and Timothy Garton Ash) to Chequers to discuss the awkward German Question.<sup>23</sup> If he had himself wondered in earlier years whether the Germans would turn the corner and develop their country into a liberal democracy, working for international peace instead of unleashing wars, he had become more confident by the 1990s that the postwar experiment was a success. This did not mean, however, that he stopped reminding the Germans of the catastrophic chapters of their history in the first half of the twentieth century or of how fortunate they had been in the second half.

One occasion presented itself when the University of Munich invited him to give a major lecture on the Third Reich.<sup>24</sup> Instead of summarizing the horrors of Nazism, he focused on the “preliminary steps” (*Vorstufen*) of its horrendous crimes. Furthermore, instead of chastising the so-called masses, he took the German bourgeoisie to task for having remained silent. Juxtaposing the critics of German chauvinism and militarism to the “father of lies” Grand Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz (and others), he averred that Germany's interwar elites had never understood the dynamism and the pseudoreligious character of Nazism. This is where those who had claimed spiritual leadership had failed abominably. He added that no one could be expected to give his or her life and become a martyr—but what *could* be demanded was a sort of prophylactic civil courage learned and tested in advance of the catastrophe. Hitler's ascent to the chancellorship would have been impossible had it not been for the “superior” (*vornehme*) and cowardly silence of the country's elites.<sup>25</sup> Later, Stern took aim not only at those who had kept quiet in 1933 but also at those who had later hidden their wartime involvement in the crimes of the regime. Günter Grass became one of his targets. Stern had admired Grass in the 1960s not only for his novel *Die Blechtrommel* but also because of his support of Willy Brandt and the chancellor's domestic reformism. When it became known much later that Grass had been a member of the Waffen-SS in World War II, it was not Grass's actions during the war that Stern held against him; what was offensive was that he had taken so long to break his silence. Grass's hypocrisy, Stern insisted, had compromised both the writer and his criticism of Israel.<sup>26</sup>

At the same time, Stern held up as role models those Germans who had been involved in the active resistance to Hitler. It seems that he was most comfortable in the company of surviving anti-Nazis, and he worked to preserve the memory of those who had given their lives to overthrow Hitler. Some of his essays and, above all, his last book, *No Ordinary Men*, were

<sup>23</sup>See Stern's account in Schmidt, “Freiheit ist meine Leidenschaft.”

<sup>24</sup>For the full text of the lecture, see Fritz Stern, “Das feine Schweigen und seine Folgen,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Dec. 28, 1998.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid. “Das feine Schweigen” was an expression he had taken from Friedrich Nietzsche but now applied to all those who had looked down on Nazi vulgarity but lacked the civil courage to speak up.

<sup>26</sup>See Stern's remarks quoted in “Eine Provokation mit bedrückendem Ergebnis,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, April 14, 2012.

devoted to their sacrifice.<sup>27</sup> He published this book jointly with his wife Elisabeth Sifton, the daughter of the renowned theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. In it they examined the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whom Niebuhr had hosted at his Union Theological Seminary in New York in the 1930s. The other “nonordinary man” portrayed in this book was Hans von Dohnanyi, Bonhoeffer’s brother-in-law and a high court judge in Leipzig close to the resistance group around Admiral Wilhelm Canaris—all of whom were executed.

In 1999 Fritz Stern had yet another opportunity to summarize his insights into German history when he was awarded the prestigious Peace Prize of the German Book Publishers’ Association. Accepting the award in Frankfurt’s Paulskirche (of 1848 revolutionary fame), he again offered a wide-ranging interpretation of the twentieth century in which he reminded his audience of Nazi mass murder and the need for freedom and public accountability in politics.<sup>28</sup> He warned that democracy was constantly endangered and quoted his friend Ralf Dahrendorf who had said it was crucial to create a harmonious relationship among competition, social cohesion, and political freedom.<sup>29</sup>

By the beginning of the new century, Stern had become less and less concerned about the future of Germany, even if he believed that the country still faced formidable challenges at home—such as the overcoming of the continuing divisions between so-called *Ossies* and *Wessies*. With the election of George W. Bush as US president, Stern began to worry instead about the future of the country that had given him and his family shelter in 1938 and with which he firmly identified. After becoming a citizen, his attachment became so strong that he never contemplated accepting a professorship at a (West) German university. But by 2001 he had observed, with growing unease, the policies that Bush had adopted in his first term. Interviewed by a *New York Times* reporter on January 6, 2005, he drew on his knowledge of the Weimar Republic to discuss how and under what circumstances a democracy can collapse and reminded his readers that many Europeans had longed “for fascism before the name was ever invented.”<sup>30</sup>

While he was careful not to suggest that American society was headed in a similar direction, he was much blunter two weeks later, on the day of Bush’s second inauguration, when interviewed by a reporter for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.<sup>31</sup> It was not just the patriotic pomp and its cost that irritated Stern. Rather, he was deeply worried about “the immediate future of the country that saved us, educated us and gave us so much.” Looking back on Bush’s first term and the wars that he had waged, he spoke of a “radical break” that the sitting president had made with the principles of a foreign policy that both Republicans and Democrats had supported. It was not just the poor planning of the Iraq War and the unilateralist neglect of America’s allies that were leading toward a major crisis; it was also Bush’s economic policies. And when he saw the television pictures of Bush’s premature

<sup>27</sup> Elisabeth Sifton and Fritz Stern, *No Ordinary Men: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Hans von Dohnanyi, Resisters against Hitler in Church and State* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2013).

<sup>28</sup> Fritz Stern, “Vergangenheit vergeht nicht,” *Kulturchronik* 1 (2000): 18–24.

<sup>29</sup> For a sample of Dahrendorf’s views, see, e.g., Ralf Dahrendorf, “Enlightenment Applied, Enlightenment Betrayed: A Story of Liberty under Pressure,” speech delivered at Columbia University, Feb. 27, 2006, to mark the occasion of Stern’s eightieth birthday, reprinted in *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute Washington* 39 (Fall 2006): 15–38.

<sup>30</sup> Stern quoted in Hedges, “Warning.”

<sup>31</sup> Jordan Mejias, “Amerika unter Bush: Die Leni-Riefenstahlisierung,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Jan. 24, 2005.

announcement on board an aircraft carrier that the war's "mission" had been "accomplished," Stern referred to this as the "Leni-Riefenstahlinization of American foreign policy." No less important, German history continued to contain a warning for any democracy. Indeed, there was, in his view, no guarantee that the United States might not turn in an authoritarian direction. To be sure, Washington was not Weimar, and liberal traditions and institutions had deep roots in the United States. At the same time, he added, authoritarian currents that posed a danger to the republic were not unknown. Nor did he think that Bush would conduct a more moderate policy during the next four years.

Stern returned to these themes a few months later when he was awarded the coveted German *Nationalpreis* in Berlin.<sup>32</sup> This time he asked his audience to be patient with the United States and to empathize with its situation. He and many others were conscious of the dangers; they knew their responsibility and were fighting "for the soul of the country." The task was therefore to foster the links that had been built across the Atlantic. While continuing to make contributions to this effort, he lost patience again in 2013 when it became known that the US National Security Agency had engaged in a massive tapping of cell phones, including that of German chancellor Angela Merkel.<sup>33</sup> This time he did not mince words: he called such activities illegal, criminal, and suited only to undermine the trust between the two countries that had been built up over several decades.

Stern's reference to the "soul" of America also related to the direction of the economy. After all, the United States had come out of the Great Depression and World War II with institutional structures and economic beliefs that had been formulated in the New Deal and that rested on a belief that those who had wealth and influence also had responsibilities toward the weaker and less fortunate strata of society. Stern had long held the view that elite groups must not only be wary of illiberal irrationalism in politics but also be committed to the promotion of social justice as a condition of a viable democracy.

It was against this background that Stern became increasingly skeptical when neoliberal economists convinced politicians to abandon postwar Keynesian economic management and push instead to make "the market" the sole determinant of economic activity. The first waves of privatization and deregulation of the 1980s spilled over into the 1990s but were always accompanied by warnings about the evolution of capitalism, especially after the fall of the Soviet bloc. Stern thus used his second 1993 Tanner Lecture to speak up against the unfolding *Raffgesellschaft* (society of greed) that was being driven by reckless competition and avarice.<sup>34</sup> That same year he elaborated on his views during a conversation with Mechthild Küpper in *Die Wochenpost*.<sup>35</sup> He began by stressing that capitalism had fostered many virtues but then added that market economies were too serious a topic to be left to the economists. Rather, they should be seen in a larger context of psychology, morality, and culture. More important, and evidently referring to the debate on "varieties of capitalism" that the French economist Michel Albert had revived with his 1993 book *Capitalism vs.*

<sup>32</sup>See the report by Elisabeth Binder, "Seelenkämpfe," *Der Tagesspiegel*, June 18, 2005. See also Hans Mommsen, "Vom Festhalten an einer widerspenstigen Liebe," *Das Parlament*, Oct. 8, 1999.

<sup>33</sup>See the report by Patrick Bahners, "In New York nennt der besonnene Fritz Stern den Abhörskandal eine politische Katastrophe," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Oct. 27, 2013, on the lecture Stern delivered at Deutsches Haus, New York University, when he was awarded the Volksmar and Margret Sander Prize.

<sup>34</sup>Stern, "Freedom and Its Discontents."

<sup>35</sup>Mechthild Küpper, "Der Osten hat sich schließlich selbst befreit," *Die Wochenpost*, Nov. 28, 1993.

*Capitalism*, he railed at orthodox American macroeconomists such as Jeffrey Sachs, who were telling the Russians and later the Poles that there was only one capitalist path.<sup>36</sup> He admired Sachs'schutzpah in imposing his neoliberal precepts on Russia but did not believe that socialist ideas were dead. Bill Clinton, he hoped, might bring about much-needed domestic change, and he regretted that the new American president was being overwhelmed by international problems that had to be solved if the United States wanted to remain a "world-political power."<sup>37</sup>

In a conversation with Fritz Stern and Theo Sommer of *Die Zeit* on the occasion of Stern's eightieth birthday in February 2006, former German chancellor Helmut Schmidt touched upon the economic and social environment that, he believed, historians had been neglecting, and he spoke of the "degenerations of American capitalism" that had become a *Raubtierkapitalismus* (carnivorous capitalism).<sup>38</sup> Stern replied that most Americans had no understanding of the fact that capitalism existed in very different forms and contexts. Consequently, few of his fellow citizens appreciated what Marion Dönhoff, the widely esteemed doyenne of postwar German journalism, meant when she demanded that capitalism be "civilized."<sup>39</sup> Stern went on to define the United States as a "plutocracy that calls itself Christian" and that was being "supported and cheered on by fundamentalists." He added that the country had been racked by "scandals, corruption, and injustices," but, in the end, he did not give up hope that reforms would be introduced. To him, the United States continued to be a society in which "large countermovements" could arise "very quickly." In the end, he came back to what had always worried him most, namely, that the "real liberties" of America were the ones that were most threatened and that the Bush administration had systematically used the attacks by Al Qaeda on September 11, 2001, to strengthen its political grip.<sup>40</sup>

Stern's worries only increased when this Christian fundamentalism began to spread further and when Donald Trump rose to the top of the Republican presidential ticket. His concerns were pointedly summarized in a letter to the editor of the *New York Times* published on April 20, 2016. Responding to an op-ed piece in which Roger Cohen had warned that Trump's rise was "as unsurprising as it is menacing," Stern wrote that Cohen's analysis of the decline of liberalism was "correct and pertinent." Referring to Ronald Reagan's "diatribe" against "the dreaded L-word" in the 1988 campaign, he said that this "trashing of a fundamental American value" had marked "a low point." In his conception of politics, liberalism had "always stood in defense of human decency."<sup>41</sup>

If Stern's engagement with German politics and society after 1989 and his criticisms of American society and US foreign policy constituted something like the sum total of his thoughts as a modern European historian, there was yet another recurrent theme in many

<sup>36</sup> Michel Albert, *Capitalism vs. Capitalism* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1993).

<sup>37</sup> Küpper, "Der Osten."

<sup>38</sup> Schmidt, "Freiheit ist meine Leidenschaft."

<sup>39</sup> Thus Marion Dönhoff in a speech delivered on the occasion of her acceptance of the Erich Kästner Prize in 1994; "Zivilisiert den Kapitalismus!," reprinted in Irene Brauer and Friedrich Dönhoff, eds., *Marion Gräfin Dönhoff: Zeichen der Zeit; Ein Lesebuch* (Hamburg: Hoffmann & Campe, 2009), 478–84.

<sup>40</sup> See Stern's remarks in Schmidt, "Freiheit ist meine Leidenschaft."

<sup>41</sup> Fritz Stern, letter to the editor, *New York Times*, April 20, 2016, responding to Roger Cohen, "The Death of Liberalism," *New York Times*, April 14, 2016.

of the essays and lectures he gave before German and American publics, as well as before undergraduates at Columbia University: the mass murder of Europe's Jews under Nazism and the role of Germany's Jewish minority before and after 1933. Time and again he returned to an almost desperate attempt to understand what had made the Hitler dictatorship tick; time and again he grappled with the very complex biographies not only of his uncle, Fritz Haber, but also of Walther Rathenau, Albert Einstein, and Paul Ehrlich. These articles—which were not hagiographies but essays in the literal sense of the word—analyzed the peculiar situation of Germany's Jews, who had felt firmly integrated into pre-Nazi German society, economy, and culture. Antisemitism had been on the rise, to be sure, but they could not portend the future and the coming of the Holocaust.

It is in this light that Stern's response to the publication of Daniel J. Goldhagen's best-selling book of 1996, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, must be seen. According to Goldhagen, German antisemitism had become so ingrained in society and politics by the late nineteenth century that Germany's Jews could have seen that the "eliminationist" discourse of the pre-1933 decades would turn into an "exterminationist" one under Hitler.<sup>42</sup> Stern published a scathing review of the book in *Foreign Affairs* in December 1996.<sup>43</sup> He charged Goldhagen with painting a distorted picture of antisemitism and minimizing the strength and determination of those who had defended the Weimar Republic. Nor, he argued, had the road to Auschwitz been as "straight" as Goldhagen asserted. Above all, Goldhagen had advanced a view of the position of Jews in pre-1933 Germany that was untenable. In fact, the book had omitted an "integral element of history," namely, that Germany had been the country "in which Jews had made extraordinary leaps of cultural and economic prominence." They had become the "envy of Jews elsewhere." This "astounding ascendancy" had begun when they (at least the men among them) had achieved legal equality in 1869.

Stern nevertheless acknowledged that the hope of "complete acceptance" had remained unfulfilled. German Jews knew "that they were being treated as second-class citizens" and that "their success heightened their vulnerability." Referring to a "dynamically expanding" society—and yet one that had been "severely weakened" by its "internal strains" before 1914—he thought it "odd to single out 'eliminationist antisemitism' as the key social dynamic" and to say "nothing of the still sharp antagonisms between Protestants and Catholics or the intense class conflict... that weighed on them far more than 'the Jewish question.'"<sup>44</sup>

It seems, therefore, that, while Fritz Stern spent his career as a historian and public intellectual writing in both English and German to enlighten his readers about the "German catastrophe," he never ceased to wrestle with the question of why his fully integrated family was forced to leave his native Breslau to find refuge in a foreign country—one with which he came to identify strongly, and yet one whose domestic and foreign policies made him increasingly unhappy. This may explain why he had very recently begun to conduct research for a short biography of the German-Jewish poet Heinrich Heine, who, living as a public

<sup>42</sup>Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Knopf, 1996).

<sup>43</sup>Fritz Stern, "The Goldhagen Controversy: One Nation, One People, One Theory?," *Foreign Affairs* 75, no. 6 (1996): 128–38.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*

intellectual in exile in Paris, had anticipated through his life and work many of the problems that had also shaped Stern's own identity and outlook on the world in his tireless quest for a free and socially just society.

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