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Writing National Histories. Western Europe since 1800

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The chapters in this collective work derive from a conference entitled Apologias for the Nation-State, organized by the editors at the University of Wales in 1996. Taken as a whole, in two respects the book constitutes an unusual and enterprising undertaking. First, as an exercise in comparative history in a particularly appropriate field - the role of historians in the writing of national history. Second, in terms of the attention paid to the differences over time in the role of historians, highlighted by the structuring of the book into chronological sections, each with an introductory comment: 'the age of bourgeois revolution', 'the age of the masses', 'liberal democracy and anti-fascism', 'fascist historiography and the nation-state', 'the Cold War years', and 'contemporary trends'.

Apart from an introduction (primarily by Stefan Berger) and conclusion (primarily by Kevin Passmore), the essays are exclusively on France, Germany and Italy, plus one essay (somewhat anomalous in so structured a context) on England. Its author, Benedict Stuchtey, is concerned with the very English tradition of amateur historiography, epitomized by Macaulay, that maintained its vigour until Trevelyan, despite the encroachments of later nineteenth century professionalism within the universities (Churchill is added, whereas, as a politician, he provides a less clearcut example). Ceri Crossley, Stuart Jones, Peter Schöttler, Bertram M.Gordon, Hugo Frey and Julian Jackson write on French historians; Georg G.Iggers, Patrick Bahners, Alastair Thompson, Peter Lambert, Hans Schleier, Mary Fulbrook and Stefan Berger on Germany;

and Martin Thom, Mauro Moretti, Philip Morgan, Martin Clark, Roberto Vivarelli and Carl Levy on Italian historiography.

All in all, the book has many virtues, the positive result of its comparative approach. It raises questions of differences as much as or more than similarities in history writing in nation-states. For this reviewer, the benefits of comparison are accentuated by the 'foreign eye' of the overwhelming majority of the contributors, who (by education or professional practice) come from national historiographical traditions different from their subject matter, and hence are writing with the (presumed) advantages (and certain traps) of cultural distance and detachment. Bahners, in his very interesting notes of British reviews of Ranke's "History of the Reformation in Germany", is the only contributor to comment on contemporary foreign discussion of the practice of history writing; more perhaps could have been made of this dimension (for example, through a discussion of Elie Halévy's works on nineteenth century England), as it adds another layer to the complexities of national and foreign perceptions of historical narrative.

There are considerable differences between the individual contributions in aim, language and clarity (very common in a collective volume), and more rigorous sub-editing by the publisher would have avoided a few infelicities of euro-speech and quotations unnecessarily in two languages. But these are minor blemishes. The book should prove its utility, perhaps more as a teaching tool than as a text directly accessible to university students who may not be adequately versed in the histories of the three countries. One of its refreshing aspects is its distance from the tradition of both the history of historiography and the little manuals on 'what history is about and how to write it' that were still very dominant when I was a student (over forty years ago). It is a book of postmodernist times, in terms not so much of its language (although a couple of the essays bear the mark of that nowadays familiar opacity), as of its deconstruction of the longstanding self-confidence of academic historians in their role as the vestal virgins of historical Truth. It is understandable that the editors should have dedicated the book to Georg Iggers.

At first sight, the central theme around which the book has been organized - historians and the construction of national historical narratives - seems clear enough. But to read the essays in sequence reveals certain ambiguities and omissions underlying the guide lines presumably provided by the editors. There is a fundamental ambivalence, possibly because of the specific interests of individual contributors, as to whether the book is about historians as constructors of national narratives, or about their responses to the intellectual pressures, beliefs and cultural Weltanschauungen of their countries in different periods. Undoubtedly, as Passmore argues in his conclusion, the two aspects are intimately related and have a deep influence on how historians write histories (whether national or not). But they are very different matters.

The essays on the nineteenth century concentrate on the construction of historical narratives as an element in the process of nation-building, by individuals (such as Ranke, Cattaneo and Taine) or a generation (Thierry, Lamennais, Guizot, post-Unification Italian historians, turn of the century Germans, such as Delbrück and Meinecke). The contributions on the first half of the twentieth century are more concerned with the direct, unmediated relationship between historians and politics, particularly during the fascist period. Schöttler, in his excellent essay on Marc Bloch and German historiography, documents Bloch's remarkable effort to maintain his methodological criticism and constructive dialogue with the corporation of professional historians, even in Nazi Germany, distinct and separate from what he called, in a most telling phrase, his personal "terror of every scientific nationalism" (1934). Others, such as Morgan (on the Rosselli brothers) and Clark (on Volpe), or Lambert (on Rörig) and Schleier (on Nazism and the historical profession), discuss the impact of the dictatorial regimes on the political use of history. They identify the responses of historians, ranging from outright opposition to adaptation, in terms of change of orientation and themes in their writings; those who adapted displayed varying degrees of enthusiasm, accompanied by professional reservations about the historical crassness of the regimes' propagandists. The last two sections, on the most recent half-century, oscillate between the two poles: Frey discusses what he calls the Gaullist 'reorganisation of history' to remove the stain of Vichy from the French republican tradition; Vivarelli, in a nostalgic vindication of liberal history as the only valid interpretation of the Italian national state, condemns postwar Italian historiography as dogmatically dominated by the opposing communist and Catholic political parties; Fulbrook (in the best essay of the volume) uses the unique potential offered by the political existence of the

two Germanies for a systematic comparison of the contribution and the responses of historians in the two states during the successive phases of the Cold War; Jackson, Berger and Levy concentrate on the problems for historians of the crisis of credibility, particularly among the young generations, of the hitherto unquestioned tradition of the nation-state.

The ambivalence that results from these two different objectives is evident in the uncertainty about the appropriate subjects for study - professional historians? academic historians as part of the broader category of social scientists? or as intellectuals? or popularising historians, journalists, politicians and other propagators of elements of man-in-the-street historical consciousness, memories and myths of the national past? Some of the essays are concerned less with historians than with political ideas and social theory loosely linked to the theme of historians and nationalism (Jones); others with the response to political pressures of academics in the human and social sciences, rather than specifically historians (Thompson), or with Benda's trahison des clercs (Schleier, Gordon); others with right-wing pseudo-historical tracts, in good part written by political hacks or fanatics(Gordon, Frey).

The book tends to contrast the historical writing in France to that in Italy or Germany. Nor is this surprising, given the stress placed on political experiences, particularly in the twentieth century. But, curiously, given the choice of countries, there is no discussion of imperialism and its significance for history writing (apart from a few marginal references). I suspect that a reading of Seeley, Lavisse, Volpe and Delbrück would have rendered the contrast between democracies and authoritarian states less sharp, as all of them were narrating the destiny of great powers. Precisely for that reason, in an ideal volume, comparisons with other historiographical experiences, particularly those of historians of small states that lacked or had long lost an imperialist past, could have been revealing. It is not accidental that both a Dutch historian (J.Huizinga, Im Bann der Geschichte) and a Swiss (W.Kaegi, Historische Meditationen) should have written essays at the darkest moment of the second world war (1942) on the absence of destructive imperialism in the historical consciousness and political traditions of the small nation-state.

What does emerge very clearly from the comparison of history writing in these countries is the notably different role of the state in conditioning the historical profession. There is a danger, as Jürgen Kocke noted recently (History and Theory, 1999), of asymmetrical historical comparison through excess concentration on Germany's presumed Sonderweg. Even so, Iggers, past master on the theme, makes the very telling point that Prussian universities, after Wilhelm von Humboldt's reform, enjoyed considerably more autonomy in research and teaching than French or other Continental universities, but that the mechanisms of selection ensured a far greater degree of conformity among academics after 1848, while the more advanced level of professionalisation excluded the non-academic and amateur historians so visible in France and Britain. In the first half of the twentieth century the contrast between the compliance of academic historians under the fascist and nazi regimes and the boycotting of Vichy by the French academic profession is even more striking. Schleier's account of collaboration with the Nazi regime was written before the 1998 Historikertag, where a session was dedicated to the active involvement of distinguished German historians in the Nazi programme for repopulating the conquered eastern territories.

Berger claims that the historical professions in all three countries were successful in maintaining their institutional autonomy. In a formalistic sense this may be true, at least of those with tenure within the institutions, and certainly compared to Soviet or East German historians. Fulbrook illustrates the point in the different research and career prospects that characterised the two post-Nazi Germanies. But there is a tendency, for many of the authors of this volume, to adopt too direct and literal an understanding of the relationship between history writing and politics. The limits to choice of topics, approaches and methods of historical research and writing, in Kuhn's sense of the paradigm of academic acceptability within the scientific world, would have merited reflection, not least because it would have deepened the understanding of the implicit ties between writing history and politics. There is also a broader issue of social prestige (and material benefit) that is intimately connected to the prevailing political mood, that emerges clearly in Moretti's essay on Italian post-unitarian historians and Lambert's on the career and writings of Fritz Rörig. The public recognition, esteem and influence of historians (and of academics in general) is undoubtedly related to the role attributed to them by the state: it was (and still is) notable in Germany, France and Italy.

(Perhaps the lack of such social status explains what subjectively seems to me the relatively more individualistic approach towards research themes of historians in Britain, at least until the recent disciplining of universities by government.)

A related issue is that of the influence of historians on the mental world of their readers. In the grand age of nation-building, nobody - neither historians nor the political class - had any doubts about the importance of ex cathedra historical texts. Fulbrook stresses the extreme political sensitivity to the impact on public opinion of historical writing on both sides of the Berlin wall, where national identity and nazism were central issues in the cultural cold war. In contrast, the essays by Jackson, Berger and Levy on contemporary trends in France, Germany and Italy over the past ten-fifteen years raise the major issue of the current crisis of credibility of historical narratives of the nation-state. What they have to say is pertinent, perhaps would have gained in depth by discussing more fully not just the production but the consumption of history, the relationship, that is, between historians and their readers.

It is surely of prime importance for academic historians today to reflect on why, in recent decades, they have lost their hegemony as narrators of the national past. The path has been opened, via wholly different approaches, by Rudy Koshar in his research on what were the elements of 'official' histories that attracted and were recalled by their readers in Wilhelmine Germany; by Nicola Gallerano in his analyses of the 'public use of history' in Italy; and, throughout the West, by the increasing attention paid to the intricate and delicate theme of the relationships between subjective memory and history. What they have in common is to place in doubt the importance today of the influence of professional historians on the formation of ideas. Arguably, the writings of most professional historians do not attract the interests of the non-captive (i.e. non-student) reading public. The sort of history that interests the general reader, on the Continent as much as in Britain, would appear to be what probably the majority of academic historians today would regard as old hat - simple narrative political history, particularly of the contemporary period, military campaigns and biographies of Great Men (and Women). Increasingly, professional historians, as a category, have lost out in the public arena to the competition of alternative means of 'providing' interpretations of history - films, TV and (soon) Internet - in societies where the formal acquisition of a national history memory has become remote, whether as part of the educational curriculum or as a component element of political pedagogy.

There can be little doubt that writing national history today is a different cup of tea than it used to be. Few historians have the self-confidence of our prolific predecessors of the last century. The direct pressures of dictatorial regimes are too recent to ignore and have unquestionably created profound and structural problems for their historians related to the dangers of too unmediated a vicinity to the sirens of political control and patronage. Presumably, as professional historians, we have been at least partially inoculated against such dangers. But, at the same time, it would be an illusion to imagine that we are now beyond national myth creating and that, in the brave new world of postmodernist subjectivity and the crisis of identities, historians have become blasé about the implicit political messages that have always formed part of the writing of national histories. In the new nation-states of Europe that have emerged since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and outside Europe, national foundation myths and narratives are actively being constructed and written. In the western world (although not in the United States), the signs of a decline in the ideology of the nation-state can be read in the boom of regional self-identification and the hopes placed in the European Union. Narrative histories, to legitimate both the former and the latter are being written and taught in schools, in the traditional mould of nation-state histories. Writing national history has not lost its role as the hand-maiden of politics.

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