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How German Is It?

Alan Kramer and John Horne understand by *Sonderweg* something quite specific: ‘the Wehler interpretation of German history,’ one refuted by David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley in 1980. Now ‘things have moved on.’ Since they agree with Blackbourn and Eley on all counts, for me to open my discussion with a question about the *Sonderweg* looks like an attempt to tar them with the Wehler brush, part them from his vanquishers, and ‘reduce’ their book to a contribution to a moribund debate.

I understand ‘*Sonderweg*’ differently. To me, it refers to the inner motors pushing modern German history in a direction unhappily different from the ‘West’ (a collectivity coterminous with the Allies in the world wars). Identifying and examining these motors have produced a great variety of *Sonderweg* interpretations, by many distinguished historians, in political, intellectual, and (especially in the syntheses of Ralf Dahrendorf in 1965 and Hans-Ulrich Wehler in 1972) social history, and not a few challenges to each. Having myself done battle with the *Sonderweg*, I believed the stake had been driven into its heart. One of the great merits of *German Atrocities* is that it has forced me, and I suspect others as well, to think again.

Thus the question with which my review opened, ‘Is it too soon to retire the *Sonderweg*?’, was directed first of all against myself. Their book was a vigorous reminder that the ‘German Problem,’ to which all those investigations into Germany’s domestic history that we now label ‘*Sonderweg*’ had sought a solution, was from the outset (and long before the Holocaust became central to our understanding of the German twentieth century) posed by German behaviour in the international arena. Had the European experience between 1914 and 1945 been no more bloody than the years between 1871 and 1914, such questions as whether Germany’s Junkers had been unnaturally preserved in an aspic of high tariffs, or whether its middle class was unpolitical and allergic to conflict, to name only two, would hardly have exercised our attention. Germany’s domestic idiosyncrasies, such as they were, would not have carried the freight of explanation that made their investigation so exigent. The war changed that. And, as Horne and Kramer reveal so convincingly, it was the atrocities that for many gave this catastrophe its meaning and shaped its memory—on both sides. Like Barbara Tuchman, who also perceived that ‘Belgium ... became to many the “supreme issue” of the war’ (*Guns of August*, p. 359), Horne and Kramer endorse the Entente’s explanation when they move beyond the contingent frictions of battle (‘proximate causes’, which my review acknowledged they

discuss) and argue that the ‘nature of the German army’s harsh response to the *franc-tireur* war’ had its roots ‘ultimately in the dominant political culture of the Kaiserreich’ (p. 140). It was the atrocities, and the propaganda they sparked, that began to turn German difference into something that two generations of historians urgently believed needed an explanation. Here is the long-forgotten granddaddy of the *Sonderweg*.

I am surprised that the authors are unhappy with my remarking this.¹ ‘A German Way of War?’, the title of my discussion, is a question they posed (p. 161). I took it to be deliberately provocative, and welcomed the provocation. Far from wishing to reduce their study to a narrow debate over ‘Wehler’s interpretation,’ I imagined that I was drawing attention to an argument that no reader of a journal named *German History*, whatever his speciality, should miss.

Professors Kramer and Horne protest that they reject ‘monocausal explanation’, but I never charged them with it. No academic historian, certainly not Wehler, has ever proposed a monocausal explanation, or ever affirmed that German history was an ‘Autobahn without exit or entry roads leading inexorably to 1914 and 1939.’ These are straw men. As for ‘essentialism’, a neologism invented to criticize others, who has ever consciously flown that flag? Yet Horne and Kramer raise the question of essentialism themselves when they declare, ‘The distinctions that we are making should in no way be understood as essentialist’ (p. 424). The disclaimer ‘Nobody here but us chickens’ naturally provokes an investigator to peer more closely into the henhouse.

Precisely because I found their case so compelling, and its implications for our view of the Kaiserreich so challenging, I wanted to push harder on it, to clear away the ‘underbrush’ that, in my view, argued beyond the evidence, in order to see more clearly what was left. I invite the reader to google H. R. Hopp’s enlistment poster ‘Destroy This Mad Brute.’ Against the background of a ruined cityscape a rabid gorilla, half-naked blond damsel slung over his shoulder, is invading America. Its Wilhelm II moustache, *Pickelhaube* captioned ‘militarism’, and blood-drenched club labelled ‘*Kultur*’ leave no doubt about its identity. Now look at the ‘brutal faces’ (p. 100) of Max Feldbauer’s *francs-tireurs* illustrated on p. 101 of Horne and Kramer, and at the other representations on pp. 97, 99, and 192. Do these support their thesis of Germany’s ‘demonized view of the Belgian people’ (p. 18)?

As for the ‘Appeal to the World of Culture’, I am sorry that I misrepresented them by saying that they had added italics to a text that had none. My own source for the text, which I presumed was authoritative, was a January 1915

¹ Christian Hartmann also took it for granted that Horne and Kramer accepted a *Sonderweg*; i.e. some form of exceptionalism. ‘Schneisen der Verwüstung’, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (14 June 2004), 135, p. 12.

publication by the signatories, which had no italics.² Nevertheless, I still maintain that the sarcasm in the Appeal's reference to Germany's 'so-called militarism' precludes our assuming that its signers were 'associating German culture with militarism' (p. 283). Since the Appeal specifically denied that German soldiers had killed 'a single Belgian citizen' except when 'dictated by the bitter necessity of self-defence' (p. 280), Kramer and Horne's claim that it constitutes a 'justification of the killing of harmless civilians' begs the question; it was precisely the civilians' harmlessness that was in dispute.

That the Appeal so clearly reveals 'the differences in political culture between nations at war' (identified as 'the crucial issue at stake') is even less obvious to me. Perhaps living in a society where 70% of those polled affirmed that Saddam Hussein was personally involved in the 9/11 attacks fully two years after that event has desensitized me to the credulity of German intellectuals, only two months into a much more devastating war, about their government's claims—especially since they had probably read of women, children, and old people firing from every house in Herstal/Liège and pouring boiling oil (later, boiling tar) on German soldiers, a story that originated in neutral Holland and spread via the Belgian and international press (pp. 107, 108). We have no control group against which to test German gullibility. But when London asked Ambassador Sir George Buchanan about the tsarist army's brutal antisemitic policies against Russia's Jews, Buchanan declared the military's calumnies about Jewish spying 'fully proved,' as did Prof. Bernard Pares and the *Times*' correspondent Stanley Washburn—although a commission headed by Kerensky had found them groundless. Mindful of the war effort, Britain's Jewish leaders shrank from public criticism.³

Central to Horne and Kramer's argument about German political culture are the differing valuations France and Germany allegedly ascribed to the *franc-tireur*: 'The spirit of the volunteer—the self-motivated citizen defending nation and Revolution—remained central to the ideologized mythology of the French *levée en masse*' (p. 141),⁴ while the German reaction to the *franc-tireur* 'was rooted in a deep ideological aversion to the politicized citizen ...' (p. 421). As Tuchmann wrote in 1962: 'To the Western mind, the *franc-tireur* is a hero; to the German, he is a heretic who threatens the existence of the state ...' (*Guns of August*, p. 355).

But can one establish whether two cultures (France and Germany) value partisans differently if one only looks at what they say about the partisans of

² *Briefwechsel zwischen den Herren Yves Guyot und Daniel Bellet und Herrn Lujo Brentano. Correspondance entre Messieurs Yves Guyot et Daniel Bellet et Monsieur Lujo Brentano* (Jan. 1915. Der Kulturbund deutscher Gelehrter und Künstler. Ligue de savants et d'artistes allemands pour la défense de la civilisation. Berlin NW 7. Unter den Linden 38).

³ Mark Levene, *War, Jews, and the New Europe: the diplomacy of Lucien Wolf, 1914–1919* (New York, 1992), pp. 45–54.

⁴ Horne and Kramer tend to use *levée en masse* and *franc-tireur* interchangeably, although they were definitely not the same thing.

one of them: France's? The French *of course* idealized the 'self-motivated citizen'—when he was fighting for France. What if he were fighting for the enemy? Napoleon (an example conspicuously missing from the authors' final comparative chapter) 'responded,' says David A. Bell, 'with brutal counter-insurgency tactics which are comparable in many respects to those used by the German forces in Belgium in World War I.'⁵ During the six-year Peninsular War, 'French forces repeatedly resorted to the taking and execution of hostages, to the burning of villages, and to widespread slaughter of inhabitants deemed to have cooperated with partisans.' In Sétif, on 8 May 1945, French forces retaliated against the killing of around 100 French nationals with collective reprisals that took, in some accounts, between forty and sixty thousand Algerian lives. Figures vary, as they do regarding the tens of thousands dead as a result of French bombings of Malagasy villagers between 1945 and 1947, because the relevant French archives for both cases are still closed. Atrocity is a crime of opportunity; and such examples make me less willing than Horne and Kramer to believe that had the situations in the summer of 1914 been reversed, Joffre would have behaved better than Moltke. The 'volunteer' is the civilian warrior on our side; the terrorist or (as General Richard Sanchez might say) jihadist is the barbarian on the enemy side. 'No army,' as our authors rightly remark, 'likes to be preyed on by guerrillas' (p. 421), an insight they do not pursue.

On the other hand, even authoritarian armies may welcome the help of partisans. We have both mentioned Colmar von der Goltz's 1877 book praising Gambetta's insurgency. Did Goltz really recant? Ideology did not prevent him in 1911 from suggesting to the Ottoman war minister that he respond to Italy's invasion of Libya by provoking uprisings in Eritrea. And Goltz thoroughly approved Gen. Mahmud Şevket's instructions to Col. Enver Bey to rally Arab tribesmen in a guerilla resistance to the Italians, leading the latter to complain that Goltz, though no longer in Ottoman employ, 'was personally vetting Enver's operational plans.' *War by Revolution*, to use Donald McKale's apt title, was a tactic Berlin supported throughout the First World War, in the Middle East, Ireland, and Georgia.

I agree with Kramer and Horne that 'if national comparisons are implied, then transnational comparisons must be a part of the methodology.' And like must be compared to like. But I am troubled by their tendency to dismiss comparisons with colonial and civil wars (where they concede that for many armies 'the distinction between soldier and civilian vanishes'), because they were 'different': 'Yet the point for contemporaries was that 1914 was not a civil or colonial war, but a conflict between European states, indeed between those "great world-dominating nations of white race", as Freud called them' (p. 423).

⁵ 'Napoleon and the Culture of War in Revolutionary Europe', paper given to the History Department, UC-Berkeley, 5 March 2003.

That *is* the point if one is trying to explain why the Entente experienced atrocities on the Western Front as more egregious than civilian deaths in other kinds of conflict, and why Germans conceded the argument if not the facts. From the perspective of these contemporaries, for whom the superiority of the (Western) 'white race' was a given, to compare these atrocities with those committed in civil and colonial wars would indeed have been comparing apples and oranges. But surely for historians, especially ones who believe that an army's response to threats posed by armed civilians is a litmus test for its political culture, all civilian victims are 'apples'.

In a book that thematizes so poignantly the violation of the boundary between civilian and combatant, I was surprised that in the final, explicitly comparative, chapter, which casts a wide net to find analogies to German behaviour in summer of 1914, only to dismiss most of them, there is no discussion of the Allied air war in the Second World War. Horne and Kramer do refer to the *German* bombing of Rotterdam, saying that the Allies were reluctant to prosecute it at Nuremburg because of the 'subsequent bombing of German cities by the British. Yet there was nothing like the German execution of over 6000 civilians in a similar period during that earlier invasion.' 'Yet'? The conjunction suggests a moral gradient, between a benign political culture that accepts the loss of thousands upon thousands of civilian lives as military necessity and one that deliberately executes civilians in reprisal for, and deterrance of, (imagined) guerilla actions. If the comparisons in this final chapter are rarely rigorous, the moral distinctions are even less so. To raise the question of Rotterdam without raising Dresden and Hiroshima means to relinquish the task of comparison just when it becomes necessary.

That having been said, I repeat that we are all in John Horne and Alan Kramer's debt for a work of tremendous research, imagination, and moral seriousness. If I find some things to object to, I find even more to admire. When I referred to those whose previous understanding of the war had been coloured by the Christmas soccer game, Jean Renoir's 'Grand Illusion', and the faked documentation of a non-existent 'atrocious' story (in Louis Snyder's *Historic Documents of World War I*), I meant myself. They have changed my understanding of the First World War and the ensuing twenty years, and have unsettled my picture of the Kaiserreich. For that, I am greatly in their debt.

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