

## MEMORIAL

### Gerhard A. Ritter (1929–2015)

GERHARD A. Ritter spent a productive decade (1964–1974) at the University of Münster and another two decades (1974–1994) in Munich, but he remained a Berliner. Born in 1929 in Moabit, he was reared in Dahlem, where he experienced the city's wartime devastation, occupation, and division. Soon after his retirement from his professorship in Munich, Ritter and his wife moved back to Berlin, where he became an active participant in the capital's cultural life and graciously entertained an unending parade of family, former students, and friends from near and far.

Ritter always stressed his modest background: both his grandmothers had worked as domestic servants, and his father owned a small but successful publishing firm with close ties to the labor movement. Like every member of his generation, Ritter's life was shaped by memories of National Socialism and the struggle to create a new, democratic Germany. As a doctoral student at the University of Berlin, he worked with Hans Herzfeld, who encouraged his critical engagement with the German past. Even more important for Ritter's intellectual development was the influence of Hans Rosenberg, who had been forced to emigrate by the Nazis and, in 1949, returned as a visiting professor to Berlin, where he inspired an extraordinary constellation of future scholars (including, in addition to Ritter, Gilbert Zieburg, Gerhard Schulz, Wolfgang Sauer, Otto Büsch, Friedrich Zunkel, and Helga Grebing). Rosenberg's scholarly rigor, political commitment, and methodological range had an enormous impact on Ritter; the two men remained close, both intellectually and personally. Finally, Ritter was influenced by the two years he spent at St Antony's College in Oxford, where he established another important set of personal and intellectual connections with British scholars. Later in his career, Ritter was a visiting professor at the University of California, Berkeley, and at Washington University in St. Louis, but Britain remained for him, unlike for most of his contemporaries, a more powerful presence than America.

Ritter's dissertation on the German labor movement at the end of nineteenth century (published in 1959 as *Die Arbeiterbewegung im Wilhelminischen Reich. Die Sozialdemokratische Partei und die freien Gewerkschaften, 1890–1900*) was one of the first—and still one of the best—examples of what would become the new social history of politics. It was also the initial installment in Ritter's lifelong engagement with the political and social history of German workers, which would produce a number of important books and essays, including Ritter's contribution to the multivolume series, *Geschichte der Arbeiter und der Arbeiterbewegung seit dem Ende des 18. Jahrhunderts*, published by Dietz Verlag. The consistently high quality of this collective enterprise (which has now reached fifteen volumes) is a tribute to Ritter's skills as an editor and to his abiding influence as a scholarly model for others.

Ritter was a true comparativist, always alert to the interplay of similarity and difference that enriches our historical understanding. Comparative analysis, especially a comparison of Germany and Britain, was an important element in Ritter's longtime interest in the development of

parliamentary institutions and political parties. An early expression of this was an extraordinarily imaginative essay on German and British parliamentarism, first published in 1962 and then as a revised version in *Arbeiterbewegung, Parteien und Parlamentarismus. Aufsätze zur deutschen Sozial- und Verfassungsgeschichte des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts* (1976). Comparison also shaped Ritter's approach to another central theme of his scholarship: the origins and evolution of the welfare state. Here, too, he was a pioneer, defining a subject, providing foundational empirical research, and stimulating the work of others. His book, *Der Sozialstaat*, first published in 1989, expanded and revised two years later, and then translated into several languages, remains the best place to begin thinking about these fundamental issues of state formation.

As a Berliner who retained strong ties to the divided city, Ritter was more engaged by the momentous events of 1989 than many of his West German colleagues were. He became actively involved in the commission responsible for the political and scholarly transformation of the Humboldt University, which turned out to be a difficult, demanding, and sometimes painful process. Ritter was characteristically inspired by the process of German unification to pose some important new historical questions, which he examined in *Der Preis der deutschen Einheit* (2007; English translation, 2011) and in his last monograph, *Hans-Dietrich Genscher, das Auswärtige Amt und die deutsche Vereinigung* (2013).

In addition to his many works of scholarship and synthesis, Ritter was active as an editor, reviewer, and academic organizer. His source collections on social history, historical statistics, and voting behavior enriched the scholarly discourse and encouraged further research. He served on the editorial boards of several major journals and was actively involved in a number of important research projects on parliaments and parties, the German inflation, as well as the labor movement.

Prominent among Ritter's virtues was what the Romans would have recognized as *pietas*, a sense of duty and devotion to family and community, and particularly to one's ancestors. He wrote with great respect and affection about his teachers, especially Herzfeld and Rosenberg. Another expression of his filial piety was the time and effort he devoted to the collection of letters that he published in 2006: *Friedrich Meinecke. Akademischer Lehrer und emigrierte Schüler. Briefe und Aufzeichnungen, 1910–1977* (English translation, 2010), which documents three generations of German academics whose lives were shadowed by war, political repression, and exile. Ritter's final scholarly essay, in which he reflects on his relationship with German refugee historians in the United States, Britain, and Israel, appeared in 2015 in *The Second Generation: Émigrés from Nazi Germany as Historians*, edited by Andreas Daum, Hartmut Lehmann, and James Sheehan.

Ritter was an extraordinarily successful teacher, a tireless editor and organizer of scholarly projects, and, perhaps most of all, a model of scholarly energy and engagement. There is a preliminary and necessarily incomplete record of Ritter's accomplishments in the Festschrift in honor of his sixty-fifth birthday, edited by Jürgen Kocka, Hans-Jürgen Puhle, and Klaus Tenfelde, *Von der Arbeiterbewegung zum modernen Sozialstaat* (1994). In the course of his long and productive career, Ritter received many honors, including the *Preis des Historischen Kollegs*, honorary degrees from the University of Bielefeld and the Humboldt University, membership in the Bavarian Academy of Sciences, as well as the *Bundesverdienstkreuz*. From 1976 to 1980, he was president of the Association of German Historians.

Although Ritter was never identified with a particular school or a single historiographical method, few historians in the postwar period had greater influence on the discipline. The source of this influence is, I think, what William James once called "temperament," by which he meant the complex blend of moral, psychological, and intellectual qualities that form our relationship to the world. Temperamentally, Gerhard Ritter was remarkably generous, open to new ideas, curious about every aspect of the past, and engaged with events of the present. He could be

critical of other scholars, including—perhaps especially—those he most admired, but he had the gift of criticizing without giving offense. This made him a wonderful mentor and a valuable friend.

Gerhard Ritter's wife Gisela died in 2013. Despite the usual infirmities of age, he remained active until the very last months of his life. He died on June 20, 2015, mourned by his two sons and their families, as well as by scores of friends and admirers from around the world.

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