

## MEMORIAL

### Ernst Nolte (1923–2016)

ONCE considered the “Nestor of research on fascism,” Ernst Nolte was later labeled—following the infamous *Historikerstreit* of 1986—a “contemptuous figure of German contemporary history” by none other than Marcel Reich-Ranicki.<sup>1</sup> The disparity between these assessments throws a dim light on one of the most controversial German scholars active after World War II—a historian whose idea of a *causal nexus* between Soviet Communism and National Socialism cast a shadow on his more than sixty years of academic research and publishing.<sup>2</sup>

Ernst Nolte was born in 1923 in the small town of Witten in the Ruhr region of Germany. Three striking developments in his youth shaped his early years.<sup>3</sup> The first was his family: as the son of staunch Center Party voters, Nolte was a skeptical observer of the political changes of the 1930s. That his father chose to become a member of the NSDAP in 1937 in order to save the family from political isolation (as Nolte later claimed) disturbed the young man greatly. He stressed the fact that ambivalent behavior like that of his father evoked in him a resolute will to challenge political attitudes and actions. The second influential factor was his contact with the extreme political ideologies of the interwar period. Nolte initially experienced the emergence of radical antiparliamentarian movements such as Communism and National Socialism when he was only seven or eight years old. In Hattingen, a small town in a blue-collar area where his father taught at a Catholic primary school, young Nolte observed the dynamic presence of the KPD and NSDAP. This was his first contact with the extreme excesses of modern politics—a powerful encounter that made him feel a mixture of rejection *and* fascination at the same time. The third influential development was Nolte’s affinity for philosophy. Born with a deformation of his left hand

<sup>1</sup>Margit Szöllösi-Janze, *Die Pfeilkreuzerbewegung in Ungarn. Historischer Kontext, Entwicklungen* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1989), 9; Marcel Reich-Ranicki, *Mein Leben* (Munich: DVA, 1999), 545. Szöllösi-Janze was referring to Ernst Nolte, *Der Faschismus in seiner Epoche: Action française, Italienischer Faschismus, Nationalsozialismus* (Munich: Piper, 1963). The *Historikerstreit* was an intellectual and political quarrel that took place in West Germany from 1986 to 1988. Historians, philosophers, publishers, politicians, and journalists intensely discussed three decisive issues: German national identity after 1945, the significance of Nazi crimes for German history, and the struggle between leftwing liberalism and liberal conservatism for political and cultural hegemony in the Federal Republic. After Nolte had claimed a “causal nexus” between Bolshevik and Nazi mass murder (in an FAZ article from June 1986; see note 2), sociologist Jürgen Habermas publicly attacked Nolte and other “revisionist” historians, arguing that conservative historiography threatened the democratic values of West Germany. For an overview of the controversy, see Gerrit Dworok, *Historikerstreit und Nationswerdung* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2015).

<sup>2</sup>Ernst Nolte, “Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will. Eine Rede, die geschrieben, aber nicht gehalten werden konnte,” *FAZ*, June 6, 1986; Ernst Nolte, *Der europäische Bürgerkrieg. Nationalsozialismus und Bolschewismus* (Munich: Herbig, 1987).

<sup>3</sup>On Nolte’s youth, see Gerrit Dworok, “Gespräch mit einem Grenzgänger. Ernst Nolte im MUT-Interview,” *MUT. Forum für Kultur, Politik und Geschichte* 578 (May 2016): 16–37.

and thus unable to serve in the Wehrmacht, Nolte soon became involved in the dominant intellectual issues of his time. He studied philosophy, German philology, and classics in Münster, Berlin, and Freiburg. Like many other students—Hannah Arendt, for instance—Nolte became an ardent worshipper of Martin Heidegger, whose philosophical phenomenology shaped Nolte's own "historical thinking" to a massive extent.

It was this approach—a combination of philosophy and historiography—that made Nolte a truly lateral thinker (*Querdenken*).<sup>4</sup> His much acclaimed survey on *The Three Faces of Fascism* (1963) offered a comparative analysis of French proto-fascism, Italian fascism, and German National Socialism.<sup>5</sup> It was a remarkable work, since its author managed, on the one hand, to describe the historical nature of fascism with an eye to the utterances and actions of leading fascists. On the other hand, he interpreted the phenomenon philosophically as a radical countermovement to globalization—or, as Nolte called it: "praktische Transzendenz."<sup>6</sup> Nolte's definition of fascism—as "anti-Marxism which seeks to destroy the enemy by the evolvment of a radically opposed and yet related ideology and by the use of almost identical and yet typically modified methods, always, however, within the unyielding framework of national self-assertion and autonomy"—became widespread, and its author was praised by West Germany's New Left for establishing the term *fascism* in the scholarly discourse on totalitarian dictatorship.<sup>7</sup>

Already within this definition and within the particular approach of historical phenomenology itself was Nolte's signature idea of a "European civil war of ideologies," a theoretical construct he developed in the following decades. Nolte increasingly stressed an interdependency between Bolshevism and National Socialism, labeled both ideologies as countermovements to Western globalization, and, in 1986, finally aroused harsh criticism by publicly posing the following provocative questions: "Was the Gulag not prior to [ursprünglicher als] Auschwitz? Was not the "class murder" [Klassenmord] of the Bolshviks the logical and practical Prius of the "race murder [Rassenmord]" of the National Socialists?"<sup>8</sup> Mainly because of such hypotheses, which were subsequently and peremptorily attacked by Jürgen Habermas, Hans-Ulrich Wehler, Richard J. Evans, and many others, Nolte became one of the most vilified opponents of German leftwing liberalism and a highly controversial historian. Since he did not deviate from his positions in the aftermath of the *Historikerstreit*, but even further developed his concept of a "civil war of ideologies," as well as his criticism of the allegedly German "politics of history" (*Geschichtspolitik*), Nolte soon became, in the words of Martin Broszat, an isolated historian and "misfit."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Critics labeled his thoughts in a more unflattering way—especially Jürgen Habermas, who called Nolte's ideas "the bizarre background philosophy of an important eccentric spirit [die skurrile Hintergrundphilosophie eines bedeutend exzentrischen Geistes]." See Jürgen Habermas, "Eine Art Schadensabwicklung," *Die Zeit*, July 11, 1986, reprinted in *Historikerstreit. Die Dokumentation der Kontroverse um die Einzigartigkeit der nationalsozialistischen Judenvernichtung* (Munich: Piper, 1987), 70.

<sup>5</sup>This was published in English translation as *The Three Faces of Fascism* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1965).

<sup>6</sup>Nolte, *Der Faschismus in seiner Epoche*, 544.

<sup>7</sup>Nolte, *The Three Faces of Fascism*, 20–21.

<sup>8</sup>Ernst Nolte, "Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will," in *Historikerstreit*, 45.

<sup>9</sup>Martin Broszat, "Wo sich die Geister scheiden. Die Beschwörung der Geschichte taugt nicht als nationaler Religionsersatz," *Die Zeit*, March 10, 1986, reprinted in *Historikerstreit*, 189. It should be noted that many of Nolte's opponents were not willing to deal with his hypotheses in a strictly scholarly fashion. For an illustrative example of such behavior, see François Furet, "Brief an Ernst Nolte," in

Undaunted, Nolte dedicated himself to another audacious project: a long-term survey of the historical existence of man. Encouraged by Francis Fukuyama's study *The End of History and the Last Man* and with recourse to Martin Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*, Nolte developed several diachronic narrative planes (so-called *Existenzialien*), such as "war," "state," "nation," and "the left." With reference to these structural elements, he told a world history of influential ideas and ideologies from early civilizations to a potential post-historical era.<sup>10</sup> His 1998 work *Historische Existenz: Zwischen Anfang und Ende der Geschichte?*, which offers surprisingly unconventional analyses and interpretations, can be read as a conservative criticism of the reigning teleological narrative of Western civilization.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, it clearly was meant as a counterpart to Fukuyama's controversial hypotheses, approaching the ideology of a universal society as skeptically as the historical phenomenon of Bolshevism.<sup>12</sup> Since the survey broached the contemporary issue of a fundamental conflict between sectionalism and universalism, *Historische Existenz* might be considered a disputatious, but still up-to-date piece of historiography. Yet, the work received little attention (except in Italy), much like other pieces of Nolte's late work, such as *Die dritte radikale Widerstandsbewegung: Der Islamismus* (2009) or *Italienische Schriften* (2011).<sup>13</sup>

There were several reasons for this, not least of which was Nolte's "defeat" in the *Historikerstreit*. Yet, something more essential was at play: his problematic terminology, as well as his particular methods and approach. Ernst Nolte was a radical thinker who tended to grasp scholarly matters by the horns. His refusal to accept any social taboo is the only real key to understanding Nolte's *modus operandi*. For example, he explained that his call for "justice, even for Adolf Hitler," was not intended to minimize the dictator's guilt or to whitewash National Socialism.<sup>14</sup> By using this idiosyncratic terminology, Nolte tried instead to underline the fact that there is no absolute evil (or good) in human history, and that even a person like Hitler had personal motives that determined his actions. With this in mind, Nolte also argued that there had been—besides the majority of innocent victims of the Holocaust—individual Jews like the Bolshevik revolutionary and Politburo member Grigory Zinoviev, as well as certain Zionist organizations, which had acted as protagonists in the civil war of ideologies and could thus not only be regarded as victims.<sup>15</sup>

It is obvious why this kind of argumentation evoked consternation and confusion. Nolte's intellectual radicalism had led him to an almost unavoidable isolation in the profession. As his thoughts and hypotheses became increasingly incompatible with some of the

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Nolte, *Der europäische Bürgerkrieg*, 548. Furet noted that Eric Hobsbawm and Tony Judt had berated him for even daring to cite Nolte.

<sup>10</sup>Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992); Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer Verlag, 1967; orig. 1927).

<sup>11</sup>Ernst Nolte, *Historische Existenz: Zwischen Anfang und Ende der Geschichte?* (Reinbek: Lau, 2015; orig. 1998).

<sup>12</sup>Nolte also referred to Fukuyama's survey in a conceptual sketch he wrote about its hypothesis. See Nolte, *Historische Existenz*; also see idem, "Philosophische Geschichtsschreibung heute?," *Historische Zeitschrift* 242 (1986): 265–89.

<sup>13</sup>Ernst Nolte, *Die dritte radikale Widerstandsbewegung: Der Islamismus* (Berlin: Landtverlag, 2009); idem, *Italienische Schriften* (Berlin: Landtverlag, 2011).

<sup>14</sup>For criticism of this and other misleading terms, see Matthias Brodtkorb, *Der kausale Nexus. Eine Einführung in das Denken Ernst Noltes*, in *Singuläres Auschwitz?*, ed. Matthias Brodtkorb (Banzkow: Adebora, 2011), 17–28.

<sup>15</sup>Nolte, *Der europäische Bürgerkrieg*, 30.

fundamental cornerstones of postwar memory culture, he was vehemently criticized by scholars, politicians, and the media. It should nevertheless be recalled that Ernst Nolte appears to be one of the first historians who stated that Auschwitz was unique (this was in 1963).<sup>16</sup> He was also against any kind of “clean sweep” of the past, instead condemning totalitarian mass murder and advocating freedom of speech. Historical justice was all about “deliberation” (*Erwägung*), as he put it in 2015.<sup>17</sup> Following this advice, one should rightly criticize the controversial parts of Nolte’s work but also take into consideration the more positive aspects and contributions of his historical phenomenology.

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<sup>16</sup>Nolte, *Der Faschismus in seiner Epoche*, 482, 511–12.

<sup>17</sup>Dworok, “Gespräch mit einem Grenzgänger,” 30.