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Nolte, Ernst

German Historian; Prof. em. Dr. phil. /ml

Birthday: January 11, 1923, Witten
Classification: Historian, also Historian of Sciences
Nation: Germany

Background

Ernst Hermann *Nolte* was born 11. Jan. 1923 in *Witten/Ruhr*. He comes from a family of Catholic teachers and grew up in *Hattingen/Ruhr*, where his father was headmaster of a *Volksschule* (elementary school).

Education

After graduating from high school in 1941, N. studied German, Greek, and Philosophy at the University of Münster, Berlin, and Freiburg (i.a., under Martin Heidegger). In 1945, he passed an emergency exam. From 1950 to 1952, N. once again visited the University of Freiburg, where he received his ph.D. in 1952 under Eugen Fink with a study about “Selbstentfremdung und Dialektik im Deutschen Idealismus und bei Marx” (Self-Alienation and Dialectic in German Idealism according to Marx). After being recommended by historian Theodor Schieder, N. was habilitated at the University of Cologne in 1964.

Activities

After the war, N. first became a schoolteacher and taught Ancient Languages and German at high schools, from 1945 to 1965 in Paderborn, Brühl, Neuss, and Bad Godesberg. Besides that, he worked intensively on contemporary history, especially on modern ideologies and their representatives in the twentieth century.

In 1963, N. published the study “Der Faschismus in seiner Epoche” (Fascism in its Era), which he also presented as his habilitation thesis. Contrary to the common theory on totalitarianism, which, in view of the parallels of political system and ruling techniques, largely equates fascism and bolshevism, N. emphasized the independent character of the fascist movements. As a pan-European phenomenon, fascism and bolshevism had characterized the era between 1918 and 1945. This uncompromising new interpretation of the entire era brought N. such great reputation that he first received a position as assistant professor for modern history at the University of Cologne in 1964, and a position as professor at the University of Marburg (Lahn) in 1965. In 1967 N. edited a volume containing source material with the title “Theorien über den Faschismus” (Theories about Fascism). Like his 1963 study, this volume was considered an indispensable handbook right into the new left circles. In 1973, N. joined the Freie Universität Berlin, where he taught as a professor of modern history at the Friedrich-Meinecke-Institut of the department of history until he retired in 1991.

In 1974, N.’s book “Deutschland und der Kalte Krieg” (Germany and the Cold War) appeared which, together with his first book and the volume “Marxismus und Industrielle Revolution” (Marxism and the Industrial Revolution, 1983), forms a trilogy of the history of ideologies. This trilogy revolves around the theses that two “ideological postulates of extermination” are opposing each other in the modern bourgeois societies. For N., the “Anti-Marxism” is the decisive motive, or the Russian revolution from 1917

is the most important point of reference, of the Hitler-Fascism and the annihilation of the Jews connected to it. Critics considered this to be a one-sided overrating and accused him of “ordinary German nationalism” (Felix Gilbert).

With his essay “Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will” (Past that doesn’t want to pass), published in the summer of 1986 in the *FAZ* (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, June 6, 1986) N. initiated the so-called “Historikerstreit” (Historian’s Fight). In this text, which originally was written as a lecture for the Frankfurt “Römerberggespräche” (Roman Hill Talks), but which was refused, he assumed a connection between the “red terror” of the revolutionary Russia and the National-Socialist crimes, and he asked: “Was not the ‘Archipelago Gulag’ more at the origin than Auschwitz? Was not the ‘class murder’ of the Bolsheviks logically and actually prior to the ‘race murder’ of the National-Socialist?” To this, the Frankfurt social philosopher Jürgen Habermas answered in the *ZEIT* (July 11, 1986) that, since the political change in 1982, “apologetic tendencies” could be increasingly noticed in modern German historiography when it comes to the discussion about the NS time. Revisionist attempts by neo-conservative Historians of modern History could be noticed to put the NS crimes into perspective by disputing their singularity, which shrank Auschwitz “to the format of a technical innovation”.

During the resulting widespread discussion about the “Einzigartigkeit der nationalsozialistischen Judenvernichtung” (Singularity of the NS extermination of the Jews) – so the second title of a documentation about the “Historikerstreit” – many renowned Historians got involved, most of them opposing to these ideological approaches, which in their view were scholarly abstruse and politically scandalous. N., however, stuck to his thesis that the Archipelago Gulag was “more at the origin” than Auschwitz, and he explained later on, this “metaphoric shortcut” represented a gap in research which he intended to close (cf.: “Die hist.-genet. Version der Totalitarismustheorie”. in: *Zeitschrift f. Politik*, 2/1996, pp. 111-122). In May 1997, the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* (German Research Society) cancelled N.’s participation in a German-Israeli project to publish the letters of the Jewish writer Theodor Herzl.

N.’s book “Der Europäische Bürgerkrieg 1917-1945. Nationalsozialismus und Bolschewismus” (The European Civil War. NS and B, 1987) stirred up the discussion again. The author was accused to display Hitler-Fascism as having been historically right as an anti-Bolshevistic defender of the European civil societies, and to conduct an “relief offensive” (H. A. Winkler). Rudolph Augstein accused the PhD Philosopher, his book defended the German middle classes, the Generals and finally inevitably the mass murderer Adolf Hitler (cf. *SPIEGEL*, 1/1988).

N.’s study on “Geschichtsdenken des 20. Jahrhunderts” (Historical Thinking in the 20th Century), published in 1991, received a lot of attention by critics, too. His attempt to prove “Ratlosigkeit und Unsicherheit” (Helplessness and Uncertainty) of modern historical thinkers from Max Weber to Hans Jonas, was sharply rejected. Also rejected was his thesis, three “abnormal”, “extraordinary” states had existed after 1945: the USSR, the divided Germany and Israel. Two of them (the USSR and Germany) had become normal, whereas Israel had yet to reach normality, if it does not want to become the “only state after Hitler’s heart”. Critics called this book a “failed study” (*ZEIT*, Nov. 8, 1991) being partly filled with “banalities and rubbish” (*SPIEGEL*, 44/1991) and which contained – particularly in the chapter “Der Zweite Weltkrieg und der ambivalente Sieg des ‘jüdischen Messianismus’” (The Second World War and the ambivalent victory of ‘Jewish messianism’) – “indecent, even repulsive pages” (Ernst Schulin in: *FAZ*, Oct. 8, 1991).

In spring 1994, N. caused a stir first by appearing at the SAT.1 talk show “Talk im Turm” (Talk in the Tower) in connection with a discussion about Spielberg’s film “Schindler’s List”, and short time afterwards with interviews that he gave to the Italian Newspaper *Espresso* and the [German weekly] *Woche*. During his TV appearance, N. outlined a scaling of crimes, reaching from hostage shooting in the Fosse Ardeatine [caves in Italy] to the

extermination machinery in Auschwitz. In the Fosse Ardeatine, hostages were shot because partisans had killed German soldiers. The ratio of 1:10, so N., was just about justified by the customs of war. The murder of some 33,000 Jews in Babi Jar as a response to the dynamiting of 300 to 600 German soldiers, he considered, however, to be “disproportionate”, firstly because this is a ratio of 1:100, secondly because the victims were exclusively Jews. The “fundamental difference” between Katyn and Auschwitz, so N., is that the Soviets, who killed 15,000 Polish officers in Katyn, acted as “rationalists” of the World Civil War, whereas “irrationalists” were at work in Auschwitz (cf. *FAZ*, March 29, 1994). Both these statements were criticized as well as those made by N. in connection with the participation of the neo-Fascists in the Italian Government. N. differentiated accurately between “constitutional” and “totalitarian Fascism” and explained that does not consider it to be reprehensible right from the start, if a government “under certain difficult circumstances” rules for a restricted period of time without parliamentary legitimation (cf. *Die Woche*, May 19, 1994).

In an interview with the *SPIEGEL* in 1994, N. stated he could not rule out that the most victims did not die in the gas chambers, but due to epidemics, bad treatment and mass shootings (*SPIEGEL*, 40/1994). Subsequently, several speakers cancelled their participation at a symposium about “Jewish Nietzscheanism since 1888”, where they were supposed to lecture together with N. As a consequence, the organizer of this symposium, the foundation Weimarer Klassik, had to cancel it. Also as a reaction to this *SPIEGEL* interview, the *FAZ* cancelled its 25 year lasting cooperation with N.

After these statements, the critiques from the conservative camp could not be missed either, mainly since N. had called the law against the “Auschwitz lie” a danger for the “academic freedom” (cf. *FR* [*Frankfurter Rundschau*], Aug. 27, 1994). N. was convinced that his case will decide, “whether or not the re-unified Germany is an intellectually free country” (quoted in: *SPIEGEL*, Oct. 4, 1994). In 1996, he responded to the critique that he had developed to a radical right winger, by stating that his position was unchanged, his theories showed “a great deal of continuity and consistency”. Between 1963 and 1996, the “German public”, however, had made a massive shift to the left, so that he, who was seen as a leftist before, now stands at the right.

N.’s controversial letter exchange, published in 1988, with the French liberal historian François Furet, who died in 1997, attracted great attention. N.’s Thesis of the example character of Stalin’s terror for Hitler’s extermination of the Jews and N.’s claim, the National-Socialist anti-Jewish hatred had a “rational core”, were in the center of this letter exchange. Furet, who, like N., tried to explore the relationship between communism and fascism, kept clear distance to N.’s Thesis about the origins of the NS terrors. The Frenchmen warned to reduce the course of events to determined, causal events and accused N. to suffer under a hurt German patriotism.

N.’s book “Historische Existenz. Zwischen Anfang und Ende der Geschichte?” (Historical Existence. Between Beginning and End of History? 1998) contained the continuation of the theses is developed in the 80s. By asking in this book, what constitutes history, he attempted a holistic interpretation of history in a narrative way. In this treatise, he claimed that the mass murder of the Jews was not least a reaction to the activities of the Soviet partisans, and he judges that Hitler had had “serious reasons to view the Jews as an ‘enemy people’ at least since the outbreak of the war, and to take respective measures”. Critics called this book a “testimony of moral decay and scholarly decline” (*SZ* [*Süddeutsche Zeitung*], Feb. 22, 1999) and an “Apology of anti-Semitism” (*NZZ* [*Neue Züricher Zeitung*], Oct. 6, 1998). N. refers to the threat of extermination in the Old Testament, and by emphasizing, that Hitler’s “fight for living space” had as a prerequisite his “remarkable knowledge of the Old Testament” as an example, N. indirectly holds the Jews jointly responsible for the genocide committed against them. On the occasion of the awarding of the Konrad-Adenauer-Preises für Wissenschaft [K-A Award for Science] in June 2000, N. made headlines again. The Deutschland-Stiftung [Germany Foundation], which honors with this

awards “deeds and persons that have contributed to a better future”, granted N. this award together with a prize money of 10,000 Deutschmarks, “for his outstanding historical-philosophical work of life”. After CDU chairwoman Angela Merkel disassociated herself from this award in advance and refused to hold the eulogy, the director of the Munich Institut für Zeitgeschichte [Institute for Contemporary History], Horst Möller, honored the prizewinner, even though colleague historian had advised him not to do it, because they saw this award as a sanctioning of N.’s attempt to excuse the German past. N. used his address to demand a renunciation of a “negative germano-centric interpretation” of the NS past and “collective guilt attributions against Germany” (cf. *ZEIT*, June 8, 2000).

Works

Publications i. a.: “Der Faschismus in seiner Epoche” (63), “Die faschistischen Bewegungen” (66; new edition. 68 under the title. “Die Krise des liberalen Systems und der faschistischen Bewegungen”), “Theorien über den Faschismus” (67; ed.), “Deutschland und der Kalte Krieg” (74), “Marxismus und Industrielle Revolution” (83), “Der Europäische Bürgerkrieg 1917-1945. Nationalsozialismus und Bolschewismus” (87), “Nietzsche und der Nietzscheanismus” (90), “Geschichtsdenken im 20. Jahrhundert. Von Max Weber bis Hans Jonas” (91), “Lehrstück oder Tragödie?” (91), “Heidegger” (92), “Streitpunkte. Heutige und künftige Kontroversen um den Nationalsozialismus” (93), “Die Deutschen und ihre Vergangenheiten. Erinnerung und Vergessen von der Reichsgründung Bismarcks bis heute” (95), “Feindliche Nähe. Kommunismus und Faschismus im 20. Jahrhundert. Ein Briefwechsel” (98, together with François Furet), “Historische Existenz. Zwischen Anfang und Ende der Geschichte?” (98), many Journal articles and -essays, many translations in several languages, mainly Italian and Spanish.

Awards

Awards: Award of Bechtle-Verlag für Zeitgeschichtsforschung [Bechtle Publishers for Contemporary History](69), Hanns-Martin-Schleyer-Award (85), Konrad-Adenauer-Award of the Deutschland-Stiftung [Germany Foundation](00).

Memberships

Memberships: Founding member of “Bundes Freiheit der Wissenschaft” [Federation Freedom of Science], PEN Center of West-Germany (73-77), since he left in 1977 member in the German-Swiss PEN; on the Board of Directors of the Berlin Wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft [Scientific Society](since 73); on the Board of Directors of the Institut für Zeitgeschichte [Institute for Contemporary History] (79-88).

Since 1956, N. is married to Theodore-Anneliese, née. Mortier. They have one son and one daughter (Georg Heinrich, born 1959, Dorothee-Elisabeth, born 1963).

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