

From Germany to the USA and Back. In Remembrance of Georg G. Iggers

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I.

DIFFERENT people will remember Georg Gerson Iggers in different ways: as an eminent historian of historical thought and historiography; as a committed liberal who excelled in combining intellectual ambition and original scholarship with a life-long commitment for practical emancipation in different social and political arenas; as an intellectual networker with a global reach; as a decent, reliable, open-minded personality who knew how to make friends and establish durable lines of communication across borders; and as a transatlantic bridge-builder, particularly in the context of German-American intellectual and academic relations. It is this last aspect that the following text is dealing with: Georg Iggers belonged to the second generation of mostly Jewish refugees who had escaped from Nazi Germany in the 1930s, entered academic careers in the USA, and reestablished close relations with their country of origin after the war.¹ Georg Iggers' attitudes, thought and work have been decisively structured by this transatlantic life-course, first as a victim, later as an influential actor. Refugees and émigrés as historians – Georg Iggers personifies this great topic of twentieth century intellectual, political and academic history in a very memorable and highly specific way.

Researchers have identified 134 historians who, under National Socialist rule, were driven away from positions in universities and research institutions because they were discriminated against or persecuted as Jewish, Marxist or in other ways on the left. The large majority of them (98) made it to the United States, among them names which became famous in later years, like Fritz Epstein, Felix Gilbert, Hajo Holborn, Hans Rosenberg and Hans Rothfels. Ranked by numbers of refugees arriving, Great Britain and Palestine were a distant second and third. Some migrated to Latin America, Turkey, Scandinavia and China. A relatively small number, perhaps half a dozen, escaped to the Soviet Union, at least temporarily.

If one is interested in assessing the influence which this type of exiled scholarship has had on the study and interpretation of history in Germany after 1945, the view has to be broadened in order to include a 'second generation' of refugees and exiles. With respect to the USA, in addition to the newly arriving scholars who had already become historians before they had to leave their country ('first generation') one can identify 107 persons who fled from Germany (and Austria and Bohemia) when they were still children or youngsters. They later were trained

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¹ Georg G. Iggers, "History and Social Action beyond National and Continental Borders", *The Second Generation. Émigrés from Nazi Germany as Historians*, ed. by Andreas W. Daum et al. (New York/Oxford: Berghahn, 2016), 82-96.

and entered their careers as historians in the USA ('second generation'). Among these 87 men and 20 women one finds well-known names like Fritz Stern, George L. Mosse, Walter Laqueur, Gerda Lerner, Peter Gay, Klemens von Klemperer as well as Georg and Wilma Iggers.² Of course, the older and the younger generation of German-born and German-speaking émigré historians in the USA differed. But both were deeply influenced by the experience of forced emigration and by more or less successful attempts to start a new life in the United States. Members of both generations had an important impact on the development of historical studies in Germany after 1945.³

Only a few of these émigré scholars returned to Germany after 1945, perhaps 15 altogether to the FRG until the mid-1960s, mostly members of the 'first generation'.⁴ This low return rate was less due to a dominantly hostile or uninterested attitude of West German or West Berlin academic institutions, but more often to decisions of the scholars themselves who preferred to continue to work and live in the United States. Some of them resumed positions at West German institutions part-time while maintaining their affiliation in the US. Frequently, visiting professorships at West German institutions were accepted, and there were many other forms of cooperation between former refugee scholars and German colleagues and students, starting in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

II.

It is impossible to quantify and difficult to assess the influence émigré scholars have wielded on the development of historical research, interpretations and teaching in the Federal Republic of Germany over the decades. Certainly, émigré scholars profoundly differed from one another as to experiences, successes and failures, but also with respect to political orientation, thematic *foci* and methodological preferences. The following generalizations on émigré scholars in Western countries, especially in the United States, are tentative and partly based on personal experience.

² A very helpful list in *The Second Generation*, 339-453.

³ Cf. Catherine Epstein, *A Past Renewed. A Catalogue of German-Speaking Refugee Historians in the United States after 1933* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); *An Interrupted Past. German-Speaking Refugee Historians in the United States after 1933*, ed. by Hartmut Lehmann and James J. Sheehan (Washington: German Historical Institute, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Andreas W. Daum, "Refugees from Nazi Germany as Historians: Origins and Migrations, Interests and Identities", *The Second Generation*, 1-54; *Deutsche Historiker im Exil (1933-1945). Ausgewählte Studien*, ed. by Mario Kessler (Berlin: Metropol, 2005); Gabriela Ann Eakin-Kimme, *Geschichte im Exil: deutschsprachige Historiker nach 1933* (München: M-Press, 2005). In general: *Forced Migration and Scientific Change. Émigré German speaking Scientists and Scholars after 1933*, ed. by Mitchell G. Ash and Alfons Söllner (Washington, D.C.: German Historical Institute; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Also see Ragnar Björk, "Re-Embedding the Historian: German-Language Refugee Scholars in Scandinavia, 1933-1945", *Reflections on Exile Historiography*, ed. by Anton de Baets and Stefan Berger, *Storia della Storiografia. History of Historiography*, 69 (2016): 49-64; *Out of the Third Reich. Refugee Historians in Post-War Britain*, ed. by Peter Alter (London: I. B. Tauris, 1998); Shulamit Volkov, "German Émigré Historians in Israel", *The Second Generation*, 261-270. Also see Klemens von Klemperer, "It hardly needs Emphasis that my own Generation, the Second, is deeply indebted to the First", *The Second Generation*, 55-58.

⁴ In contrast, most of the German historians who had escaped to the Soviet Union returned to Germany, mostly to the GDR, when Soviet authorities allowed them to do so, usually not before the death of Stalin. Cf. Mario Kessler, *Exilerfahrung in Wissenschaft und Politik. Remigrierte Historiker in der frühen DDR* (Köln: Böhlau, 2001), 317 ff.

(1) The influence of émigré historians was rather limited in the first one and a half post-war decades, but it grew in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Then, a younger generation of historians gained ground in West Germany and West Berlin who aimed at a critical revision of the received, frequently conservative national-historical views and approaches. In that they sought and found support by some émigré scholars looking on German history from abroad.

(2) The rise of social history was part of this basic and controversial reorientation of the discipline, in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Social historians advocated a more critical view of the German past, they experimented with new analytical approaches, they favored 'history of society' as an alternative way of looking at general history, and they frequently pleaded in favor of an 'histoire engagée', which would accept and emphasize its public responsibilities. Social historians advocated and practiced cooperation with practitioners of the neighboring social sciences who were open to historical approaches. In this respect social historians were supported by colleagues in Western countries, émigré scholars among them. Hans Rosenberg, a student of Friedrich Meinecke who had turned towards social history during his years in New York and Berkeley, became an influential voice and partner of cooperation, especially for younger social historians in the Free University of Berlin and the University of Bielefeld. Historically oriented social scientists played a role, among them Reinhard Bendix, Ernst Fraenkel, Franz Neumann, Albert Hirschman and Karl Deutsch. They provided theories, ideas and approaches frequently in the tradition of Max Weber and, even more important, encouragement and international recognition helping to legitimize basic criticism of dominant traditions in the field and the analytical turn many social historians were aiming at.⁵

(3) Many of these refugees from Nazi Germany who landed in the United States (or in another Western country like Francis Carsten in England) were deeply interested in the causes of fascism, both academically and existentially. They had escaped this totalitarian regime because they had been able to find a new home in a country which, in contrast to Germany, had stayed firm with the principles of liberal democracy. The difference between Central Europe and 'the West' had become an essential part of their biographies and literally saved their lives. On this background several émigré scholars took part in the debate why Germany, in the crisis of the interwar period, had turned fascist and totalitarian while other Western democracies did not. The crises of capitalism could not be a sufficient explanation since the countries which stayed liberal-democratic like the USA, Great Britain or Sweden had experienced capitalist crisis as intensively as Germany, Austria or Italy. Other long-term factors were looked for and found which, besides the non-accepted defeat in World War I, seemed to explain the vulnerability of Germany's democracy and her slipping into fascism, in comparison to 'the West': the relatively late process of nation state building, weaknesses of the German bourgeoisie, the long surviving powers of traditional elites, the heavy weight of bureaucratic statism, strong illiberal traditions in the political culture. Since the 1940s, the comments and writings of émigré scholars like Hajo Holborn, Hans Rosenberg, Ernst Fraenkel, Georg Mosse and Fritz Stern

⁵ Cf. Georg G. Iggers, *New Directions in European Historiography. Revised edition* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1984), chs. III and IV; Gerhard A. Ritter, *The New Social History in the Federal Republic of Germany* (London: German Historical Institute, 1991).

have decisively contributed to the rise of a critical interpretation which conceived modern German history under the viewpoint of its 'divergence from the West', as a 'Sonderweg'.

The critical 'Sonderweg' view of modern German history never became an accepted master narrative, but it gained ground in a generation of German historians and social scientists who, in the third quarter of the twentieth century, tried to understand and explain German fascism and its catastrophic legacy. Since the 1980s, this 'Sonderweg' interpretation of modern German history has been severely criticized and modified, but it has never been fully rejected nor has it disappeared altogether. It has triggered challenging methodological and theoretical debates, far beyond the historical discipline. It testifies to the influence of émigré scholars on German intellectual developments in the second half of the twentieth century.⁶

(4) I have been in touch with several émigré scholars and in close contact with some of them, throughout my career.⁷ Of course, their personalities and scholarship strongly differed. But they resembled one another by combining European, mostly German, traditions with formative experiences in the USA, the country which had saved them, and where most of them had taken new roots. To visitors like me, they appeared to be Europeans and Americans at the same time. When they talked and wrote about German history, they did so from a position in which familiarity and distance balanced each other: it was a combination that is favorable for historical understanding and analysis.⁸ Most of these émigré scholars were Jewish, which in conversations about history with German visitors frequently added a specific dimension of seriousness and commitment, beyond mere professional interest. As Germans (or Austrians or Bohemians) at least by origin, and as Americans in many ways they frequently stood for a relatively cosmopolitan, open, liberal, and democratic, modern culture of scholarship which fascinated younger academic visitors to the USA from Germany in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, where such an academic culture was not yet fully established, but was about to emerge. In contrast to the period after World War I, the German historical profession (in the Federal Republic) has opened itself up to the West after World War II. Contacts with refugee scholars have substantially contributed to this and to the emerging transatlantic connections.

III.

The life and work of Georg Iggers personifies this type of émigré scholarship in a specific way. His early experience of being discriminated in and driven out of his native town, Hamburg, has deeply formed his lifelong commitment to human rights,

⁶ Cf. Jürgen Kocka, "Asymmetrical Historical Comparison: The Case of the German *Sonderweg*", *History and Theory*, 38 (1999): 40-51; Kocka, "Looking Back on the *Sonderweg*", *Central European History*, 51 (2018): 137-142 (with further literature on the topic). Also see: Caroline Dickie, *The Sonderweg: An Example of Identity through Historiography* (Hartford, Conn.: Trinity College, 2007); Marzia Ponso, *Una storia particolare: "Sonderweg" tedesco e identità europea* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2011).

⁷ Cf. Jürgen Kocka, "Influences. A Personal Comment", *The Second Generation*, 318-323.

⁸ For broader contexts cf. Anton De Baets, "Plutarch's Thesis: The Contribution of refugee historians to historical writing (1945-2015)", *Storia della Storiografia. History of Historiography*, 69 (2016): 27-38.

democracy and social equality, which he, together with his wife Wilma, admirable translated into social and political practice.⁹ This started with his intensive participation in the civil rights movement in the American South in the 1950s and 1960s during his period of teaching at historically Black Colleges in Little Rock and New Orleans,¹⁰ but was continued and extended to a large number of anti-discrimination, civil rights and humanitarian engagements throughout his life. With his critical assessment of German traditions of historical thought in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries¹¹ Georg Iggers contributed to the 'Sonderweg' interpretation of German history. It was on this background that Georg and Wilma Iggers became keen observers of current changes in West and East Germany, particularly since the 1960s when the Iggers family started to spend the summer months in Germany, mostly in Göttingen (in close cooperation with the Max-Planck-Institute of History there). Georg Iggers accepted several invitations to German universities, among them to an interdisciplinary research group on the history of the bourgeoisie in nineteenth century Europe at the University of Bielefeld in 1986/87 and as a visiting professor to the University of Darmstadt in 1999 (where he received an honorary doctorate in 2006). Georg Iggers was particularly interested in those academic, cultural and political changes which helped to overcome the highly problematic German 'Sonderweg' tradition and move the country and its culture towards a new, more liberal, more democratic and post-nationalistic state of affairs which, he hoped and soon believed, would emerge. He paid particular attention to *new* trends in German historiography, and became a strong supporter of the 'new social history'. For instance, he closely observed the "Bielefeld School" of social historians, which his comments and writings have helped to make internationally known, particularly in the Anglo-American world.¹²

As an American, as a man of the left, and with his background as a Jewish refugee from National Socialism, he also gained access to the GDR and made contacts with East German historians when this was still difficult for many West Germans, in the 1970s and 1980s. He was critical of the basically dictatorial character of the GDR, but he closely observed, with curiosity and sympathy, non-dogmatic Marxist approaches in the GDR and elsewhere.¹³ Georg G. Iggers was influential in building bridges between East German and West German historians, particularly in the period of unification in the 1990s. Numerous German visitors, both from the West and the East,

⁹ Cf. Georg G. Iggers and Wilma Iggers, *Two Lives in Uncertain Times. Facing the Challenges of the 20th Century as Scholars and Citizens* (New York/Oxford: Berghahn, 2006).

¹⁰ It is worth mentioning that a sizeable number of refugee scholars from Central Europe found employment in "Black Colleges" in the American South and contributed to the education of Afro-Americans and frequently to their quest for equality. Cf. Gabrielle Simon Edgcomb, *From Swastika to Jim Crow: Refugee Scholars at Black Colleges* (Malabar, Fl.: Krieger Publishing Company, 1993).

¹¹ Georg G. Iggers, *The German Conception of History. The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1968). A German translation appeared in 1971 and a thoroughly revised German version in 1997.

¹² See note 5 above. Cf. Lutz Raphael, "Bielefeld School of History", *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 2nd ed., Editor-in-Chief, James D. Wright, (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2015), 26 vols., vol. 2, 2015, 553-558.

¹³ Cf. *Marxist Historiography in Transformation. East German Social History in the 1980s*, ed. by Georg G. Iggers (New York: Berg, 1991). Also see *Marxist Historiographies. A Global Perspective*, ed. by Georg G. Iggers and Q. Edward Wang (New York: Routledge, 2016).

have been to Buffalo, N. Y. They took part in professional discussions at the University of Buffalo (where Georg taught), and they enjoyed the marvelous hospitality of Georg and Wilma Iggers at their home.

Later on Georg has extended his work as a historian of historiography and as a commentator of recent developments in the field on a global scale.¹⁴ The same was true with respect to his attempts to support alternative approaches to history, especially those with an anti-orthodox, anti-dictatorial, emancipatory orientation. In the last years of his life he started to support the integration of Cuban historians into international discourses, a bit along the model he had developed and practiced earlier with respect to East German historians and their integration into international discourses.

But Georg's deep interest in German developments never declined. As a matter of fact, in his later years he became a bit more German again with respect to his personal relations, his consumption of news, his loyalties and – his criticisms. Over the decades it has been a privilege and very encouraging to follow Georg's and Wilma's increasingly positive assessment of the main political and social trends in the Federal Republic of Germany, which, however, never prevented them from voicing unequivocal criticism of undemocratic traditions, elements of racism and illiberal trends, especially in most recent years. On his regular visits to Göttingen, Darmstadt, Leipzig, Berlin and other places Georg maintained a rich network of collegial contacts and personal friendships. We remember him with admiration and love.

¹⁴ Georg G. Iggers, Q. Edward Wang and Supriya Mukherjee, *A Global History of Modern Historiography*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2017).