

## HISTORIANS IN THE POLITICAL ARENA IN GERMANY: AMPLE OPPORTUNITY AND THE AMBIVALENCE OF SOFT KNOWLEDGE

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### Paul Nolte

FREE UNIVERSITY BERLIN

In times of political attacks on the humanities in the United States, their ideas as well as their budgets, American scholars are often in disbelief when they hear about the public appreciation their colleagues receive in Germany. Far from being an expression only of recent trends in political polarization, and perhaps even an attitude of contempt that has become fashionable in certain conservative circles, the differences in the role of the humanities in Germany and the United States are deeply rooted in the political cultures and institutional settings of both countries. While history certainly remains a discipline with broad popular appeal and public legitimation in the U.S., especially when compared with literary or cultural studies or the specialized study of non-Western cultures, American history professors find themselves restricted to their role on campus and in the academic ivory tower to a much greater extent than their counterparts in Germany. The boundaries between academia, on the one hand, and the general public, the media, and the political and policy arenas, on the other hand, are much more rigid in the United States, while they tend to be more open and fluid in Germany. Hence, historians in Germany are provided with a plethora of opportunities, should they wish to embark on that territory, to participate in political communication and consulting in a multitude of ways, from contributing an op-ed piece to a national newspaper to participating in an official parliamentary or governmental advisory board.

What chances, but possibly also risks, does this entail, and how exactly are the bridges between academia, on the one hand, and the public sphere and politics, on the other, constructed for historians in Germany? It may be helpful to share some personal experiences and insights before considering larger, historical, and institutional explanations for this constellation. Therefore, the following reflections are arranged in four sections. First, I would like to give an account of my own ventures into the public and policy arenas over the

1 Revised and expanded version of a paper given at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association in Denver on January 7, 2017, at a panel on "Historians in the Policy Arena: Bringing the Past in Dialog with the Present," which was co-sponsored by the German Historical Institute Washington and the National History Center. The author wishes to thank Dane Kennedy, director of the National History Center, Washington, and Simone Lässig, director of the German Historical Institute, for this invitation.

past fifteen years or so — not for reasons of vanity, but to give those less familiar with the German public sphere an idea of the particular communicative spaces open to historians in that country. I will try not to be overly impressionistic, but make some systematic points concerning the differentiation (or entanglement) of certain types of public-political action. The second section will briefly discuss the context in which such action is embedded in Germany due to certain long-standing historical traditions, as well as more recent developments in the “Berlin Republic” after reunification, be it in German political culture or in the structure and self-understanding of its academicians. The relatively “open spaces,” or weak boundaries, have roots going as far back as the nineteenth century, but have also benefitted from the acute sense of crisis that had gripped Germans around the turn of the millennium. In a third step, I will ask what it actually is that interests politicians in the knowledge of historians, as compared with scholars from other humanities disciplines, and in particular, compared with social scientists. This will shed light both on the general “attractiveness” of historians based on the peculiar kind of knowledge and judgment they can offer and more specific factors that result from Germany’s modern history, and especially the postwar period. Finally, in order not to draw too rosy a picture, I will point out some tensions, conflicts, and ambivalences in the encounter between historians and the political sphere.

## I.

With regard to my own experience and how it might speak to opportunities for historians in the German public arena, I should start by saying that from a biographical as well as historical point of view, I have been born, or at least raised, as a “political animal.” My propensity for occasionally leaving the inner academic circles for public statements was strongly reinforced by the example of my academic mentor, Hans-Ulrich Wehler, one of the leading historians of his generation, pioneer of social history in Germany, and astute public intellectual.<sup>2</sup> Although they had been influenced by Nazi ideology in their Hitler Youth years, after the fall of the Third Reich many in Wehler’s generation (he was born in 1931) felt a public responsibility to advocate for democracy and an open, liberal society. Other historians such as Hans Mommsen, and sociologists such as Jürgen Habermas and Ralf Dahrendorf are equally representative of this conviction.

The generation to which I belong, however, about thirty years younger, overall has not felt an equally strong impulse for public engagement

<sup>2</sup> See my short biography: Paul Nolte, *Hans-Ulrich Wehler: Historiker und Zeitgenosse* (Munich, 2015).

or even political partisanship. Growing up in the aftermath of the 1968 student revolt, a democracy that was both stable and vivid was almost taken for granted, while career paths were becoming lengthy and difficult in a tightening job market, much as they are now in the United States. Engaging in public debate implies taking some risks vis-à-vis the profession and one's colleagues, and therefore a consolidated, tenured position often is (or at least seems, from a subjective point of view) a prerequisite for entering the policy arena. Also, from the demand side of the game, politicians (but the media as well) tend to put a premium on academic honors and reputation, especially in Germany with its long-standing status tradition of a professorial elite. Politicians seek academic authority, and before they can look into content, they rely on positions and titles. Nowhere else am I more formally addressed, sometimes even with a strange attitude of deference, as "Herr Professor Doktor Nolte" than when I am with politicians.

My "career" in the public arena started not on any political party track, but with historically informed opinion pieces in major German newspapers such as the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* or the leading weekly *Die Zeit*. Editors and journalists read them, and I soon received follow-up invitations to write more pieces, or to appear on a radio broadcast. And yes, politicians (and their staff) also read newspapers and listen to public radio. Hence, I started to receive invitations to informal, political consulting circles convened by individual politicians. There was the head of a federal state (*Ministerpräsident*) trying to establish a consulting circle (*Beraterkreis*), and there were others who invited experts to "fireside talks" (*Kamingespräche*) in an informal setting and on an irregular schedule. And here, important transitions begin: although formats like this belong to the democratic political sphere, they are not really "public." Also, there is often a conflict between listening to an expert or someone considered an "independent mind" and the interest in winning them over to your cause. If you disagree too much with a politician's agenda, you may not be invited a second or third time. You will hardly be told explicitly, but I have sensed several times that my analysis frustrated the expectations of those inviting me: too conservative in a leftist environment, too liberal for a conservative audience.

In Germany, the transition from an individual politician's inner circle to an appointment to an official expert or advisory body can be fluid. The politician who has consulted you may, after an election, be

appointed to office and hence be able to extend invitations for a scholar's participation in a more official way. And yet the quite intimate nature of political consulting may not change all that much in this transition. Whereas scholars, especially at an educational institution such as a university (as opposed to a research institute), are used to doing their communicative work in public, as they do when they teach a lecture course, the work of governmental or parliamentary expert committees is mostly done behind closed doors — not in secrecy, but under the Chatham House Rule, or “*unter drei*,” as it is called in the German code of political journalism. This may apply even if the mandate comes from the public and the results produced are for public-political use, such as a report that is later discussed in parliament or appropriated by a federal ministry or government agency.

My experience as a historian in those bodies has been ambivalent, both in terms of offering or “applying” historical knowledge and with regard to consequences and effectiveness. In the “Council for Innovation and Growth” (*Rat für Innovation und Wachstum*, 2006-2008) hosted by Chancellor Angela Merkel for a few years, I was the only academic representative of the humanities and social sciences among many scientists and CEOs of major German companies; some of the latter, in particular, regarded me with suspicion because my agenda was not clear to them. And, indeed, I did not have a clear-cut agenda compared to their barely disguised lobbying interests. In this environment, any attempt to pursue some form of “meta-agenda,” as humanities scholars would naturally be inclined to do, was in vain: no one was interested in questioning the very concepts of “growth” or “innovation,” or of demonstrating their historical contingency.

A few years later, in the expert commission for the first report on gender equality by the German federal government,<sup>3</sup> I was the lone historian among a group consisting mostly of social scientists, political economists, a law professor, and other providers of “hard data,” and therefore seemed in some way responsible for the “grand narrative,” or the historical foundations of more recent trends in education or the labor market. While this turned into a kind of friendly struggle with colleagues, the transition into policy was still difficult to make. Once experts have finished their report and hand the paperwork over to the politicians, they also turn over authority, and lose much of their command over their previous work, which now becomes subject to political spin in the policy arena. Still, the significant interest in issues of

3 Sachverständigenkommission für den Ersten Gleichstellungsbericht der Bundesregierung, 2008-2011.

gender equality in civil society provided more opportunities to speak publicly about our work than the members of the expert commission could possibly seize.

Yet another type of political communication is at play when scholars are invited to join a political delegation for diplomatic purposes, as academic experts or, in a broader sense, as representatives of “culture” (as opposed to business, in particular). When German Federal President Joachim Gauck visited the United States in October 2015, the emphasis was on cultural relations and on strengthening a sense of shared history between Germany and the United States. Therefore, history mattered in quite an immediate sense, as the delegation visited places and documents of the American Revolution in Philadelphia. But the rules were different from those of an academic seminar, even when, as part of the program, a historian and a law professor were scheduled to meet with American academics and discuss their respective constitutional traditions. Five minutes into the event, my colleague and I had to discard our carefully assembled notes because the discussion was taking a different turn, and it became more important to improvise, as President Gauck commanded the situation with his shrewd, but hardly scholarly questions.

While more examples and other formats of interaction between historians and politicians might be added, it is important to note the wide variety of constellations. There is no single scheme of “history entering the public sphere,” or “scholar meeting politics.” Manifold distinctions have to be made between institutional settings, communicative formats, and functional roles in which a historian may appear in the public arena, with or for politicians. There is a difference between more closed or internal communicative spaces, and more public ones. Somewhat paradoxically, entering the public sphere may draw scholars into a world of confidentiality unknown to them before. More important is the distinction between the role of critical public intellectual, on the one hand, a free-roamer in the grey zone of knowledge and opinion, and the “expert” on the other hand, as someone who has unambiguous facts at their immediate command, facts that ideally serve as a basis for policy decisions. Yet historians rarely come up with those facts. And after the cultural and poststructuralist turn, in particular, they often deliberately challenge the myth of the “expert.” Still, historians, at least in Germany, are very much sought after in the public arena, and I shall now turn to some of the reasons for this.

## II.

Historically speaking, the prominent role of historians in Germany's public arena is due to a peculiar combination of continuity from the nineteenth and rupture in the twentieth century. In the nineteenth century German professors in general, whether in medicine or in theology, were close to the state in several respects. Universities, as in the Prussian reform system of the Humboldt brothers, were modernized as state institutions, and they mostly remain public universities to this day. Academics, and historians in particular, committed themselves to the Hegelian idea of the state as the steward of the public interest, apart from and above the partisan interests that, as many Germans believed, increasingly shook and splintered society. Academics were members of the ruling elites, and given the non-centralized, federal structure of German politics as well as the university system, they had relatively easy access to the circles of power in their respective territories. Mostly conservative (and protestant) in their worldview, they styled themselves as nonpartisan, and through the Prusso-German idea of civil servants (*Beamte*), as potentially loyal to any government. For the vast majority of the historical profession, this included loyalty to the National Socialist reshaping of Germany in 1933, be it in reluctant complicity or in outright enthusiasm.

And yet the consequences of the Third Reich fundamentally altered the position of academic elites vis-à-vis the state in the new democracy of the Federal Republic. (The communist transformation of the professoriate in the GDR is an entirely different story.) In many ways the 1950s marked a transitional period, in which classical patterns of academic authority were still pervasive, and biographical continuity was typical. When the eminent Göttingen historian Hermann Heimpel was considered for the Federal Presidency in 1957/58, this demonstrated the overlap of Nazi partisanship, reluctant adaptation to a new democracy, and persistence of protestant nationalism in the German *Bildungsbürgertum*. It was only in the context of the liberalization and protest movements of the 1960s that a younger generation jettisoned the seemingly apolitical attitude and the governmentalist conservatism and nationalism at the same time.

While social scientists, such as the members of the "Frankfurt School" of philosophy and sociology since the 1920s, had previously been more left-leaning, historians now came to join the new professorial positioning as critics of power instead of acting affirmatively, and they increasingly affiliated themselves with the moderate

Left, especially with the Social Democratic Party (SPD). As understanding the Nazi catastrophe and the Holocaust moved to the very center of German national identity, the public function of historians seemed obvious: instead of remaining defenders of government, they would now reinvent themselves as custodians of democracy, and as keepers of memory not for its own, antiquarian sake, but in the light of new and future threats to an open society that was considered fragile and susceptible to authoritarian regression. This role continues to be of special importance today, and is potentially even gaining influence in the era of a new populism and right-wing extremism. The central question for the historian as public councilor in Germany therefore remains: What ought we to do to ensure that it never happens again?

However, there are other factors as well that contribute to the relatively easy access, not just of historians, to the public arena. Leading national media, also in part continuing traditions from the nineteenth century, are relatively open to professors as voices of authority, as op-ed contributors, and may even build part of their reputation on winning them as authors. Overall, the structures of the public sphere in Germany facilitate overlaps and discursive spaces in the triangle of academics, politics, and an educated general audience. Public broadcasting, in the system of *öffentlich-rechtlicher Rundfunk*, retains its cultural dominance, long after the liberalization of German media and telecommunications markets in the 1980s: what is a mere niche market in the United States with radio stations such as NPR enjoys institutional and public hegemony in Germany, with flagships such as *Deutschlandfunk* radio.<sup>4</sup> In the book market (an arena that historically has lacked direct state influence, even in Germany), trade publishing houses such as C.H. Beck in Munich see their mission not only, as American trade publishers would also do, in bridging the gap between academic research and a wider, non-university readership, but in reaching out into the political sphere and policy discourses.

In a very broad sense, civil society in almost all its dimensions, be it education or religious life, is much less independent from the state in Germany than it is in the U.S. This para-governmental structure of German society is in part a century-old legacy, as with the churches, but it has been transformed in the Federal Republic in a very characteristic way that allows scholars to act, in an almost dialectical way, as “loyal critics”: certainly as part of the system, and overall in an affirmative position vis-à-vis the *freiheitlich-demokratische Grundordnung* of

4 I have reflected on the relationship of scholars in the humanities and social sciences with the media in: Paul Nolte, “Medialization and Scholarship: A Historian’s Point of View,” *Sociology of Sciences Yearbook*, vol. 28 (2012): 179–186.

the liberal constitution, and yet as critics of power, and of everything that they regard as a possible deviation from post-Nazi accomplishments. Apart from the media, on the one hand, and direct political engagement (in political parties, in government or parliamentary committees), on the other hand, platforms for public roles of historians (and other humanities and social science scholars) include the churches and religious organizations, and the foundations associated with the major parties (*Politische Stiftungen*) that function as think tanks and transmission belts between the academic and the political spheres.

The most recent historical layer in the transformation of the “German model” was added in the post-reunification era, especially with a certain type of neoliberal reform that, in a very broad sense, has been a salient feature of Germany’s trajectory, especially when compared to the United States. While American neoliberalism is market-driven and has put additional pressure on public systems of education and on public support for the humanities, its German counterpart is driven by the quest for governmental control, featuring the introduction of market-emulating mechanisms of competition under state governance, and increasingly under the governance of the federal (that is, national, rather than state) bureaucracy. The “Excellence Initiative” for German universities begun in 2005 is an important case in point, as is the commitment of the Federal Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF) to assigning new research funding to the humanities, rather than withdrawing funding from them.<sup>5</sup> In those contexts, scholars in the humanities, many historians among them, have become more important to politicians and administrators, and vice versa. It is now not uncommon for a German history professor to make a phone call to an official in a federal ministry about an application for project funding. A new academic-political complex has emerged that builds on the traditions of the complicated German *mélange* of bureaucracy and academic self-governance originally institutionalized in the late 1950s and 1960s.

5 In particular, through the “Käte Hamburger Kollegs für geisteswissenschaftliche Forschung,” a competitively designed funding line of the BMBF that started in 2007 within the larger political initiative “Freiraum für Geisteswissenschaften.” The expansion of the German humanities institutes abroad and its partial centralization in the Max Weber Stiftung (founded in 2002, named after Max Weber in 2012), to which the German Historical Institute in Washington DC belongs, may also be seen as part of this larger trend.

As a part of this post-unification reform thrust, often associated with the so-called “Agenda 2010” reforms implemented by Chancellor Gerhard Schröder in the early 2000s, experts were in especially high demand. The problems that Germany (like other advanced Western societies) confronted seemed to demand scholarly expertise — in this case, not primarily in the field of historical identity and memory, but in economics and social science: demographic change and the challenges of an ageing society, the restructuring of the welfare state,

and the consequences of immigration and a multicultural society. Much of what I discussed as my own experience earlier in this article belongs to this specific context of expertise-based policy-making. In the past five to ten years, however, the mood has changed, and the political system has lost much of its interest in academic experts as consultants. The number of government advisory councils and parliamentary committees has shrunk, and only a few of them, such as the Council for Sustainable Development (Rat für nachhaltige Entwicklung) and, in particular, the German Ethics Council (Deutscher Ethikrat), remain influential. However, the Ethikrat is dominated by scholars from medicine and biology, law and theology, and currently there is no historian among its twenty-six members. The knowledge that historians have to offer is too vague, not “scientific” or “expert” enough, to be considered relevant in those councils’ suggestions for German lawmakers.

### III.

What, then, do historians have to offer, what kind of knowledge or judgment do they (supposedly) command that proves attractive to wider public arenas, to politics more general and perhaps even to policy-making? Actually, there is a marked difference between the “public arena” and “politics,” for the larger, non-academic readership for history books mostly expects some sort of storytelling, a crisp and possibly entertaining narrative, often — to use Friedrich Nietzsche’s term — in an “antiquarian” mode of history.<sup>6</sup> Politicians, and certainly those in a more instrumental sphere of policy-making, by contrast, are hardly interested in the past as such, or even the past as a refuge from the present.

Still, there is a certain expectation, again based on a specific German academic, or *bildungsbürgerlich*, tradition, that historians offer a coherent “grand narrative” of the nation’s history in which a political agenda may be situated — not so much in the sense of specific decision-making, but as a horizon of legitimation for the larger thrust of government action, and in order to situate contemporary politics in a historically meaningful *Weltbild*. The two-volume history of modern Germany by Berlin historian Heinrich August Winkler, *Der lange Weg nach Westen*, published in 2000, has often been referred to by politicians in that way: as historically vindicating reunification against skeptics, both domestic and abroad, and as laying the groundwork for the politics of the new German nation-state in the post-reunification era.<sup>7</sup> For the political communication of history in Germany, relating

6 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben* (Leipzig, 1874).

7 Heinrich August Winkler, *Der lange Weg nach Westen*, 2 vols. (Munich, 1999/2000).

the present to the Nazi past remains fundamentally important, and current challenges in populism, racism, and antisemitism challenge historians to run the “Nazi litmus test.”

Overall, the national framing of history proves enormously resilient in the political arena. While this is only partly due to Germans’ obsession with the burden of their history in the twentieth century, it still nourishes an increasing tension with the post-national methodologies and narratives that have emerged in the historical professions — in Germany, the United States, and elsewhere — in recent years. Because of the legislative and policy implications that pertain to a nationally framed political society, even topics that refer to general issues in modern societies, and one might say, belong to the realm of social history, are easily being subjected to a “national” (not nationalist) interpretation: migration and population change, inequality and poverty, or gender relations.

There is, however, one general function that historians can fulfill, and that sets them advantageously apart from scholars in other disciplines — not with regard to topic or specific subject matter, but rather in terms of representation and rhetoric. Historians — certainly in Germany, but possibly in other countries as well — are sought after as what one might call practical generalists. They offer their knowledge in a not overly specialized way, they are used to arguing in broader contexts and to making multi-causal arguments. And what is very important, they are mostly using understandable, jargon-free language that relates to tangible issues and is immediately accessible to those outside of their professional community. While German historians are often said to be more academic, scientific, and “Teutonic” in their writing styles and not quite as elegant or forceful in their narrative prose as their British and American colleagues, their publications are still much more accessible, on average, than those of a typical sociologist or economist. All of this sets history apart not only from the sciences, but also from the social sciences, which have suffered a remarkable loss of public and political authority since their heyday in the 1970s.

This mode of practical and accessible generalism also distinguishes history — overall, of course not in every single case — from other disciplines in the humanities, such as philosophy and literary studies, with their more hermetic (while perhaps more theoretically profound) styles of thought and writing. Since more advanced trends in the historical profession — under the influence of the cultural turn, or

postcolonial theory — have moved in that direction over the past decades, there may be a danger that historians lose their authority in the public arena because they are losing their immediate understandability. In other words, politicians and the media may prefer more conventional, traditional, if not necessarily politically conservative, modes of history writing, which could pose a challenge to the profession in the future. But again, it is important to note that in Germany, historians and humanities scholars in general are held in high esteem not just among the political Left, as is the case in the United States, but also by conservative politicians. So far at least, they have not been accused of pursuing an esoteric agenda of political correctness that would alienate them from one half of society, or rather, alienate the representatives of that half from the humanities.

#### IV.

The friendly reception that historians often experience in the public and political arenas is not something just to be basked in, but a double-edged sword. By way of conclusion, I would like to summarize some of the tensions, conflicts, and ambivalences in the communicative space that this paper hints at throughout. Tensions are sometimes produced within the historical profession between those who engage as public intellectuals or in policy advising, and those who prefer to stick with “pure scholarship,” with the tacit suspicion, and sometimes very explicit allegation, that leaving the ivory tower and producing and representing historical knowledge in modes different from the classroom or the academic journal corrupts academic standards. The wider reputation that may be gained from participating in a governmental body or by being invited to speak to a political party convention hence can easily be at odds with the reputation, or social capital, accumulated within the profession.

More important, however, are the tensions that emerge in the transitional space between academia and politics. There may be at least three, although they are closely related to one another: (1) the tension between loyalism and criticism. Scholars in the humanities are usually proud of their intellectual independence and of their critical attitude towards power and privilege. And yet their role in policy advising will be different as soon as they enter the system of politics, with its different rules of the game. To be sure, there is a difference between political engagement on behalf of the party in government or in support of the opposition in terms of the balance of affirmative and critical modes of thought. Still, a critical scholar would want to

be critical not just of power, but of any political stance that appears all too streamlined in her view. (2) The role conflict between “expert” and “public intellectual”: historians, much like sociologists or physicists, are addressed as experts, as holders of a highly specialized, and potentially objective knowledge. And yet they often aim at giving more general meaning to contemporary situations, doing so by expressing their own opinion, as public intellectuals — which by definition includes the transgression of expertise, and exposing oneself as an opinionated citizen.<sup>8</sup> From this arises (3), the tension between hard data and soft knowledge, between expectation and delivery: historians in the policy arena are constantly maneuvering between the expectation of delivering hard facts, hard data, as scientists do, or at least of offering an unambiguous statement: “Now tell me, what was it like?” In a post-factual age, when the very essence of objective knowledge is being contested in the political arena, it may become more difficult for historians to speak persuasively in more complicated modes of knowledge and truth: grounded in the sources, and yet transcending a simple linearity of meaning. Historians will never fall into the trap of the positivist illusion that facts may immediately and conclusively be converted into policy. What historians can offer is of a different nature, as they are delivering soft knowledge, and pride themselves in the production of ambivalence.

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**Paul Nolte** is Professor of Modern and Contemporary History at the Freie Universität Berlin and Richard von Weizsäcker Fellow at St Antony’s College, Oxford, in 2016-17. His recent work has focused on the history of democracy and on German historians in the postwar era, and includes a short biography of *Hans-Ulrich Wehler* (Munich, 2015). A new book on the making of Thomas Nipperdey’s three-volume *German History of the Nineteenth Century* will be published in 2018.

8 See M. Rainer Lepsius, “Kritik als Beruf. Zur Soziologie des Intellektuellen,” *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, vol. 16 (1964): 75-91.