

German Historical Institute London

THE 1984 ANNUAL LECTURE

National Histories and  
National Historians:  
Some German and English  
Views of the Past

*by*

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London 1985  
Published by the German Historical Institute  
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London WC1A 2LP  
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Everyone has a view of the past; but not everyone is a historian. Or, as Antonio Gramsci put it, 'because it can happen that everyone at some time fries a couple of eggs or sews up a tear in his jacket, we don't necessarily say that he is a cook or a tailor'.<sup>1</sup> For most ordinary people their view of the past is a random and fragmentary one, made up of family recollections, war memorials, television programmes, holiday visits to castles and palaces, the associations of objects in the home – a shell case from the First World War, or – especially for the British – a brass tray from India, a wooden African tool brought home by an uncle who had served in the colonies – a whole range of disconnected and often trivial experiences out of which it is very hard to construct any sense of a continuous history. Very many of these fragmentary images are national ones, half-remembered from school or evoked in the rhetoric of politicians; and they are not necessarily the episodes which professional historians would emphasise. The story of King Alfred burning the cakes which every English child knows, or at least used to know, is more likely to be used by the professional historian as a piece of evidence for the nutritional standards of ninth century Wessex than as an example of the moral qualities of an English monarch. Treitschke once wrote: 'He who wishes to reckon the age of a people should not count the years of its history: the profounder question will lead him more surely to his goal – which part of the past is still living as history in the souls of the people?'<sup>2</sup>

A study of these popular attitudes to the past would be a major field of research involving sociological and psychological methods as much as historical, and it is a field that is only beginning to be explored. However, some of these attitudes and inherited beliefs are the result of the writings of professional historians filtered through popular text books. (One of my favourite ones, published in 1907, is called *The History of England mostly in Words of one Syllable*

– a work I would recommend to my colleagues on stylistic if not on scholarly grounds.) Most of the historians who have contributed to widely-held views were writing in the nineteenth century, in an age when historians addressed themselves to a general public and wrote books which were a pleasure rather than a duty to read.

But before we consider some of the great historians who, both in Germany and Britain, were establishing the categories in which we look at our respective national pasts, it is perhaps worth recalling some of the objective differences in those pasts which necessarily make the problems and perspectives of historians in the two countries very unlike each other. British historians have always been able to stress the continuity of British history. Down to our own day several English universities made ‘the continuous study of English history’ since the Roman conquest a central core of their syllabus. This is partly the result of geographical unity which has made the history of Great Britain, at least since 1603, the history of one state, in an island with clearly defined frontiers (the case of Ireland is different). This has meant that the English have never had any doubts about their historical identity; and the history of England has been seen as a continuous narrative which allows of different emphases and different interpretations, but in which the links with the past seem to be unbroken.

But when you study the history of Germany, it is not always clear what geographical area it is that you are considering. In the east are the Slav lands and the interminable plains of Poland and Russia. Many times from the days of the Teutonic Knights to those of Hitler’s armies, the Germans have tried by force to extend their boundaries in the east, and on each occasion the lack of natural frontiers, the boundless nature of the task, have proved too much for them. In the west, the problem of whether the Rhine was *Deutschlands Strom* or *Deutschlands Grenze* took centuries to resolve; and in the south the Italian

policy of the Hohenstaufen emperors, the dynastic ambitions of the Habsburgs, even the Rome-Berlin axis, have repeatedly involved German incursions into Lombardy. You start to study the history of Germany and before you know where you are are studying the history of Poland or Italy.

More important still there has been for the British the comforting sensation that their institutional and legal system has developed continuously through the centuries. This is still potent even today, though it is no longer taken for granted as it was a hundred years ago when Tennyson wrote in one of his smuggest poems (the other stanzas are even more embarrassing to a reader in the 1980s) of

A land of settled government,  
A land of just and old renown  
Where Freedom slowly broadens down  
From precedent to precedent.<sup>3</sup>

There was room for discussion about where the continuity lay – about whether the Normans in 1066 were an occupying army or a civilising and modernising influence and about the rival claims of Charles I and Cromwell to represent the spirit of the British constitution, but none of our leading historians have questioned the fact of continuity. Some of them were prepared to carry it very far. E.A. Freeman, Regius Professor of History at Oxford in the 1880s, believed that ‘something very like the distinction between Whig and Tory can be traced as far back as the eleventh century’.<sup>4</sup> Certainly by the nineteenth century both liberals and conservatives could claim to be the heirs of a gradual and peaceful constitutional development; but radicals too could point to a continuous tradition of protest against tyranny and of defence of popular liberties. There could be different interpretations of English history, but there was little doubt about its almost unbroken continuity.

The result of this was twofold. First, English history could be seen as a kind of continuous dialogue in which

opposites were repeatedly reconciled and even the most painful episodes such as the Civil War and the execution of Charles I could be seen as somehow having turned out for the best. Secondly, this view of English history gave particular importance to the study of *constitutional* history, since it was in the development of the unwritten British constitution that the unity and continuity of English history was to be sought.

German history looked very different. From the period of the Ottonian emperors onwards, there seemed to be a series of catastrophes, of political failures, when a great achievement was snatched from the German people by a cruel fate (like the early death of Henry VI in 1197) or by the ill-will of the French or the Pope or by the treachery of conspirators inside Germany itself. Again and again, from the days of Frederick Barbarossa in the twelfth century to those of Freiherr vom Stein in the nineteenth, or indeed to the armistice of 1918, the German people on the verge of a great achievement seemed to have fallen back into anarchy and confusion – and it was very easy to attribute this to the secular hostility of the French or the jealousy of the English or the ambitions of the Jews or of traitors ever ready to deliver a *Dolchstoß* to the German nation on the eve of triumph. This recurrent pattern of triumph and cataclysm, of failure to achieve political unity or an adequate constitutional development made many German historians look elsewhere in their history for the continuity which their political history so obviously lacked. Inevitably, it seems to me, German historians have been more interested than their British colleagues in looking for some inner quality, the ‘soul of the people’, a *Volksseele*, a German spirit which underlies all the divergencies and fragmentation of German history. ‘This secret something’ (*dieses geheime Etwas*), as Ranke called it, which, in his words, ‘filled the humblest and the most exalted – this spiritual air (*diese geistige Luft*) which we breathe in and out [and] which precedes all

constitutions and quickens and fills all constitutional forms.<sup>5</sup> The emphasis is, that is to say, necessarily on cultural and moral factors rather than on constitutional developments; and in these circumstances it is perhaps not surprising that *Geistesgeschichte* has been for the Germans what constitutional history has been for the English.

But, having mentioned Ranke, let us look at some of the historians who shaped the tradition of historical writing in England and Germany and established beliefs about the nature of history itself which still influence our thinking and our picture of the past. Let us start with two men born within five years of each other, Thomas Babington Macaulay and Leopold von Ranke. They were very different in their careers, preoccupations and methods, but each was the most famous historian of his day in his own country and each was a writer whose style justifies him a place in the history of literature as well as of historiography. The two men met only once, at breakfast in 1843; and it was clearly not a very satisfactory occasion. Ranke apparently did not (or would not) speak English, though in the same year he married an English wife; Macaulay did not speak German, though he read it, and he found Ranke's French, in which language the conversation was conducted, unintelligible. Nevertheless, the two historians respected each other. For Ranke, Macaulay was 'the incomparable man whose works have a European or rather worldwide circulation to a degree unequalled by his contemporaries'.<sup>6</sup> And Macaulay wrote in similar terms of Ranke: 'The original work of Professor Ranke is known and esteemed wherever German literature is studied . . . It is indeed the work of a mind well fitted both for minute researches and for large speculations. It is written also in an admirable spirit, equally remote from levity and bigotry, serious and earnest, yet tolerant and impartial.'<sup>7</sup>

One does not need to stress the differences between them – starting with the fact that Macaulay wrote his universal

history at the age of nine, while Ranke was at work on his at the age of ninety. Each represents a different tradition. Macaulay was not a professional historian in the sense in which we use the word today. He never held a university post and made his reputation as a brilliant essayist. But he was not just an essayist; he was an active politician, a famous orator in the House of Commons, a junior minister and an administrator who played an important role in the government of India. It is indeed perhaps significant that unlike most historians he visited India before he visited Italy. Lord Acton once described Macaulay's essays as 'the key to half the prejudices of our age';<sup>8</sup> and one could say the same of his *History of England* of which the first two volumes appeared in 1848 and the remaining two in 1855, four years before Macaulay's death.

'Every schoolboy knows', to use one of Macaulay's most notorious phrases, that Macaulay was the principal exponent of the 'Whig interpretation of history': and in spite of the attempt by Herbert Butterfield and others to discredit it, the Whig interpretation, taken in its most general sense, is still a very influential view of the past today, although it is in many ways perhaps inappropriate to the England of the 1980s. Progress is taken for granted: 'The history of our country during the last hundred and sixty years', Macaulay writes in the introduction to his *History*, 'is eminently the history of physical, or moral and of intellectual improvement.'<sup>9</sup> For Macaulay the event which contributed most to making this progress possible was the Revolution of 1688, 'of all revolutions the least violent [and] of all revolutions the most beneficent'.<sup>10</sup> Macaulay believed that it had put an end finally to the strife between King and Parliament, established a moderate Protestant church and inaugurated an age of growing toleration. He had no doubt that this was why England had escaped the fate of France in the 1790s and of those countries which in 1848, when he was writing, were shaken by revolution, whereas, as he says

with characteristic self-satisfaction, 'in our island the regular course of government has never been interrupted'.<sup>11</sup> Both Macaulay and Ranke wrote under the shadow of the revolutions of 1789 and 1848 and it colours their whole attitude to the world. But for Macaulay the stability of the British constitution and of British political society would guarantee peaceful change when necessary and so continue to preserve England, while for Ranke stability was a boon only to be obtained by carefully preserving old ways as long as possible and only accepting any innovations with deep reluctance.

This confidence in British progress and Britain's immunity to European infections confirms Macaulay in his insularity. 'The book is written in a completely insular spirit', he wrote, 'and has nothing cosmopolitan about it.'<sup>12</sup> He is not very interested in the details of England's relations with other powers. In reply to a reviewer who complained about this, he said quite frankly: 'I am writing a History of England; and as to grubbing . . . in Saxon and Hessian archives for the purpose of ascertaining the details of the continental negotiations of that time, I should have doubled my labour, already severe enough.'<sup>13</sup>

Macaulay's *History of England* was an immediate success. There had been, as his nephew and biographer Sir George Otto Trevelyan (the father of the historian who, in some ways, was Macaulay's twentieth-century successor – G. M. Trevelyan) revealingly points out, 'no such sale since the days of *Waverley*'.<sup>14</sup> It is easy to see why. The brilliance of the style, the vigour of the narrative, so that one reads on even though one knows what is going to happen, had ensured a wide readership, not just, it would seem, among the middle class, for a public meeting in Manchester passed a vote of thanks to the author 'for having written a history which working men can understand'.<sup>15</sup> But of course it was not only because of its style that Macaulay's History was influential. It reflected and magnified the prejudices of its

readers – the self-confidence, the sense of superiority to foreigners, the belief in the near perfection of British institutions and the feeling that the British were continuing to play a leading role in what Macaulay called ‘a great and eventful drama extending through ages’.<sup>16</sup> And it was, of course, going to be a drama with a happy ending. Macaulay’s assumptions, his belief that there were no political problems which could not be solved, his pride in British achievements, have been acceptable and accepted to our own day. There are certainly echoes of them in the rhetoric of the Second World War, and, for that matter, of the Falklands War; and even if since the day of Winston Churchill’s *History of the English-Speaking Peoples* and the works of the late Sir Arthur Bryant, few historians have regarded it as their main task to glorify the national past, nevertheless many of Macaulay’s attitudes still survive as living elements, to use Treitschke’s phrase, in the soul of the people.

Ranke outlived Macaulay by twenty-seven years, although he was five years older. ‘I have wandered about in the broad landscape of world history’,<sup>17</sup> he once wrote to his brother, and his historical vision makes Macaulay seem provincial. Although in his youth Ranke maintained that ‘history has been given the task of passing judgement on the past for the benefit of the present and the future’, he immediately went on to say that this was not his aim and that, in the most famous of all his phrases, he merely wanted to show the actual past – ‘wie es eigentlich gewesen’.<sup>18</sup> In fact, of course, he did not do this; nor can any historian. What he did leave as a legacy to his successors was, as one would expect from any great original writer whose collected works run to fifty-four substantial volumes, a number of contradictory messages about history and the nature of the past. He was the great master of exact scholarship: ‘Strict narrative of facts, however limited and unattractive, is without doubt the highest law.’<sup>19</sup> He was the

great pioneer of archival research, of history to be written 'aus den Relationen der Augenzeugen und den echtsten unmittelbarsten Urkunden'.<sup>20</sup> But if detailed research was the basis of Ranke's historical writing – and also provided for him a wholly satisfying way of life, as he recognised by choosing as the motto for his coat of arms when he was ennobled in 1865 *Labor ipse Voluptas* – his historical writing goes far beyond the assembly of facts. Ranke is therefore not just the pioneer of scholarly history who has affected the practice of all subsequent historians; he was also a man of deep feelings and wide vision.

Ranke illustrates very well some of the difficulties in forming a continuous coherent picture of the German past out of the political, constitutional and geographical confusion of German history. In what are to me Ranke's greatest works, the *History of the Popes* and the *History of the Reformation in Germany*, he is haunted by the contrast between German political divisions and political failure and the clear existence, in spite of this, of a German nation, a German culture, a German soul. It was the historical task of the nation, as he said on numerous occasions, to build a state which would be worthy of the German genius; and in this task it was, as he said in one of his lectures, the duty of historians 'to embody an otherwise vague national consciousness, to reveal the content of German history and to experience the effective vital spirit of the nation in it'.<sup>21</sup> And when he was appointed official Historiographer to the King of Prussia in 1841 he resolved, as he wrote, to 'dedicate my modest forces to *vaterländische Geschichte* as much as the other duties of my profession permitted'.<sup>22</sup>

Ranke's conception of the German past, however, was not *vaterländisch* in the way that many of his contemporaries and successors interpreted the word. Rather he was aware of the enormous and tragic problems which history (Ranke himself would probably have said God) had posed for the German people. The tension between Emperor and Pope

bedevilled the history of Germany in the Middle Ages, so that the German spirit never found a suitable constitutional embodiment. In the eleventh century, he wrote, 'Germany did not wholly understand her position nor fulfil her mission. Above all, she did not succeed in giving complete reality to the idea of a western empire.'<sup>23</sup> Again the Imperial Diet in the sixteenth century, which at one stage he had seen as giving expression to the unity of the nation, proved a disappointment, so that he wrote: 'Before I proceed further I feel bound to make the confession that the interest with which I have followed the constitution of the Empire began to decline from this point in my researches.'<sup>24</sup>

For Macaulay the central event in British history had been the Glorious Revolution of 1688; and it had in his view provided a framework within which all problems would be happily solved by compromise. For Ranke, on the other hand, the central event in German history had been the Reformation. In one sense it had been a great achievement of the German spirit, but it had also caused a disastrous split in the nation. He certainly believed that the Protestant *Weltanschauung* was, as he put it, 'the German religion'.<sup>25</sup> But he also saw that the Reformation left in Germany 'a division which has never since been healed, which has constantly been kept alive by the same foreign influences that originally caused it'.<sup>26</sup> Once this division had been perpetuated by the Thirty Years' War, then the only hope was to ensure a stable balance between the two confessions: 'The idea of exalting one or the other confession to supreme dominion can never now be entertained. All must now be referred to the question as to how each style, each people, may best be enabled to develop its energies, in obedience to its own religious and political principles. On this depends the future condition of the world.'<sup>27</sup> In Germany this involved the creation of a balance between Prussia and Austria. For Ranke, Prussia had already been a Great Power playing its part in the European state system at least

a century before Germany existed as a national state, and in his *Nine Books of Prussian History* (later expanded to twelve) he found a continuity in Prussian history from the Middle Ages to Frederick the Great, not indeed in geographical terms, but in the interplay of the dynasty with national and religious developments and, above all, with the international situation.

The history of Prussia was an essential part of German history, but it was not the whole of it; and although by the 1870s when he revised and expanded his *Prussian History*, Ranke was prepared to accept that Prussia was now a part of the German Empire, he was always afraid that the specific qualities of Prussia, and especially its conservatism, might be submerged in a liberal united Germany. Prussia and Austria were the two great European powers which somehow embodied the German spirit and it was in his view essential to maintain the balance between them in any political framework for a wider Germany. But the other German states also had something to offer the nation as a whole; and if the future of Germany was ultimately bound to be decided by Prussia as a German great power, the other states also had their contribution to make. 'This is the task of Germany', Ranke wrote, 'that the life of each *Stamm* can develop its special individuality: the community of all will be the true unity of the Germans, springing from their hearts, their inmost and deepest nature.'<sup>28</sup> It is easy to see why Ranke admired King Frederick William IV and why his acceptance of the Bismarckian state was never free from a certain anxiety that too much of the traditional variety of Germany might be lost. By the end of his life, while working on his *Universal History*, he was also contemplating writing the history of the little Thuringian town, Wiehe-an-der-Unstrut, where he was born. The general and the particular, the great and the small, had somehow to be reconciled in any political settlement just as they had to be combined in the writing of history.

For many of the generation after Ranke the Bismarckian Empire seemed to be the culmination of German history, just as for Whig historians Mr Gladstone seemed to be the culmination of the history of England. As Hermann Oncken wrote, looking back in his old age, it was possible 'to see our national history as a single piece as if it had reached its completion, and to understand the deeper contradictions as steps towards a victory in the light of reconciliation' (*Stufen der Überwindung im Lichte der Versöhnung*).<sup>29</sup> Germany could now have the best of several worlds. The Prussian school of historians had no doubt that the course of German history was to be seen as culminating in the triumph of Prussia; and the most eloquent of them, Heinrich von Treitschke – perhaps in his career as an essayist, poet and member of parliament the nearest German equivalent to Macaulay, and certainly like Macaulay in being the key to half the prejudices of his age – left an unforgettable impression on his hearers, and not just on Tirpitz or the younger Moltke who were among them, but also on so inveterate an English liberal as G.P. Gooch, who recalled 'his magnetic personality, his passionate conviction and his incomparable eloquence [which] made him an educative force of the first magnitude'.<sup>30</sup> Treitschke's passion and prejudice, his patchy scholarship, seem to make him the opposite of Ranke, and he symbolises the eclipse of an older and more decorous manner of writing and teaching history. Yet, in the period up to 1914, the so-called Ranke renaissance in Germany showed that Ranke too could be used to support a nationalist and indeed an imperialist message. The doctrine of Ranke which was seized on most eagerly was that contained in his early essay on the Great Powers, but which was implicit throughout all his writings. This maintained that the true actors in history are the great national states – 'spiritual beings, original creations of the human spirit, we might say God's thoughts' (*Gedanken Gottes*).<sup>31</sup>

But while Ranke thought that each state has its place in the European balance of power and would make its own contribution to universal history, the new generation of German historians saw history in terms of international struggle and of social Darwinism (Ranke himself, incidentally, had refused to accept Darwin's theories) so that they believed that nations, and especially of course the German nation, had a particular mission in the world. Just as Ranke had believed that the role of Prussia in the past had been to stand up against universal empires, especially that of Napoleon, so now his successors, or some of them, saw Germany's mission as a challenge to Britain's imperial position in a struggle for world power. Just as British historians in the age of imperialism were suggesting that the continuous development of British history now pointed to Britain's imperial destiny, so German historians felt that they too had a role to play in Germany's *Weltpolitik* comparable to that which the previous generation had played in the achievement of German unity. However, the situation in Britain and Germany at the end of the nineteenth century was very different. The British already had an empire and the main problems were what to do with it and how to keep it. The Germans on the other hand were imperialists without an empire, so that while British historians were using the past to justify their empire and to install into the new generation a pride in their imperial traditions, German historians had to deduce from the nature of the German state itself an imperial mission – a *deutsche Sendung* – which would replace and take over from the mission of the previous generation which had been to win and establish a united Germany.

Britain by the beginning of the twentieth century had in fact at least three empires. There was the empire composed of the lands settled by British people, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, parts of South Africa, for instance. There was a tropical empire, some of it going back more than two

centuries, as in the Caribbean, some of it in the process of being acquired, especially in Africa, in the 1880s and 1890s. And there was India – a unique phenomenon. Because of India, Macaulay himself can be called an imperialist historian since he was concerned about British public indifference to the history of India. The famous passage which starts ‘Every schoolboy knows’ goes on ‘who imprisoned Montezuma, and who strangled Atahualpa. But we doubt whether one in ten, even among English gentlemen of highly cultivated minds, can tell who won the battle of Buxar, who perpetrated the massacre of Patna, whether Sujah Dowlah ruled in Oude or in Travancore, or whether Holkar was a Hindoo or a Mussulman.’<sup>32</sup> His own service in India as a senior administrator responsible for fundamental reforms in the Indian educational system gave him a strong sense of Britain’s task in India and a profound hope that British rule would take its place in the history of British progress and the spread of British ideals. ‘To have found a great people in the lowest depths of slavery and superstition’, he said in a famous speech in the House of Commons, ‘to have so ruled them as to have made them desirous and capable of all the privileges of citizens would indeed be a title to glory all our own. The sceptre may pass from us . . . but there are triumphs which are followed by no reverse. There is an empire exempt from all natural causes of decay. Those triumphs are the triumphs of reason over barbarism: that empire is the imperishable empire of our arts and our morals, our literature and our laws.’<sup>33</sup> India, under the beneficent rule of high-minded administrators like Macaulay and his brother-in-law Sir Charles Trevelyan, would become assimilated into British history, with British institutions, a British educational system and so on. While Macaulay respected some of the monuments of the Indian past – ‘the beauty and magnificence of the buildings created by the sovereigns of Hindostan’, he wrote, ‘amazed even travellers who had seen St Peter’s’–<sup>34</sup>

this only made the British achievement all the greater. He had no doubt that the future of India lay with Britain (a view which he shared with Karl Marx). One can, I think, see in Macaulay the origins of a British liberal attitude to empire which continued to influence British thinking and politics right down to the 1950s. Britain's mission was to bring to backward peoples the advantages of a liberal constitutional regime and to lead them very gradually, almost imperceptibly indeed, to independence under a political system to be modelled as closely as possible on that of Britain.

By the end of the century some British historians were no longer satisfied to proclaim the superiority of British institutions but were also asserting the superiority of the British race and its innate right to rule. The past must influence the present; and the study of heroic deeds in the age of Queen Elizabeth ('good Queen Bess', as she had become in English folklore) would inspire young men to emulate the exploits of the great seamen of an earlier age and would remind people of the need for preserving and increasing Britain's naval strength. 'I tell you that when you study English history', J.R. Seeley, appointed to the Regius Chair of History at Cambridge in 1869, wrote 'you study not the past of England only but her future.'<sup>35</sup> The future lay in building on what had been won by earlier generations and in preserving British naval supremacy, which, Seeley thought, in a grandiose simile, had made Britain 'a world Venice . . . the sea is in the broad, the narrow streets, ebbing and flowing'.<sup>36</sup> Seeley distinguished clearly between Britain's different empires: the one he was interested in was primarily that made up of the British-populated countries which might be joined in a great new federal state and then be strong enough to survive in an international struggle of all against all. In that struggle, India might well be a liability: 'It may be fairly questioned whether the possession of India does or ever can increase our power and our

economy, while there is no doubt that it greatly increases our dangers and responsibilities.<sup>37</sup> For Seeley, an admirer of Germany who had written a biography of Stein, the State was the all-important sector in history. 'History', he wrote in the introduction to his most influential book, *The Expansion of England*, published in 1888, 'is not concerned with individuals except in their capacity as members of a state.'<sup>38</sup>

The British historians in the age of imperialism had an advantage over the Germans in that they had several centuries of overseas expansion on which to base their lessons for the present. The Germans, on the other hand, had missed out on the great age of colonial ventures in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They were already, as it has been claimed they were later, *die verspätete Nation*. As Ranke himself wrote, perhaps not without a touch of envy: 'Whilst other nations were busied in the conquest of distant lands, Germany, which had little share in those enterprises, undertook the mighty task' of making the Reformation.<sup>39</sup> The English historians were fortunate, since they could maintain that the Reformation and the establishment of British naval superiority were closely linked. For James Anthony Froude (appointed late in life to the Regius Chair of History at Oxford in 1892, after a controversial earlier career) 'the Reformation was the hinge on which all modern history turned'.<sup>40</sup> The great date in English history was 1588, which was for him, as Professor Burrow has pointed out, what 1688 was for Macaulay. The defeat of the Spanish Armada in that year had put an end to Philip II's challenge to the Protestant religion in England and laid the foundations for Britain's overseas expansion.

Froude, like Seeley, his younger contemporary, was primarily interested in the British-populated colonies: for Britain's other empire firm rule was what was needed. At the time of the suppression of the Indian Mutiny in 1857 he wrote: 'India has been spared the invasion of constitutional-

ism . . . In great extremities the eloquent tongues fall silent. The heart of the nation is in its armies.<sup>41</sup> The white colonies were different: 'One free people cannot govern another free people', Froude wrote,<sup>42</sup> and only by converting the Empire into a Commonwealth (for which he proposed the name Oceana, from the utopia of the seventeenth century writer James Harrington) could Britain face the future. The British Empire, while being the expression of the power of the British state for some, was also the expression of constitutional progress. Whether liberal or conservative, the imperialist historians were heirs of Macaulay. A popular textbook of the 1880s in which one can see the ideas of differing historians filtering down to the elementary schools, expressed the prevailing feeling that everything was for the best: 'We have seen England and Great Britain growing larger and larger, stronger and stronger, more and more free, more and more intelligent, until our Empire has risen to be the greatest, most powerful and most respected on the face of the globe.'<sup>43</sup> One can understand why the Germans felt envious and frustrated and why this envy and frustration found expression in some German historians by the end of the century.

If echoes of Macaulay can still be found in the work of many British historians, the shade of Ranke also continued to haunt German historians as they tried to make sense of German history in the turmoil of the twentieth century. In some ways this is surprising: Friedrich Meinecke once compared Ranke's 'style of historical thinking imbued with the halcyon calm of the Restoration', with that of Burckhardt, 'stamped with the foreboding of approaching catastrophe'.<sup>44</sup> And we might feel that Burckhardt was a better model for the twentieth century than Ranke. Yet what Ranke had taught above all was the need for a state to use its foreign policy to ensure its internal development and to carry out its mission to work for a world balance of power. Max Lenz, for example, quoted with approval a

remark of Ranke's that 'the measure of independence is what gives a state its place in the world; it also imposes the necessity to subordinate all internal circumstances to the goal of self-assertion'.<sup>45</sup> While a few German historians saw in the consequences of the First World War a demonstration that they had to re-think their conceptions of the state and of state power, many, as Bernd Faulenbach has shown,<sup>46</sup> saw in Germany's defeat only a sign that, as in the past, Germany had been defeated from without and betrayed from within and that the power of the German state must be reasserted in order to ensure Germany's future. And in their search for a purpose in history, there were a few historians for whom the Third Reich when it came seemed to give meaning to the course of German history even more strongly than the Bismarckian Reich had done. A tragic dialectical view of history in which contradictions and disasters have to be transcended in spite of conflicts and defeats can lead to mistaken judgements as much as the optimistic British view of history as the story of continuous progress.

I have been arguing that both in Britain and Germany the great historians of the nineteenth century established attitudes to the national past which not only influenced their successors but also filtered through into the popular consciousness. After all the upheavals of the twentieth century is there anything left of these ways of thinking, and in what sense can or should we be thinking in terms of national history at all? While the underlying sense of continuity in British history has meant that British historians, whether Whig or Tory, have at least until recently never been in doubt that there was in some sense a British identity, German historians have repeatedly had to look for and define the nature of a German identity. Whatever their political differences for British historians there was a degree of consensus which made history – at least till our own day

and except in Northern Ireland – less a vehicle for current political controversy than it has been in Germany.

Since 1945, the situation in Germany has been a constant challenge to the historians. First, the break in German history seemed even sharper than ever before. Not only had the frontiers changed once more and Germany been once more divided, but one of the strongest elements of continuity in German history – the Prussian state – had vanished completely. But there was also a moral problem involved in mastering Germany's past. As Golo Mann put it in 1958: 'The Third Reich stands like a wall between the present and all the earlier past.' He believed that the answer lay in giving up the attempt to separate German history from European history: 'To write German history today can only be to write European history with a German emphasis' (*mit deutscher Akzentuierung*).<sup>47</sup> Others expressed themselves even more sharply: 'The history of the German national state is at an end', Karl Jaspers wrote in 1960,<sup>48</sup> forgetting perhaps that an even greater philosopher, Hegel, had said much the same thing on the extinction of the Holy Roman Empire at the beginning of the nineteenth century: 'Germany is no longer a state.'<sup>49</sup> Then there was a widespread belief, as the citizens of the Federal Republic were working to restore their economic life, that the Germans were 'tired of history' – or as a speaker said at the Mannheim Historians' Conference in 1976: 'We are in danger of becoming a people without a history' (*ein geschichtsloses Volk*).<sup>50</sup> A natural reaction, perhaps for a people who had experienced in their own lifetime too much history and wanted to opt out. Although professional historians were reviving an old discussion about the difference between German history and that of other Western countries – was there a *deutscher Sonderweg*? – or, as in France, England and America, looking for kinds of history in which the national framework seemed irrelevant, there is now a new political element in the discussion. Two

German states or two states in one nation mean two German histories: and history has become, as Wilfried von Bredow has recently put it, a *Legitimationsarsenal*.<sup>51</sup> Both the Federal Republic and the DDR claim to be the true heirs of what is best in the German past. It is not just Luther who has been celebrated in both German states. Goethe, Clausewitz, even Augustus the Strong and Frederick the Great have now been reclaimed for East Germany. And in the West the great success of the Staufer exhibition in Stuttgart a few years ago and of the recent Prussian exhibition in Berlin show how much of the German past still lives, as Treitschke would have put it, in the hearts of the people.

What about national history in Britain? Are the British also going through an identity crisis and turning to history to find out who they are? Some German observers have pointed out that although in the Federal Republic there is political stability and a comparatively prosperous economy, there is a widespread feeling of anxiety and uncertainty, whereas in England, as Christian Graf von Krockow puts it, 'the German visitor is amazed to find a self-confidence which cannot be shaken by the loss of world power, the dissolution of empire or economic crises or social conflicts'.<sup>52</sup> One could add to the list of British predicaments and anyway I am not sure that the English are as complacent as Professor von Krockow implies. What is I think true is that the bits and pieces out of which the popular view of the past is constructed have become ever more fragmentary and the version of the past as given in textbooks tends to seem increasingly irrelevant. Thus some historians in Britain today, notably Lord Thomas and Professor Geoffrey Elton, call for historians – I quote from Professor Elton's stimulating and controversial Inaugural Lecture as Regius Professor in Cambridge, delivered in January 1984 – to 'allow the history of England to form the backbone of the awareness of the past which it is our duty to awake and maintain in others as well as in ourselves'.<sup>53</sup> Not

everyone would agree with him that national history should be at the core of our study – and the demand in Scotland or Wales probably would not be for English history anyway. The English still need to know more of the history of other countries than they do, just as I sometimes wonder whether the appalling historical experiences in Germany in this century have not made German historians too agonisingly introspective, too involved in their own professional feuds to look far into the world outside – and it is, if I may be allowed to say so – the great achievement of the German Historical Institute in London under Professor Kluge and Professor Mommsen that it has made historians of both countries aware of many comparative aspects of history which they were in danger of overlooking. Historical interests shift continually and, as Professor Robert Herbert wrote recently: ‘We all look at the past through odd-shaped crystals whose facets reveal only certain things useful to us at the time.’<sup>54</sup> At least we can try to share our views with others and not treat history just as a private kaleidoscope. Professional historians should not try to escape the responsibility of forming the historical awareness of a wider public, and it would be sad if we left it all to the television producers. And if we are to do this we can still learn from Ranke and Macaulay – and for that matter, alas! from Treitschke – that whether we are dealing with national history or *Alltagsgeschichte* or economic history or black history or women’s history or whatever, we must write history that somebody other than our professional competitors might actually want to read.

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