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Wolf Lepenies: The Seduction of Culture in German History

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INTRODUCTION



Bombs over Dresden and the *Rosenkavalier* in the Skies

On February 13, 1945, a young mother, with a baby in her arms, and her sister, holding a small boy by the hand, missed the overcrowded train to Dresden. Instead they had to spend the night in a nearby village. The farm where they found shelter was on elevated ground, and among the images the boy could later recall from his childhood was a stroll in the open on the night that Dresden burned. Quietly but with a definite feeling of triumph, he occasionally spoke of this night—as if there were personal merit in having survived the disaster. When the refugees returned to their quarters, the grownups stayed up for a long time. The boy was put to bed, but the door was left open a crack, letting in light. So he could see above him a lamp with strings of glass beads that softly clinked back and forth. Could any German artillery or flak have remained to shake the ground and make the lamp move? Sleep came swiftly.

The boy could not have known that, at the same time, his father was only two kilometers away—two thousand meters up in the sky above Dresden, to be exact—as one of the few German fighter pilots who had scrambled to attack the Allied bomber fleet. That night, most of the pilots had rushed from flash to flash and had finally had to land without ever making contact with the enemy. German air defenses were having increasing difficulty figuring out the course and destination of the English and American bomber squadrons. Often the fighter pilots had to use incidental clues from the ground to guess where they should fly.

When the boy's father took off with his squadron on the evening of February 13, the men initially flew toward Strasbourg in a waiting pattern, circling there to receive destination orders from the ground. The orders, however, never came. The crew included a pilot, an observer, a

gunner, and a radio man. When the ground spotting station suddenly rebroadcast a radio program with Richard Strauss's waltz sequences from his opera *Der Rosenkavalier*, the educated men on board—two crew members had doctorates—thought they knew where they should fly: Vienna. So they headed toward the city that provides the setting for the *Rosenkavalier*. Yet the longer they flew, the more they doubted that Vienna was really the target of the Allied attack. Then the gunner remembered the city where the opera had had its world premiere on January 26, 1911, and so they turned back toward Dresden to prevent what could no longer be prevented.

All this is hard to believe, but this is the story my father told much later, when he felt able to talk about what he had done and what had happened to him during the war. The music of Richard Strauss remained, in a curious way, a basso continuo to the ongoing work of the destruction of German cities, “an absolutely devastating exterminating attack by very heavy bombers,” as Churchill described it to Lord Beaverbrook. Among the reminiscences the writer W. G. Sebald has assembled about the air raids on Germany is the narrative of a man who listened, as he said, “on the radio to some songs from the sensuous Rococo world of Strauss’s magical music” immediately before the devastating raid on Darmstadt.¹ Shortly after the First World War, Walter Hasenclever had written a poem directed against the bellicose German military, which ended with the refrain “The murderers sit in the *Rosenkavalier*.”

Bombs over Dresden and the *Rosenkavalier* in the skies create a disturbing image that suggests itself to me as a symbol of the close connection that war and culture, education and destruction, politics and poetry, and spirit and violence had entered into in Germany.² When the news that Dresden had been destroyed reached the Nazi leadership, Robert Ley, head of the German Labor Front, reacted as if a heavy burden had been lifted from his shoulders: “We [can] almost heave a sigh of relief. It is over. Now we will no longer be distracted by the monuments of German culture!”³ Three years earlier, Goebbels had reacted in a similar manner after a British bomber attack on the city of Rostock. He did not mention human casualties at all, but spoke only of the necessity to answer terror with terror and to flatten English “centers of culture” after German centers had been destroyed by the Royal

Air Force.⁴ It was well known in Nazi Germany that the loss of great works of art hit Hitler much harder than the destruction of large residential districts.⁵ German propagandists allowed this to be known, convinced that Hitler's reaction would be seen as a sign not of his brutal disregard for human suffering but of his artistic sensibility that the war had not been able to destroy.

But not only Hitler and his consorts saw the Allied bomber attacks as above all an attempt to destroy German culture. In May 1942, German-Jewish émigrés in the United States planned a large fund-raising campaign that would enable them to donate a bomber, to be called "Loyalty," to the U.S. Air Force. They tried to enlist Thomas Mann to chair their campaign's West Coast committee. Mann was furious. He would have agreed to collect money for the Red Cross or to buy war bonds, but he found it impossible to support the air raids that were, though by necessity, destroying German cities: "I do not want, after my death, that Germans who read my books—or don't read them—think of myself as chairman of a committee responsible for the destruction of German monuments of culture."⁶ Mann was probably right in anticipating the German mind-set: people knew about the thirty thousand casualties the air raid on Dresden cost, but the city also became a symbol, maybe even more well known, of the destruction of cultural treasures, above all the Frauenkirche now rebuilt.

When Ian Buruma reviewed works by the historian Jörg Friedrich on Germany's suffering during the bombing war, he pointed out that Friedrich's book *Der Brand* ended "with a long lament for the destruction of German books kept in libraries and archives. The lament is justified, but its placement at the end of a 592-page book is curious, as though the loss of books, in the end, is even worse than the loss of people—which, from a particular long-term perspective, may actually be true; but that does not make it morally attractive. . . . The real calamity, as it is presented in Friedrich's book, is the destruction of beautiful old cities, of ancient churches, rococo palaces, baroque town halls, and medieval streets."⁷ Buruma is certainly right in interpreting *Der Brand* (The fire) as an attempt to correct a "collective turning away from German history and culture," but I am not sure that Friedrich's diagnosis is correct. Writers and historians, perhaps, have not paid enough attention to cultural losses. In the collective memory of the Germans, how-

ever, names like Dresden are reminders as much of the loss of monuments of culture as of human life. The attitude of my father, who could not speak of the burning of Dresden without mentioning the *Rosenkavalier*, was, among his generation, more the rule than the exception.

As Norbert Elias wrote in his book *The Germans*, “embedded in the meaning of the German term ‘culture’ was a non-political and perhaps even an anti-political bias symptomatic of the recurrent feeling among the German middle-class elites that politics and the affairs of the state represented the area of their humiliation and lack of freedom, while culture represented the sphere of their freedom and their pride. During the eighteenth and part of the nineteenth centuries, the anti-political bias of the middle-class concept of ‘culture’ was directed against the politics of autocratic princes. . . . At a later stage, this anti-political bias was turned against the parliamentary politics of a democratic state.”⁸ Elias here describes the role of culture in German “domestic policy”; its role in “foreign policy” was characterized, says Elias in *The Civilizing Process*, by the German obsession with distinguishing between civilization and culture: “In German usage, *Zivilisation* means something which is indeed useful, but nevertheless only a value of the second rank, comprising only the outer appearance of human beings, the surface of human existence. The word through which Germans interpret themselves, which more than any other expresses their pride in their own achievement and their own being, is *Kultur*.” Whereas the French as well as the English concept of culture can also refer to politics and to economics, to technology and to sports, to moral and to social facts, “the German concept of *Kultur* refers essentially to intellectual, artistic, and religious facts, and has a tendency to draw a sharp dividing line between facts of this sort, on the one side, and political, economic, and social facts, on the other.”⁹

Ultimately not only the German middle classes but Germany as a whole has distinguished itself by its cultural achievements and aspirations. The domestic appeal of culture, accompanied by a mandarin-like scorn for everyday politics, has been based on the assertion of the deeply apolitical nature of the “German soul”—an assertion that eventually nurtured Germany’s claim, as a *Kulturnation*, to superiority vis-à-vis the merely “civilized” West. This peculiar role of culture in German

domestic as well as foreign policy is the theme of this book. I deal with the “German seduction,” the tendency to see in culture a noble substitute for politics, if not a better politics altogether.

Describing the antipolitical bias in the German notion of “culture,” Elias found it astonishing “to see the persistence with which specific patterns of thinking, acting and feeling recur, with characteristic adaptations to new developments, in one and the same society over many generations. It is almost certain that the meaning of certain key-words and particularly the emotional undertones embedded in them, which are handed on from one generation to another unexamined and often unchanged, plays a part in the flexible continuity of what one otherwise conceptualizes as ‘national character.’”¹⁰ Analyzing the German usage of “culture” as an antipolitical key word, I, however, prefer to speak not of a national character but of a national attitude. A national character resembles a body’s skin, which may be stretched—“flexible continuity”—but which the body cannot get rid of. An attitude, in contrast, is characterized by a certain looseness; it resembles a favorite item of clothing that one can put on and off and that one can change when one’s own mood or fad and fashion require it. “National character” is a serious term, whereas “attitude” has a touch of irony in it—as in the term “Anglo-Saxon attitudes,” whose ironic undertone was apparent when Lewis Carroll coined it in *Through the Looking Glass* in 1871 and became even more visible when Angus Wilson used it as the title of his 1956 novel.¹¹ Irony was a counterweight against the confidence with which the British believed in their own civilization and wanted it to be acknowledged as superior by the rest of the world. The triumphant tone with which the Germans speak of “culture,” which only they possess, while the rest must make do with “civilization,” needs an equally, if not stronger, ironic distance.

This book examines the German attitude of regarding culture as a substitute for politics and of vilifying politics, understood above all as parliamentary politics, as nothing but an arena of narrow-minded, interest-group bargaining and compromise. But this work is not a debate on the *Sonderweg* (special path) in disguise, asserting that the aversion to politics and the idealist and romantic veneration of culture were the main reason why Germany departed from the “normal” Western course of development and steered into the disaster of Nazism. I do not

describe an attitude that is a uniquely German phenomenon. Still, I argue that an overestimation of cultural achievements and a “strange indifference to politics” (G.P. Gooch) nowhere played a greater role than in Germany and have nowhere else survived to the same degree. Seeing culture as a substitute for politics has remained a prevailing attitude throughout German history—from the glorious days of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Weimar through, though now in considerably weaker form, the reunification of the two Germanys after the fall of communism. Peter Gay, Georg Mosse, Fritz Ringer, Fritz Stern, Peter Viereck, and others have explored this specific German attitude toward culture and politics. I am revisiting their arguments and try to offer new insights into an old problem.

In the area of “domestic policy,” I follow a roughly chronological pattern, beginning with the view of culture as a “noble” substitute for politics that originated in the heyday of Weimar classicism. This distance toward parliamentary politics in the name of culture was one reason why the Weimar Republic did not secure the broad-based acceptance and emotional support of its citizens that could have prevented it from falling prey to the Nazis. I regard the aesthetic appeal first of fascism and then of National Socialism not as a superficial phenomenon of the most sinister period in German history, but as an important element in the attempt to explain the attractiveness of Nazi ideology for a large segment of the German bourgeoisie and many German writers, artists, and intellectuals. And even for members of the intelligentsia in exile, the attitude of playing off culture against politics remained. After the Second World War, staying aloof from parliamentary politics on cultural grounds made less and less sense with the integration of the Federal Republic and eventually of a reunited Germany into the mainstream of Western democracies. Still, the tension between old cultural aspirations and new political realities helps to explain developments first in both German states and then, finally, in a country that no longer had to resign itself, as a consequence of a self-inflicted political catastrophe, to remaining solely a cultural nation, but found itself bestowed with the gift of a political reunion.

In the area of “foreign policy,” I have concentrated on two case studies—along with a brief glance at Central Europe, where the various revolutions that did away with communism were hailed, at least for a

while, as a victory of culture over politics. The first case study deals with the “culture wars”—a term, as far as I can tell, invented in France—that have been so important, throughout history, in shaping French-German relations. The second case study addresses the interplay between German cultural legacies and American political traditions. The chapter on European and American cultural patriotism is a coda to the German-American case study, an example of how loudly the debate over the relationship between culture and politics reverberates down to the European-American rift witnessed in the recent past.

My account does not seek to compete with the well-established approaches of political and social history, and I have not tried to tell a continuous narrative in which the different periods of German history are neatly interwoven with one another. I am aware of the limitations of my history-of-ideas approach. The wish to secure Germany’s dominance on the European continent led Bismarck to found the Reich after Prussia’s victory over France in 1871; the transformation of the cultural nation into a cultural state was a welcome consequence, but not the primary intention, of Bismarck’s strategy. The skepticism of Germany’s poet-seers toward parliamentary politics was one factor that led to the demise of the Weimar Republic, but it was not the decisive one, compared with the specter of Versailles, the shock of inflation, huge unemployment, and the revival of nationalist and racist ideologies. The Nazis were brought to power not so much by the aesthetic appeal of their rituals as by their pledge to restore German pride, their promise to limit the power of big corporations and to create jobs, and their appeal to widespread anti-Semitic feelings, among other reasons. After the war, the inner developments in the German Democratic Republic were also characterized by the cultural policy of its elites, but this policy depended on the continuous strategic interest of the Soviet Union in profiting from East Germany as a political and military glacis against the capitalist West. Political apathy and cultural excitement prevailed in postwar West Germany, at least for most intellectual observers, yet the country’s quick political and economic recovery was fueled by pragmatically oriented political leaders, who knew how to run a trade union, organize a party, and administer a pension fund.

In short, intellectual history is an addition, but no alternative, to social and political history. Intellectual history is, to a considerable de-

gree, the history of a small group only, the history of intellectuals. Only intellectuals themselves take the impact of intellectuals on the course of events for granted; the question whether and how their ideas were transmitted to a larger audience and what kind of influence they may eventually have exerted must often remain unanswered. One might see in intellectual history or the history of ideas not much more than an ornament on the building of social and political history that could easily be removed from it. After removing it, though, the building would certainly not collapse but it would not be the same building anymore. Intellectual history is not a superficial but a useful adornment of political and social history, reminding us that human societies are characterized not just by what people do, but also by what people say and think they are doing. History is not only about what is happening, history is also about making sense.

An attitude is an act of interpretation: it is a comment about what is happening or should happen in a society. This book describes an intellectual attitude that can be observed throughout German history: the overrating of culture at the expense of politics, especially in the sense of parliamentary politics. Rather than telling a grand narrative, I will take my reader on a tour and draw her attention to a series of vignettes or “constellations” in which this attitude comes to the fore in different historical circumstances. I hope the tour will take on coherence through the kaleidoscopic recurrence of problems and themes, leitmotifs and authors that play a role in several of these constellations. At some points on this tour I will follow a guide in whose life and letters the “German attitude” toward culture and politics, in different facets and variations, miscues and paradoxes, has found its most eloquent, often painfully honest and always ironic expression: Thomas Mann.

This is a book on the history of ideas. One cannot understand German history by talking solely about German intellectual life, but one can understand German history more fully by taking intellectual life into account.