

Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association Rapport de l'assemblée annuelle de la Société historique du Canada

Report of the Annual Meeting

Farewell to German History? Revisionism Versus Traditionalism

Robert A. Spencer

Volume 34, numéro 1, 1955

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/300375ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/300375ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0317-0594 (imprimé)

1712-9095 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Spencer, R. A. (1955). Farewell to German History? Revisionism Versus Traditionalism. *Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association / Rapport de l'assemblée annuelle de la Société historique du Canada*, 34(1), 51–61. <https://doi.org/10.7202/300375ar>

FAREWELL TO GERMAN HISTORY? REVISIONISM VERSUS TRADITIONALISM

ROBERT A. SPENCER
University of Toronto

AT THE END of the second World War the European political system lay in ruins; and Germany, the latest of the European "world powers" to enter the stage of history, was reduced to what Friedrich Meinecke aptly termed "a burnt-out crater of great power politics".¹ What was destroyed in May, 1945, was not only Hitler's "thousand-year Reich" but Bismarck's more modest creation, which had survived the collapse of 1918. Against this background German historians resumed their activities a decade ago. If, as is often asserted, every generation must rewrite its own history, it was only natural that German historians should ask why this catastrophe had fallen upon Europe and on Germany. But only total defeat — on a scale far beyond that of Jena or Sedan — could provoke widespread questioning of long-held and cherished fundamental beliefs, such as the uniqueness of German traditions in contradistinction to those of the west, the exaltation of the state and of power preached by Hegel and his disciples, and the legacies of Luther, Frederick the Great, and Bismarck.

This questioning had begun after the first World War, but the readiness for a self-examination after November, 1918, ended in determination to defend the old pattern. Instead of explaining the real reasons for the German collapse, most historians added fuel to the nationalist flames by encouraging the stab-in-the-back legend and by attacking the Versailles *Diktat* and the allegation of German war guilt.² As Ludwig Dehio, one of the editors of the *Historische Zeitschrift*, wrote recently, "We puzzled over the defeat in order to prove to ourselves that it need not have happened, not that it had very good reasons for happening. We wanted to prove that it came about because of avoidable errors rather than as the result of exaggeration of our general conceptions."³ Only a few German historians became exponents of the Republic,⁴ or sought to establish some *rapprochement* between Western and German political and historical thinking.⁵ Most rose gallantly to the defence of Bismarck and the Hohenzollerns. Others, less blatantly nationalistic, set out to bring hope and courage to a defeated and humiliated generation through writing of Germany's past revivals, frequently with full objectivity, but often with the national moral clearly indicated in preface or conclusion: a departure from purely scientific history which was almost universally accepted

¹ Friedrich Meinecke, *The German Catastrophe*, (Cambridge, Mass., 1950), p. 111.

² Martin Braun, "Post-War German Historiography", (*Fortnightly*, No. 1055, New Series, November, 1954, 309).

³ "Germany and the Epoch of World Wars", in Hans Kohn, *German History, Some New German Views*, (London, 1954), p. 154.

⁴ E.g. Ziekursch and Schnabel.

⁵ E.g. Meinecke and Troeltsch. Walther Hofer, "Towards a Revision of the German Concept of History", in Kohn, *German History*, p. 204.

in Germany as a national duty.⁶ Scarcely a German historian was able to judge impartially the development of Prussia-Germany since 1866, still less the origins and course of the first World War.⁷ Of the few who stood against the tide, some, after 1933, chose the path of exile. Those who remained were able to pursue their scholarly labours with, perhaps, surprisingly little interference, in part because they avoided dangerous topics, in part because of the ignorance and crudity of their Nazi supervisors.⁸ Some actively supported the National Socialists; some took a heroic part in the resistance. But the role of German professors was on the whole an inglorious one; and it was only with the turn of the tide at Stalingrad that most historians found the inner strength and conviction to resume the task shirked a quarter century earlier. The change which has resulted may well be described as revolutionary,⁹ especially when contrasted with the refusal to accept the verdict of history after 1918.

Such a development gives ground for optimism in view of the close relationship in the past between German history and German politics, and the service rendered to the national cause by nineteenth century historians. The main tenets of the National Liberals received their crudest and most effective representative in Treitschke, whose "I am a thousand times more a patriot than a professor" was an advance, mathematically speaking, on Von Sybel's "I am four-sevenths politician and three-sevenths professor". Behind them lay Hegel's idealization of the state and of power, and the anti-liberal and anti-democratic implications of Ranke's doctrine of the "primacy of foreign policy," with a political philosophy now recognized as one of the landmarks in the revolt against the west, "upholding against the advocates of western liberalism a new Prussophilism, which in time grew into Germanophilism."¹⁰ This divergence from the mainstream of the west was critical for Germany's future, political as well as intellectual. It was further widened in the historiography of the twentieth century when Friedrich Meinecke turned for standards and inspiration to the works of Ranke. His theory of *Historismus* included a highly rationalized defence of the *status quo*, i.e., of the standards of German society before World War I,¹¹ and his work was in part responsible for the projecting of the main tenets of the Prussian School of historiography into the twentieth century.¹²

⁶ Oscar J. Hammen, "German Historians and the Advent of the National Socialist State, (*American Historical Review*, XIII, June, 1941, 166ff.)

⁷ Wilhelm Röpke, *The German Question*, (London, 1946), p. 71.

⁸ Gerhard Ritter, "The German Professor in the Third Reich", *Review of Politics*, VII, April, 1946, 246ff.)

⁹ It has been so termed by Professor Geoffrey Barraclough. Braun, "Post-War German Historiography", p. 310.

¹⁰ Theodore H. Von Laue, *Leopold Ranke, The Formative Years*, (Princeton, 1950), p. 99.

¹¹ Eugene N. Anderson, "Meinecke's *Ideengeschichte* and the Crisis in Historical Thinking", in *Medieval and Historiographical Essays in Honor of James Westfall Thompson*, (Chicago, 1938), p. 390.

¹² Louis L. Snyder, *German Nationalism, The Tragedy of a People*, (Harrisburg, Pa., 1952), p. 257.

II.

This makes Meinecke's near-death-bed conversion to western liberalism of interest and importance. He was the first German historian to draw bold and courageous conclusion from the catastrophe of 1945; and until his death in 1954 at the age of 94 (a year older than Ranke) he was the main source of inspiration and guidance for the small but important band of historians who set out to revise the traditional picture of German history. For most of his long career Meinecke was regarded as a beacon of liberalism in authoritarian Germany, but for him freedom meant the freedom of the *Rechtsstaat*, freedom, that is, within the framework of the authoritarian state. He was born into the strictest conservative Old-Prussian circle, his background satiated with anti-liberalism, anti-semitism, and a fervent Bismarckianism. Yet he admired western liberalism and sought to bring Weimar and Potsdam into harmony. This personal evolution he has traced with charming candour in his *Die deutsche Katastrophe*, written in the months immediately after the war, and translated in 1950 as *The German Catastrophe*. A mixture of profound historical insight and of a reluctance to accept the full responsibility for the lesson of history, it is still probably the most serious attempt on the part of a German to explain — how did it happen? He finds the seeds of collapse in the worship of power by the German ruling classes. "Bismarck's founding of the German Empire," he writes in a characteristic passage, "was an achievement of historic greatness, and the enthusiastic reception which we who grew up with it gave it remains a precious memory. But today we must admit that formerly, in the brilliance of the achievement, we saw too little the hidden dark points where it was vulnerable, and where disease might later set in." ¹³ The inherent evils could be controlled in Bismarck's day, but disaster overwhelmed the mass democracy of the twentieth century when "from being an aristocratic affair, Machiavellism became a bourgeois affair and finally became mass Machiavellism." ¹⁴ Germany must therefore renounce the desire to become a world power, which had twice proven "a false idol"; and in what was at once a message of hope and a counsel of despair, he advised his countrymen to look to Holland, Sweden, and Switzerland as guides for Germany's future. "The work of Bismarck's era," he concluded, "has been destroyed through our own fault, and we must go back beyond its ruins to seek out the ways of Goethe's era." ¹⁵

Meinecke recognized that a radical break must be made with Germany's military past, for of the "higher and lower principle" which he saw always struggling with one another for the Prussian soul, the "lower and degenerate militarism which could blindly become the tool of Hitler and reach its last vicious peak in the *Waffen S.S.*" had won out. ¹⁶ German historians, he wrote, could not abandon all Germany's traditions and behave as apostates, but he insisted that "our customary picture of the history under which we grew to greatness

¹³ *The German Catastrophe*, p. 56.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 109 and 115.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 105-6.

needs a fundamental revision in order to discriminate between what was valuable and what was valueless." ¹⁷ "There is much," he wrote in his last substantial scholarly utterance, "that we must relearn," and he questioned whether Ranke, who had been his "guiding star" since his student days, was not a less reliable guide than Jacob Burckhardt. ¹⁸ As far back as 1924 he had pointed out the dangerous consequences of Ranke's concept of the state and the ennoblement of power, ¹⁹ but it took twelve years of *Nazi* rule and the crushing of the German state to persuade him that the Swiss historian had presented a truer diagnosis of Germany's position and a more accurate prognosis of her future. ²⁰

Meinecke's views on Ranke and Burckhardt can be read in a remarkable book entitled *German History: Some New German Views*, published in 1954. Prefaced by a penetrating survey by the editor, Hans Kohn, professor at Smith College, it contains in translation professions of faith by nine other historians who may be said to constitute the vanguard of the revisionist school. All give ample evidence of Meinecke's influence. All tend to blame the catastrophe on the increasing alienation of Germany from the west. All are conscious of the responsibility of past generations of German historians. All challenge some of the fundamental value judgments of their predecessors. All are to some extent open to the charge of depreciating the power realities imposed by Germany's geographical position; ²¹ but of their sincerity and determination to achieve a fresh synthesis of German history there can be no doubt.

The problem of Bismarck bulks large in this "re-thinking". The flood of new materials which became available after the first World War added "new stones to the pyramid" but did not alter the shape of the traditional or official picture of Bismarck. ²² The lessons of the two wars would probably have produced a reconsideration of his place in German (and European) history, but this process was immensely speeded up by the appearance during the war of a new biography on a monumental scale. It is a curious commentary on German historiography that despite all the Bismarckian studies undertaken since 1898, there had appeared no really satisfactory biography. Erich Eyck's three volume study, published in Switzerland, ²³ is the first complete work to be based on critical research in the sources, and constitutes a notable success in synthesizing the voluminous and widely dispersed fragments on which our knowledge of Bismarck was based. It was not only the first large, rounded biography (written, to the chagrin of German historians, by an "outsider" — a non-professional and a German who makes his home in England), but it represents the first major attempt to put forward the position of

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

¹⁸ "Ranke and Burckhardt", in Kohn, *German History*, p. 144.

¹⁹ Hans Kohn, "Rethinking Recent German History", *ibid.*, p. 24.

²⁰ "Ranke and Burckhardt," *ibid.*, p. 144ff.

²¹ Cf. the review by E. Malcolm Carroll, in *American Historical Review*, LX, October, 1954, 100-1.

²² Poschinger, quoted in L. D. Steefel, "Bismarck", (*Journal of Modern History*, II, March, 1930, 75).

²³ *Bismarck: Leben und Werk*, (Zurich, 1941-44).

Bismarck's liberal opponents in a well-supported analysis.²⁴ It includes, as for no other statesman, an elaborate register of his sins, set out with a jurist's honesty, and concluding with a broadminded appraisal of Bismarck as "no figure to be loved, still less to be imitated, but one to be studied — and with all critical reservations — to be admired."²⁵

Eyck's main thesis is that Bismarck by destroying the liberal movement steered Germany along a course which ultimately proved fatal. This is one of the assertions which has been most frequently challenged in the "Bismarck controversy" which at times has centred more around Eyck than Bismarck. Among the most forthright of Eyck's challengers is Franz Schnabel, a south German Catholic who fills the largest lecture room at Munich and who is in some respects Meinecke's spiritual heir. He regards Eyck's biography not as a definitive conclusion but as a valuable start in reassessing Bismarck. But he rejects Eyck's thesis that the National Liberal movement was on the "right track", maintaining (along with Namier) that the Liberals were even more nationalistically inclined than Bismarck. Going in some respects further than Eyck, whose criticism is reserved for Bismarck's means, not his ends, Schnabel argues that Bismarck's chief sin was in pressing for the *Kleindeutsch* or Greater Prussian national state, instead of working for a federation of the peoples of central and eastern Europe on the lines set forth by such publicists as Constantin Franz.

In this controversy there is a danger that Bismarck (and Hitler) may be made scapegoats for the German past, a view not shared by Schnabel and emphatically rejected by Alfred Von Martin, who insists that "We must ask ourselves how the German people came to give first Bismarck and then Hitler their opportunities."²⁶ Similarly Ludwig Dehio concludes by courageously demanding a "ruthless recognition of the frightful role which we have played as the last and therefore the most demoniacal hegemonic power of old Europe in decline."²⁷ According to Walther Hofer, a young Swiss historian teaching at the Free University of Berlin, such a revision requires "a genuine historical analysis of German history and its criticism in a true historical spirit . . . differentiating anew between true and false values in history . . . by changing the direction of the searchlights into the past," and he suggests as targets for critical examination the three traditional concepts: that power is idealized and glorified, that war is heroic and moral, and that the national idea is radicalized and made absolute.²⁸ Hofer, who stepped into the front rank with his important book on Meinecke's *Geschichtschreibung und Weltanschauung*,²⁹ has recently applied the text which he preaches in his book *Die Entfesselung des*

²⁴ Franz Schnabel, "The Bismarck Problem", in Kohn, *German History*, p. 70.

²⁵ III, 638, cited by Hans Rothfels, "Problems of a Bismarck Biography", (*Review of Politics*, IX, July, 1947, 367).

²⁶ "Bismarck and Ourselves: A Contribution to the Destruction of an Historical Legend", in Kohn, *German History*, p. 99.

²⁷ Dehio, "Germany and the Epoch of World Wars", *ibid.*, p. 140.

²⁸ "Towards a Revision of the German Concept of History", *ibid.*, pp. 188, 191, and 193.

²⁹ Munich, 1950.

Zweiten Weltkrieges (1954)—the title is significant, *Die Entfesselung*, not *Der Ausbruch*, an objective, if brief, analysis of international relations in the summer of 1939, in which he places the responsibility for war squarely on Hitler and Ribbentrop, and blames Hitler for bringing Soviet power into Central Europe.³⁰ As Hofer's book indicates, contemporary history, which was formerly left almost exclusively to the unscientific cultivation of journalists and demagogues, is now receiving scholarly attention in German universities. This development has received a great stimulus from the founding at Munich of the *Institut für Zeitgeschichte* to collect sources relevant to Nazism and to investigate the susceptibility of the German nation to Hitler. Besides Hofer's book it has published other monographs and bibliographies, as well as an excellent quarterly.³¹

III.

Among the German historians of the first rank who are not represented in Kohn's book is Gerhard Ritter, although his views are referred to in virtually every contribution. A professor at Freiburg since 1925, a Protestant enjoying the tolerance of a Catholic university as did his predecessor, Meinecke, Ritter, according to G. P. Gooch, ranks next to Meinecke as "perhaps the most distinguished and certainly the most productive of German scholars in the field of modern history."³² His writings are indeed extensive. He began with studies in late scholastic philosophy; he developed a special interest in the Reformation; but he has turned increasingly to more recent history with (among others) a biography of Frederick the Great, a massive two-volume life of Stein, a critical edition of Bismarck's *Memoirs* (in the collected works), a series of studies on the nature of power, a sketch of modern German thinking on the state, a history of the problem of militarism in Germany, and a biography of Carl Goerdeler, the leading figure in the German resistance. And from his pen has come an unending stream of articles for learned journals, for collective works, and for the more popular press and periodicals.

Ritter has claimed that he, along with Meinecke, was the first to begin to revise the traditional picture of German history after the great catastrophe of 1945.³³ In support of this claim he can point to his Presidential Address to the first meeting of German historians after the war, in September, 1949, in which he recognized that German historical writing had in the past deepened and widened the alienation of German thought from the west which had begun with the War of Liberation, and warned against "the great, often excessive enthusiasm for the state"; against the undue emphasis on diplomatic history and on the struggle for power among states; and against Ranke's doctrine of the primacy of foreign policy, which had made his universal history

³⁰ *Die Entfesselung des Zweiten Weltkrieges: Eine Studie über Internationalen Beziehungen im Sommer 1939.* (Stuttgart, 1954). Translated as *War Premeditated 1939* (London, 1955).

³¹ *Vierteljahrsshefte für Zeitgeschichte.*

³² Foreword to Ritter. *The Corrupting Influence of Power*, (London, 1952), vii. Cf. Gooch's review of the German original (*Die Dämonie der Macht*) in *American Historical Review*, LIV, October, 1948, 93; and his *History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century*, (Second Edition, London, 1953), xiii.

³³ Letter to *American Historical Review*, LX, April, 1955, 775.

a tale of the development and differentiation of nation states, and his successors therefore more or less national historians. He called for "sober self-reflection, for frank and critical examination" of German's historical traditions.³⁴ Like Meinecke's, Ritter's appeal was for a revision of values, ideals and convictions, not of facts.³⁵ He had already given some indication of what he expected from the German historical fraternity in his *Geschichte als Bildungsmacht*,³⁶ a small but significant contribution to revisionist literature, especially in view of the fact that Ritter's earlier books had shown him to be a conservative.³⁷ Here, as in his other recent writings, Ritter recognizes that Germany has shared in the common values of western civilization, and he calls for "observing the modern history of Europe from the other side of the Rhine-Vosges frontier as well."³⁸ He wants to break through the legends about English policy which were systematically preached by the Pan-Germans, the Navy League, and the Nazis, and to achieve some understanding of the special characteristics of British development.³⁹ He urges study of the Slavs, the peoples with whom the Germans must share the "living space" of east and central Europe. Here too, the legend of *Volk ohne Raum* must be wiped away.⁴⁰ Ritter is extremely critical of the Ludendorff type of militarism;⁴¹ he blames the Pan-Germans and the Colonial League for much of the misunderstandings before 1914;⁴² he recognizes the inadequacies of William II and the dangers of his sabre-rattling;⁴³ he expressly calls the annexation of Lorraine and the menace to France in 1875 mistakes;⁴⁴ he is anxious that the consequences of Bismarck's method of solving the German problem and of his domestic and social policies should be understood.⁴⁵ Ritter is thus by no means a nationalist in the sense of chauvinist. Nor by any stretch of imagination can he be accused of defence of the Nazis. While Meinecke sought to indicate certain positive elements in Hitlerism,⁴⁶ Ritter rejects it *in toto*. As a member of the Freiburg "circle", and associated with resistance groups within the Evangelical Church, he was active on the civilian side of the July 20 plot. He was one of the last to see Goerdeler alive, and was himself imprisoned from September, 1944, until liberated by the Red Army.

³⁴ "Gegenwärtige Lage und Zukunftsaufgabe Deutscher Geschichtswissenschaft", (*Historische Zeitschrift*, 170, 1950, p. 1ff).

³⁵ Hofer, "Towards a Revision of the German Concept of History", p. 190.

³⁶ 2nd Ed., Stuttgart, 1949. It was first published in 1946.

³⁷ Cf. the review by Felix Gilbert, (*American Historical Review*, LIII, July, 1948, 787-88). Nevertheless the book (which contains such bald statements as "National Socialism is no Prussian creation but an Austro-Bavarian import") caused quite a storm, especially in England. See Ritter's *Nachwort* to the second edition, p. 75ff.

³⁸ *Geschichte als Bildungsmacht*, p. 40.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 40-1.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 42ff.

⁴¹ *Europa und die deutsche Frage*, (Munich, 1948), pp. 144-45.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 142ff.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 96-7; and *Geschichte als Bildungsmacht*, 68f.

⁴⁵ *Europa und die deutsche Frage*, p. 101ff; and the excellent pages in *Geschichte als Bildungsmacht*, pp. 64-70.

⁴⁶ *The German Catastrophe*, Chapter 9.

Most of Ritter's recent writings are concerned with current politics: his *Stein*, produced under the Weimar Republic, is an example of those works which pointed to lessons in the introduction or conclusion;⁴⁷ his *Friedrich der Grosse* (1939) aimed to distinguish between the old Prussian military tradition and the new Nazi militarism, i.e., to counter the impression which Hitler sought to create by his famous Potsdam Day of March 21, 1933;⁴⁸ his *Militarismus* was originally projected in wartime as a defence of Prussia and its military traditions in order to ease the way for the entry of the generals into the resistance camp;⁴⁹ and his biography of Goerdeler (which is a documented history of the resistance as well) was designed to show the Right that the 20 July plot was not a sabotage act, and the Left (and the world) that the plotters represented broad segments of the German people.⁵⁰

The foregoing suggests Ritter's general aim of defending the traditional German values which in his view are worth defending: of working to save what can be saved from the catastrophe. He never defends the extremes or the aberrations in the Germany past, though on occasion those elements which made extremes and aberrations possible. His efforts to distinguish the worthless from the valuable sometimes lead him close to apologia; occasionally his revisionism is invaded by the nationalist bias which he is elsewhere concerned to desecry. The remarks which follow are an attempt to illustrate these statements. They are based for the most part on two works: *Die Dämonie der Macht* (1947), written originally in wartime as *Machtstaat und Utopie*, and translated as *The Corrupting Influence of Power* (1952), in which Ritter contrasts the island "welfare state" view of Thomas More with the continental power politics of Machiavelli — two of the writers who made 1516 an *annus mirabilis*; and his more important (and, unfortunately, untranslated work) *Europa und die deutsche Frage* (1948), which deals less with Europe and is primarily a sketch of German thinking on the state.

Ritter is concerned to defend the three great influences behind German *Staatsdenken*: Lutheranism, Prussianism, and Bismarckianism. He asserts that Luther neither intended to place his religious followers under the slavish authority of the German princes, nor wished to confine moral-religious principles to purely private, as opposed to public, authority, and he concludes that the renowned "Be subject to authority" teaching of Luther's followers cannot have had any essential part in the triumph of National Socialism.⁵¹ Frederick the Great's Prussia was "nothing other than an especially strong and thoroughly consistent form of continental state", which first appeared

⁴⁷ Hammen, "German Historians and the Advent of the National Socialist State", 165-67.

⁴⁸ Ritter, "The German Professor in the Third Reich", pp. 246-47; and *Geschichte als Bildungsmacht*, pp. 36-7.

⁴⁹ *Staatskunst und Kriegshandwerk: Das Problem des "Militarismus" in Deutschland*, v. I. (Munich, 1954).

⁵⁰ *Carl Goerdeler und die deutsche Widerstandsbewegung*. (Stuttgart, 1954). Cf. his "The German Opposition to Hitler," (*Contemporary Review*, CLXXVII, June, 1950, 339-45).

⁵¹ *Europa und die deutsche Frage*, pp. 13 and 19.

in France as a result of Richelieu's and Colbert's struggle against feudal conditions. Frederick's policy was "pure Cabinet policy", and his militarism, confined within precisely defined limits, had nothing whatever to do with our completely different conception of that word, i.e., total war.⁵² In Ritter this theme recurs repeatedly; but his definition of militarism is too narrow. By focusing on the generalities (he is emphatic that militarism is "by no means a specifically German but rather a universal problem")⁵³ he obscures the main problem: to see the specifically Prussian characteristics of the militarism of the Frederickian state, and to examine the degree to which it penetrated its social and political fabric even before 1740.⁵⁴ As a reviewer of his *Militarismus* commented, "one has the feeling that militarism is defined in such extreme terms that it becomes a straw man that nobody measures up to."⁵⁵ As for Frederick, so for Bismarck. Unlike Schnabel Ritter sees no possibility for a federal solution, but he is convinced that the *Kleindeutsch* national state had a much better chance to serve as a nucleus of a more stable order in central Europe.⁵⁶ He insists, too that "Bismarck had nothing to do with the nationalism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and its blind fanaticism,"⁵⁷ and that he was "no militarist".⁵⁸ He sees him as "the last great Cabinet politician of European history", a late Richelieu or a spiritual descendant of Frederick the Great, but in a changed world, basing his policy on sober, realistic considerations.⁵⁹ To this following of eighteenth century principles in an age when popular passions had rendered the aristocratic formulation of policy anachronistic, Ritter assigns the responsibility for Bismarck's contradictory diplomacy and for his "mistakes".⁶⁰

Ritter's warm, though not uncritical, appraisal of Bismarck, and his defence of the old Prussian tradition lead him to blame the rise of National Socialism not on native German developments, ("Neither Frederick the Great, Bismarck, nor Wilhelm II were the historical precursors of Adolf Hitler," he writes)⁶¹ but on the contamination of German thinking by western ideas of popular sovereignty emanating from Rousseau's doctrine of the general will.⁶² This view in turn has led Ritter's severest German critic to describe *Europa und die*

⁵² *Das Problem des Militarismus in Deutschland*, (Bonn, 1954), p. 7.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁵⁴ This problem is raised by Karl Buchheim, "The *Via Dolorosa* of the Civilian Spirit in Germany", in Kohn, *German History*, p. 40.

⁵⁵ Enno E. Kraehe, in *Journal of Modern History*, XXVI, December, 1954, 378-79.

⁵⁶ Andreas Dorpalen, "The German Historians and Bismarck", (*Review of Politics*, XV, January, 1953, 58-60).

⁵⁷ "Das Bismarckproblem", *Merkur*, IV, (1950), 669, cited in Otto Pfanze, "Bismarck and German Nationalism", (*American Historical Review*, LX, April, 1955, 549).

⁵⁸ *Europa und die deutsche Frage*, p. 82; and *Das Problem des Militarismus in Deutschland*, p. 18: "ganz und gar kein Militarist".

⁵⁹ *Europa und die deutsche Frage*, p. 84.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁶¹ "The Historical Foundations of the Rise of National-Socialism", in *The Third Reich*, (London, 1955), p. 399.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 390; and *Europa und die deutsche Frage*, Chapter IV.

deutsche Frage as "a polemic against the West."⁶³ Ritter's defence of Bismarck's work also leads him to defend the Bismarckian state as a "constitutional monarchy";⁶⁴ to an unwarranted minimizing of the position of Prussia in the peculiar federalism of the Second Reich;⁶⁵ to the complacent assurance that Imperial Germany was on its way towards a more liberal future;⁶⁶ to the confusion of self-administration with self-government.⁶⁷ Moreover, his identification of Machiavellism with continental power politics, and the distinction drawn between a continental state which must always have its finger on the trigger, and the moral-based policies of the "island powers" — the theme which is fully developed in *Die Dämonie der Macht* — is much too broad. Making it clear that he is anxious to do justice to More, Ritter is driven to a far from reluctant acceptance of the power drive of continental states,⁶⁸ to an unwarranted emphasis on the defensive nature of Germany's pre-1914 policy,⁶⁹ even to defending Moltke's famous telegram to Conrad in July, 1914, on the grounds that he was only "encouraging an ally in its severest crisis lest it be lost to the side."⁷⁰ Other examples might be cited to show Ritter's readiness to excuse German developments if similar developments can be found elsewhere; to explain away the particular by reference to the general.

IV.

To emphasize all this is to risk underrating Ritter's important revisionist views. For even his major thesis, that the Nazi form of totalitarian dictatorship was not a specifically German phenomenon, is qualified in the concluding pages of his *Deutsche Frage* with the reminder that this does not exonerate the millions who voted for Hitler in 1933.⁷¹ To see Ritter in perspective one must not only contrast his views with those of the revisionist "vanguard", but with those of the right-wing nationalists as well. Old ideas and traditions die hard. As Ritter noted in his Presidential Address, "Where the voice of scientific history does not reach, there historical legends abound."⁷² The German correspondent of the *Manchester Guardian* has recently given us a frightening picture of the current popular "miswriting" of German history.⁷³ That a similar devotion to traditional legends still prevails in certain academic circles is shown by some reviews in the *Historische Zeitschrift*, by the repudiation, often only slightly disguised, of Meinecke's *Die deutsche Katastrophe*, by some

⁶³ J. A. von Rantzau, "The Glorification of the State in German Historical Writing", in Kohn, *German History*, p. 165.

⁶⁴ "Gegenwärtige Lage und Zukunftsaufgabe", p. 16; and *Europa und die deutsche Frage*, p. 81 and n. 20.

⁶⁵ *Europa und die deutsche Frage*, p. 87.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 204, n. 20.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 38-9.

⁶⁸ Kohn, "Rethinking Recent German History," p. 28.

⁶⁹ *Europa und die deutsche Frage*, p. 132ff.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 199-200.

⁷² "Gegenwärtige Lage und Zukunftsaufgabe," p. 1.

⁷³ Terrence Prittie, "How the Germans are Miswriting Their History," (*Listener*, LII, September 9, 1954, 383-84, and 405).

older German historians and frequently by the rising generation as well,⁷⁴ or by the rejection of Eyck's *Bismarck* in favour of the traditional picture presented by A. O. Meyer.⁷⁵ Characteristic, too, is the republication of a typically nationalistic popular work, Johannes Haller's *Die Epochen der deutschen Geschichte*, still containing its paean of praise for Bismarck as the saviour of Germany,⁷⁶ which Gerhard Ritter described as one "whose nationalistic tone is unbearable".⁷⁷ Similarly, Ludwig Dehio complained that, "While German historians are trying hard to rethink German history, the old concepts are being served up again. It is like meeting a ghost."⁷⁸ Such sins are not all on the German side. In 1951 W. L. Langer's *European Alliances and Alignments*, written two decades earlier and pervaded by an almost unqualified praise for Bismarck, was reproduced without taking account of the far-reaching revaluation of Bismarckian diplomacy which had taken place in the interval.⁷⁹

In the concluding days of the war, the Heidelberg sociologist, Alfred Weber, set down his views that the nation state had been reduced to absurdity, that history as moulded by the west had come to an end, and that this meant "a farewell to European history as we have known it."⁸⁰ Will it also be "farewell to German history as we have known it"? Farewell to a history centred around the nation state, to a too-exclusive political history which so easily lends itself to nationalistic distortion, to a history whose basic tenets serve to emphasize Germany's uniqueness rather than her share in the common European inheritance? One might, indeed, be driven to the Orwellian conclusion that while all German historians are revisionists, some are more revisionist than others. In the past German historians once ranked as "heralds of German policy".⁸¹ So in the future German history will be among the influences moulding German policy, and will in turn be affected by the prevailing political situation. Both Meinecke and Ritter counselled their countrymen that the search for hegemony on the pattern of previous generations offered neither goal nor hope, and that only as *Kulturvolk* could the Germans be rescued.⁸² History, Ritter concluded, was not a single highway. Nothing predetermined that Hitler should arrive on the scene. It was therefore the task of German historians to seek out the other turns on the highways of history.⁸³ On the success of their efforts will depend whether or not there will be a real "farewell to German history."

⁷⁴ Von Rantzau, "The Glorification of the State," p. 163.

⁷⁵ Written during the war, but published posthumously in 1949 by Hans Rothfels.

⁷⁶ See, e.g., the English translation of the 1930 ed., p. 235ff, and Kohn, "Rethinking Recent German History," p. 38-9.

⁷⁷ "Gegenwärtige Lage und Zukunftsaufgabe," 6.

⁷⁸ *Historische Zeitschrift*, 172, (1952), p. 325, quoted in Kohn, "Rethinking Recent German History," p. 39.

⁷⁹ See the excellent critique in the *Times Literary Supplement*, March, 1952, 183.

⁸⁰ *Farewell to European History*, (London, 1947), xvii-xix.

⁸¹ "Gegenwärtige Lage und Zukunftsaufgabe," p. 1.

⁸² Ritter, *Europa and die deutsche Frage*, p. 200; Meinecke, *The German Catastrophe*, p. 108ff.

⁸³ *Europa and die deutsche Frage*, p. 200; and *Geschichte als Bildungsmacht*, p. 72ff.