The Uses and Misuses of History. The Responsibility of the Historian, Past and Present.

International Congress of Historical Sciences in Oslo, Norway, August 9, 2000

Introductory Remarks to the Panel

Georg G. Iggers

The question of the uses to which history has been put through the ages including its misuses is crucial to us as historians as is that of the responsibility of the historian in the face of these misuses. Two concerns occur: One is the way in which history has been used in all cultures through the ages for a variety of ends, political, religious, ethnic, and others. Jörn Rüsen has spoken of this as an anthropological constant. This involved the creation of a past in the sense of a collective identity which generally did not correspond to the actual past. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries these inventions of the past played an important role in the formation of nationalisms. Ernest Renan put it aptly more than a hundred years ago when he defined a nation "as a group of people united by a mistaken view of the past and a hatred of their neighbors." Yet these mistaken views of the past were not merely transmitted from older times but were consciously invented by intellectuals, many of whom were historians, and by poets, artists and politicians who themselves were convinced of the truthfulness of their views of the past. Beside this, since antiquity there have been conscious controls over the writing of history and manipulations of this history for political, religious, and other reasons. Professors Hartog, Ku, and Goetz deal with this in the premodern period; Professors Zhuravlev, da Silva, Lim, and Antohi in dictatorial regimes in the twentieth century; Prof. Scherrer in post-Soviet Russia. The second concern is that of the responsibility of historians in the face of these distortions. This
hopefully will be a central concern of today's discussion. Prof. De Baets has given us examples of how historians have resisted persecution and censorship.

Now to some general reflections:

The assumption underlying the panel is that honest approaches to history are possible and that the professional ethos of historians calls on them to resist misrepresentations of the past. Yet the relationship between the uses and misuses of history is a very complex one. Misuse suggests that the past is instrumentalized and distorted for political and other purposes. It also means that there is a real past which must not be distorted. History has played a crucial role in the formation and maintenance of collective identities. Almost every people, Western as well as Eastern, Europeans as well as sub-Saharan Africans, North and South American Indians, and Pacific Islanders, has identified itself in terms of a historical experience going back to the past. These have often been formulated in the forms of epics. Jewish identity through the ages is unthinkable without the Exodus experience; Greek without the Homeric poems; Hindu without the Vedas. Yet the question whether these epics were truthful or poetic accounts did not arise for a long time and was not even regarded as relevant. The clear distinction between history and myth is a relatively new one. Occasionally ancient Western historians like Thucydides, ancient Chinese historians like Sima Qian, and Islamic historians like Ibn Khaldun in his searching examination of the Mosaic exodus applied standards of credibility to their narratives.

When we speak of historians today we think first of all of professional historians. The very name of the congress in Oslo, the International Congress of the Historical Sciences, implies that the persons in attendance consider themselves to be professional historians. "Historical Sciences"
is a poor translation into English of the French "sciences historiques" and would better have been rendered into English with "historical studies." Be this as it may, it assumes that we are dealing with scholars who have been trained as historians. There are, of course, not only researchers in attendance here but also teachers, secondary and even primary, and perhaps some interested non-academic, mostly local and antiquarian, historians. But all would agree that history is a rigorous discipline, not primarily a literary genre as it still was for Gibbon and Voltaire.

Yet the idea of history as a discipline, as a Wissenschaft, is relatively new. Chladenius spoke of a Geschichtswissenschaft in the mid-eighteenth century; the members of the Académie des Inscriptions et des Belles Lettres began to think of history in similar terms as did some of the historians at the University of Göttingen at the end of the eighteenth century, but history as a profession began really only with Ranke at the University of Berlin after 1825. History for the first time was clearly demarcated from literature. Ranke proclaimed that it should show wie es eigentlich gewesen free of any embellishments. Central to professional history was the idea or the ideal of scientific or scholarly objectivity, which amounted to a strict commitment to the truth. To cite Peter Novick: "The assumptions on which it (the idea of objectivity) rests include a commitment to the reality of the past, and to truth as correspondence to that reality; a sharp separation between knower and known, between fact and value, and above all between history and fiction. Historical facts are seen prior to and independent of interpretation....The objective historian's role is that of neutral, or disinterested judge."1 Not only does this mean that a professional historian must be objective, but also that only a professional historian, trained in the methods of scholarly historical inquiry, can be objective, and excludes others from the realm of
serious historians. This is in fact a very parochial vision. To be sure, historians have particularly in the past two centuries contributed significantly to collective memories of the past and the formation of collective identities but scholarly history has only been one segment in the creations of memories which have taken many different forms.

I am in the complicated position of believing on the one hand that the honest pursuit of the past is not merely a "noble dream," to which Charles Beard and Peter Novick have downgraded it, but also on the other hand of being convinced that professional history has in large part not done this but has contributed to the distortion of the past in the service of ideological agendas. Professionalization of historical studies has to be seen within the framework of institutions and power relationships in which it emerged and continues to function. Peter Novick has sought to do this for the American historical profession, William Keylor and Pim den Boer for France, Peter Novick for the United States, Fritz Ringer and I for Germany, and recently Effi Gazi for South East Europe. Thomas Nipperdey wrote me in 1971 a few days after the German edition about the German historical profession appeared that the history of scholarship (Wissensschaftsgeschichte) cannot be written as a critique of the ideologies underlying this scholarship but that the works of the historians must be judged from the perspective of their contributions to knowledge. I by now means denied that the German historians had made such contributions, but at the same examined the extent to which their ideologies had colored their scholarly work and their findings. Novelists, poets, demogogic politicians and others contributed to creating a national identity which rested on patriotic myths. But what concerns me here is the role which historical scholarship played in reinforcing these myths.
Again what interests me primarily is not the control and manipulation of history in dictatorial regimes, although this is an important topic addressed by the panel, but the manipulation of history in societies which were relatively open. Among these I would count not only democratic states in the twentieth century, including after 1945 Japan, India, and more recently South Korea and Taiwan, but also most nineteenth-century European societies including the German states, the Habsburg monarchy, and to an extent even Imperial Russia in which despite autocratic or semi-autocratic institutions areas of free expression existed. Perhaps we came closest to a directly controlled historiography in the Soviet Union and in East Germany, although control was by no means total, and particularly in such Soviet dominated states as Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia a great deal of historical study moved outside the parameters of Communist ideology, as was also the case in China after the end of the Cultural Revolution. What is interesting in Nazi Germany is less the historiography of Walter Frank's Reich Institute for the History of the New Germany than the majority of historians who were not members of the Nazi party nor followed its doctrine closely but nevertheless voluntarily in their interpretations of German history lent their scholarly support to the Nazi regime or at least to the German cause in the war.

The classical model of professionalization is to be found at the Protestant universities in nineteenth-century Germany. It is here that the research imperative was born with its commitment to the idea and ideal of objectivity and disinterested, neutral inquiry. But this inquiry proved to be by no means disinterested and neutral, rather in almost every case ideologically slanted. We have to understand something of the sociology of the scholarly
profession. The German universities were founded by the state. The historians were civil servants. The respect for research on the part of the state and the educated public generally, but not always, kept the state from directly interfering with the work of the historians. A great deal of autonomy was left to the university. As a matter of fact historians often had greater academic freedom in Germany than in countries in the late nineteenth and the first part of the twentieth centuries like the United States where universities were often privately founded and funded and controlled by boards of trustees drawn from business and government, who often interfered with what was done. Moreover, the mechanisms of recruitment everywhere until relatively recently guaranteed that a group which was relatively homogenous in social origin and political outlook was called to the universities and in turn saw to it that the continuity in social composition and the consensus in intellectual and political orientation was maintained. The universities and within it the discipline of history were established not merely for the pursuit of knowledge or even for the training of competent civil servants, professionals, and teachers, but to stabilize the social order. To be certain in the period immediately before the 1848 revolution, and to some extent even afterwards, there were differences of opinion between the moderate liberalism of many German historians and the autocratic policies of the Prussian state. Nevertheless there was an underlying consensus which colored the work of the historians. It is important to keep in mind that the great majority of historians were convinced that they were purely objective and neutral when in fact their findings were highly tendentious. From Ranke on they believed that the critical immersion into the sources revealed the workings of great tendencies, a metanarrative at the end of which stood the established modern Western social order and civilization. Droysen, who has
been hailed even in our time as the great theorist of the historical science which emerged in the
nineteenth century, distinguished sharply between those aspects of the past which he considered
to be historical (Geschichte) and those to which he referred condescendingly as mere Geschäfte
(private transactions). The former referred to the realm of politics in so far as it fitted into the
grand narrative, to the elites and the powerful; the latter to the many aspects of life of common
people who did not matter in this narrative and which systematically excluded women. It is
striking that at the very moment at which history was to be research oriented and hence neutral, it
became highly politicized. The new interest in history and the support which it received from the
state and to an extent from other sources was directly related to the growth of nationalism. The
task of research was to help contribute to the construction of a national identity and this is exactly
what the historians did, in the case of the so-called Prussian School even openly. Historians went
into the archives not so much to be guided by the sources as to find support for their arguments
which preceded their research. Again Droysen is a good example of a historian who sought to
give scholarly legitimacy to a totally fantastic narrative which attributed a conscious national
mission to the Hohenzollern princes since early modern times.

But the Germans were not alone in this instrumentalization of scholarship. Professionalization in the late nineteenth century became the rule throughout the Western world as well as in modernizing non-Western countries such as foremost Japan. And although the political context and the intellectual traditions were different in every country, the basic assumptions on which professional scholarship operated were similar. Ranke had already made the grievous mistake in believing that existing institutions which had evolved over times
reflected the "moral energies" (to use his term) operating in history; to be objective and to possess a sense of history meant to acknowledge these forces; in a Burkean manner he believed that any demand at radical change violated this sense of history. To be a historian, therefore, meant to be a conservative, and to be a conservative for Ranke in no sense violated the "impartiality" for which he called. Other historians were more liberal, but even liberals in their call for reforms in a moderate liberal direction still affirmed much of the status quo. To be a historian whether in Germany, France, Great Britain, the United States, or Japan meant to be a patriot and patriotism essentially amounted to nationalism or in many cases even chauvinism. And this was equally true in countries like the Czech lands and Poland which were struggling for independence or newly independent countries like Greece. But historians like Droysen, Michelet, Turner, Lambros, and Palacky saw no conflict between their partisan interpretation of history and their professional ethos. Thus in the First World War virtually all historians on both sides of the lines rallied to the flag and not only as citizens of their countries but as professional historians. Documents were going to be read differently after 1918 to establish or to refute German guilt. Beyond national differences, historians shared the confidence in the superiority of Western civilization, which included an implicit, in some cases even explicit, notion, of the inferiority of non-Western peoples. The latter was very apparent in the so-called Dunning school at Columbia University in New York, which while professing adherence to Rankean objectivity set out to write a history of Reconstruction in the post-Civil War American South which gave scholarly legitimacy to the disenfranchisment and segregation of Blacks. The Black sociologist and historian
W.E.B. Du Bois in a response to these historians demonstrated how supposedly professional historiography can turn into propaganda.\textsuperscript{13}

Again the point is that the misuses of history are not restricted to authoritarian regimes but occur in societies which at least on the surface permit a broad range of free expression. Below the surface the situation may be different. For even in societies with stronger democratic traditions than Germany, there were mechanisms of recruitment and promotion which imposed restraints, many of which were not spelled out but were internalized in the minds of the historians.

Of course, there exist counternarratives. While few Marxists in the nineteenth century were academic, quite a number were by the second half of the twentieth century. More recently there have been feminist and ethnic counternarratives. Yet often this history, even if it adheres to professional practices, has offered highly ideological interpretations of history.

This paper so far has offered a very dismal picture of the historical profession in which the border line between scholarship and the construction of myths largely disappeared. In the most recent decades, as we know, there has been a great deal of skepticism regarding the possibility of objective historical inquiry. For a large number of recent thinkers every historical account rests on ideological foundations so that historical narratives can according to Hayden White be judged in terms of their "consistency, coherence, and illuminary power," but they can no more be "refuted" or "disconfirmed" than can expositions of speculative history.\textsuperscript{14} White further suggests that "it is possible to view historical consciousness as a specifically Western prejudice by which the presumed superiority of modern industrial society can be retroactively substantiated."\textsuperscript{15} This
overlooks to what extent history has been utilized in all societies Western and non-Western throughou the ages to legitimize power.

Despite my critique of the cult of objectivity which was shared by almost the entire historical profession, I am not willing to concede that there are no objective standards of historical criticism, nor do I believe are the members of the panel. The fact that the professional historians have contributed to the construction of national, ethnic, confessional and more recently gender related myths does not mean that there are no criteria of rational inquiry by which these myths can be taken apart. It is certainly very difficult to establish historical truths. Admittedly sources can lend themselves to different interpretations. But these interpretations are not arbitrary but are dependent on the sources. Historiography is thus an ongoing dialogue which does not necessarily arrive at consensus but may enhance understanding of the past by illuminating it from a variety of perspectives. Historians may not be able to fulfill Ranke's dream of writing history wie es eigentlich gewesen, but they may be able to show wie es eigentlich nicht gewesen. And to do this they must use the research methods developed in the process of professionalization. Every historian inevitably has a point of view. But the best way of avoiding arriving at untruths is to analyze one's point of view and thus being aware of one's perspective. This has been the responsibility of the historian past and present. The Truth Commission of South Africa, on which Brent Harris is reporting, is following this task. We have seen over and over again how historical myths have affected political behavior, the stab in the back legend supported by respected historians in pre-Nazi Germany, the already mentioned racist myth of the Reconstruction in pre-1945 United States, the claim of the supposedly benign occupation policies of Imperial Japan in

-10-
and preceding World War II, to mention only a few. Constructions of national history going to the early medieval period were put forth before 1945 by German scholars to justify German expansion eastward and after 1945 by Polish historians to justify expansion westward. The myth of the lost battle at Kosovo in 1389 continues to fuel Serbian chauvinism. And then there is selective memory. One example typical of many countries is the Outline History of Poland\textsuperscript{16}, published in 1986, an account of a thousand years of Polish history in which Poland appears as an ethnically homogenous nation, Jews, Lithuanians, Germans, Ukranians, and Roma occupy only a minimal place and the holocaust is almost totally ignored. The same is true of many national histories. Only recently have American historians given proper place to the multiple narratives in a multiethnic and multicultural nation. Conservative historians in post-1945 West Germany wrote a history of the resistance against Hitler concentrating on aristocrats and officers which not only left out resisters from the left but played down the extent to which the people it idolized had themselves supported the Nazi regime and war effort until it became clear that the war was lost. Communists in East Germany practiced a similar amnesia which overstressed their role in the resistance and conveniently overlooked the cooperation between Nazis and Communists in the period between 1939 and 1941. Both approaches to the resistance sought to give legitimacy to their political agendas by distorting the past or representing it selectively.

In recent years topics which had previously been tabu were approached. Beginning with Fritz Fischer's controversial study of German responsibility for the First World War and expansionist aims, published in 1961, a then younger generation of historians in West Germany began to examine accepted German historical traditions. Recent studies have established the
extent to which broad segments of the German population, including the army, were involved in the Holocaust. Wulf Kansteiner examines the role which public media in West Germany played in opening the discussion. The tabu which had clouded the collaboration of French authorities in the deportation of Jews during the Vichy period was finally broken; the movie *The Sorrow and the Pity*, filmed in 1971 was not permitted to be shown publically in France until 1979. The Russian Memorial group already before the collapse of the Soviet Union through oral history began to reconstruct every day life under Stalinism. Beginnings were made in the revision of school books in Japan. A similar revision of history text books is occurring in Israel today. In all of these reexaminations historians have played an important role. It is in this deconstruction of one-sided historical images, which distort the past to further ideological agendas, that a prime task of the responsible historian lies. Revision, of course, does not guantantee objectivity. The revisionists too have their agendas. But the dismanteling of historical falsehoods may contribute to lessening the hold which these have over the minds of men and women. This is not a repudiation of professional history but a call for it to live up to the ideals of intellectual honesty which it proclaimed. This paper itself harbors a conviction, which may to some appear a prejudice, namely the belief that there are standards of humanity and logical thinking which can guide the rational discourse among historians.


5 Fritz Ringer, The Decline of the German Mandarins


8 Thomas Nipperdey to Georg Iggers, 15 February 1971.

9 See Richard Hofstadter and Walter V. Metzger, The Development of Academic Freedom in the United States (New York, 1955), specifically the example of Columbia University in the 1910s.


12 Georg G. Iggers, "Historians Confronted With the War," paper at conference: European Intellectuals and the "Great War", Trento, Italy, 4-6 November 1998; proceedings in process of publication.


15 Ibid., p. xii.