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Two states, two histories?

A Conversation with Rudolf von Thadden

E *To many Europeans the present division of Germany appears as the most dramatic symbol of the tragedy of Europe, and as an open wound in its historical continuity. Still, the two Germanies have lasted for a length of time that adds up to two thirds of the duration of unified Germany. Do you see the situation as actually becoming more stabilized and as progressively gaining acceptance, mainly through the development of a mutual inner-German legitimization?*

Rudolf VON THADDEN: Foreign observers reflecting on this problem often overlook the fact that the division of Germany presents the same features in the different areas of political, social and cultural life. When one considers the disintegration of the German nation, no real difference can be seen at the level of State organization, of religious institutions or of educational structures. Even in the field of sport, a pan-German Olympic team only existed up to 1964, and since the end of the '60s, the German Evangelical Church has no longer held pan-German Synods. Only the Goethe Society has remained undivided up to the present day.

Recently, however, debate has not only been turning to the various phases in this postwar breaking up of the unity in pan-German national institutions, but has also gone back in time, casting doubt on the unity of German history. During a conference organized by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, with historians from both German States taking part, the subject of the common historical heritage of the German people was discussed in this sense, and a volume containing the contributions to the meeting, (as published by Rowohlt), illustrates the tensions which arose. The question to be asked is, therefore, whether the Germans are still to bear common responsibility for their history,

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or have simply divided up their entire heritage, rather like divorcees dividing their property.

E *What answer can historians provide?*

Rudolf VON THADDEN: This question is not only to be decided upon amongst historians; to some extent it also involves the historical consciousness of the citizens, and is thus more than a mere development of academic research work. The political division of the nation will be lasting and will have the prospect of being capable of surviving circumstances only if and when it has become established and has been accepted by the citizens.

E *But how can the process of political division be separated from such other questions? How can we determine whether, or since when, the two German States have implied two different histories?*

Rudolf VON THADDEN: The question has two aspects, due to the ambiguity of the term "history". Indeed, with this word we mean either the factual chain of historical events, or the historiography of these events. And in both cases, it is exceedingly difficult to find the answer.

It would seem easier to resolve the former question - that of the unity or separation of factual history. Here it might be said that, after a certain point in time, there have really been two German histories, though it remains an open question as to whether this point in time corresponds to the foundation date of the two postwar German States. There exists one justifiable opinion according to which the separate development of each of these States is to be traced back to the historical events immediately preceding the defeat of the Third Reich, and that beginnings of the dual nature of contemporary German history can already be found in the differences between Eastern and Western policies in the occupied zones. On the other hand, and no less justifiable, there is the thesis that the division of Germany has been, and still is, a gradual process which has taken much longer in the minds of the people than in its factual development.

In this opinion, the common history of a still psychologically undivided Germany is seen as continuing up to the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961, or the appearance of the first German postwar generation towards the end of the '60s.

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As far as historical studies are concerned, this divergence may be seen in the following way: German history of the immediate postwar period is generally dealt with in the context of the four occupied zones, whilst as from the year 1949, accounts of the historical developments of each part of Germany begin to be treated separately. And this difference in approach often goes so far that the history of the GDR is dealt with more in connection with the Eastern bloc nations than in a pan-German context. Thus, the inner-German border even manages to divide historical studies.

E *Has the partition of the nation into two ideologically opposed political units created two different "schools" in historical research?*

Rudolf VON THADDEN: The question of a division in German historiography is more complicated. First of all, it has to be emphasized that even in the happiest periods of the German national State, there has never been a unitary standpoint on history, and that conflicting historical views have always existed. In addition to this, it is undeniable that the historiographical traditions prominent in the Democratic and Federal Republics today are not only congruent with the respective intellectual positions of the two States, but go back beyond these to pre-existing differences in historiographical interpretations. Most GDR historians of the first postwar generation had gone through the History Departments of the pre-war German universities, where their doctoral theses - as those of later Western historians - were written. Thus, the Bismarck biographer Ernst Engelberg, who has achieved "pan-German" acknowledgement and acclaim, expressly confirms, in the preface to his work published simultaneously in both East and West Berlin, its roots in his work on German Social-Democracy and Bismarck's Social Policy, his dissertation from his old Berlin University days.

On the other hand, it can certainly not be maintained that present-day GDR historiography is simply an extension of the older "left-wing" historiographical tradition, and similarly, historiography in the Federal Republic is clearly not just the further development of older academic and scientific traditions. The different social and political situations in which the historical studies of the two German States take place have an impact on the analysis of historical events and connections, and can also influence the formulation and focus of research areas. No academic discipline can survive outside time and space.

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E *History less than any other discipline...*

Rudolf VON THADDEN: The result is that historical studies in the two Republics today noticeably differ in their results, even though they can both go back to common points of reference in their academic past. However, it is highly significant that these differences do not simply parallel the history of the two German States, but - within certain limits - follow their own individual gradual process of development. Whilst the collective consciousness of the Germans from both East and West has remained united and intact far above and beyond the formation of the two separate States, and has only started to be affected with the advent of the present-day second postwar generation, historical studies on each side of the border have rapidly developed as separate, only to re-discover the same areas of discussion once again. As research on the Reformation, on the Prussian State, or on Bismarck's founding of the Reich shows, exchange of ideas is much easier and more profitable today than during the first decades after the creation of the two separate States.

E *This looks somewhat paradoxical.*

Rudolf VON THADDEN: The paradox is only apparent, as one can see when the conditions of this development are observed more carefully. In its founding and reinforcement phases, the GDR was obliged for better or for worse to give its historiography a revolutionary approach, and refuse any aspect which might cast a shadow on the new historical quality of the "first worker and peasant State on German land", which was being constructed with such an all

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The result of voting for Hitler (Der Wahre Jacob; Berlin 7.9.1932)

encompassing effort; otherwise historiography would not have had any progressive function in the political process. Later, however, after the successful stabilization of “socialist” positions in the GDR, historians have felt they could afford to consider German history again as a whole, not to

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concentrate only on German revolutionary traditions, and not to stylize German history simply as the pre-history of the GDR.

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I *Where, then, does historiography stand in the GDR today?*

Rudolf VON THADDEN: With its appreciation of pan-German factors, this new approach to historiography in the GDR finds expression in so-called "heritage" school, which allows it to take seriously into consideration even the history of non-revolutionary forces, and restate their importance in the more general historical picture of cause and effect. "Heritage" here is used to mean the complete account of the cultural performance and achievement of past epochs with which a relationship must be drawn in the process of "critical adaptation". On the other hand, revolutionary "tradition" is used to mean the selection, appropriation and re-elaboration of historical heritage in light of the interests of certain specific classes, and thus embodies to a certain extent the store of experience of social groups and classes.

According to this approach, the German past is to be guarded and tended to as an undivided heritage. Without any prejudice over its more shadowy side, German history has to be observed as a whole, and the division of the country is not to be allowed to develop into a division in its history. Luther is thus neither to be depicted as a simple "tool of the aristocracy", as reductive social history would have him, nor as the driving force of the Reformation in Central Germany, as regional history would narrowly define him, but as a central figure in German history as a whole. And even Frederick the Great or Bismarck are not to be primarily considered of interest because of their position in the history of Prussia and the territory beyond the Elbe, but rather because of their significance in historical vicissitudes of much greater importance. The present-day inner-German border, then, does not provide an easy answer to the long-standing disputes over the problems of the pan-national history of Germany.

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I *One cannot conclude, however, that differences are disappearing.*

Rudolf VON THADDEN: Of course not. It does not follow from the above conclusions that harmony has suddenly come to reign, and that differences in approach have been smoothed out. Just to take an example, the historical

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evaluation of the Reformation according to the Marxist-Leninist interpretation, despite its re-evaluation of Luther, is still very different from that of the other historiographical traditions. And the dispute between the two will still continue over the question of the instrumentalization of historical study for present-day political purposes. Yet this does not prevent there being an important and meaningful dialogue over the subject of German history.

It will be even more necessary to be careful not to transfer without distinction divergent approaches in the field of historiography over into the field of factual history. In particular, theoretically founded differences in opinion should not be allowed to influence the discussion of concrete research problems. Dialogue between historians must not become a heavier burden than dialogue between active politicians. Just as in commercial exchange between East and West, there are also areas in history which should proceed for the best, unaffected by phases of political controversy.

E *Can then this dialogue among historians have a role in the development of inter-German relations?*

Rudolf VON THADDEN: A rule worthy of note - which is independent of inner-German dialogue, but applies to it as well- is that academic study and science must not be expected to contribute more than they are able. To put it more bluntly - those who expect historical studies to resolve the division of Germany are not only deluding themselves as to the limits of such studies, but are also doing harm to dialogue across and beyond the border. History is no substitute for politics, even though it is certainly not a field completely separated from politics.

This means that because of the separate development of each of the two German states, history must constantly be evaluating its position in this process. If history does not sufficiently reflect the reality of the division of Germany, which has by now lasted for more than a generation, it will run the danger of operating in too rarefied an atmosphere, and of losing any influence in the formation of political opinions and judgments. On the other hand, however, if it is thought that history best serves the seemingly endless German identity question by providing a theoretical background to each and every decision taken by politicians, it will also be no wonder if historians lose their

prestige. History is neither a temple to the Muses, elevated above reality, nor the mere reflection of daily politics.

Historians must neither disengage themselves completely from the political debate, nor operate only as the suppliers of historical images. Whenever immediate, short-term aims are pursued through the study of German history, the highly over-simplified answers to the identity issue it ends up providing to the debate can be even more dangerous than content analysis, and can only lead to further identity crises, or even to the loss of identity. If - to put forward a very unlikely hypothesis - Germans living today were given the possibility of combining all their experiences, hopes and fears into a reunited national concept of history, the result could be mere evasion from reality. These people would begin to see history as a museum exhibit irrelevant to their own identity, and this would be much worse than having two separate German histories.