

**Christoph Cornelißen (Hg.), Geschichtswissenschaft im Geist der Demokratie. Wolfgang J. Mommsen und seine Generation, Berlin (Akademie Verlag) 2010, 364 S., 7 Abb., ISBN 978-3-05-004932-8, EUR 49,80.**

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*Zeitgeschichte* in Germany has now been focusing for some time on the 1970s and 1980s, and has produced a substantial number of studies on the period »after the boom« (Lutz Raphael/Anselm Doering-Manteuffel). By contrast, the history of the (West) German historical profession is still lagging behind and remains by and large confined to the first two postwar decades. What makes this gap even more problematic is the fact that most of the existing historiographical texts have been written by historians at the very center of the new developments during the 1970s, most notably Hans-Ulrich Wehler and Jürgen Kocka, or by sympathetic observers such as Georg Iggers. Thus the critical evaluation of these decades remains a historiographical desideratum. The present volume, a *Gedenkschrift* for the late Wolfgang J. Mommsen, constitutes a step in the right direction.

Wolfgang J. Mommsen was never a partisan of the self-proclaimed »critical« social history in general or the *Bielefelder Schule* in particular. Yet he served on the editorial board of »Geschichte und Gesellschaft« and was a forceful critic of what he perceived as the methodologically traditional political history dominant in the early Federal Republic. As Mommsen himself put it almost three decades later, »wir waren damals natürlich auch geneigt, unsere Väter-Generation in die Pfanne zu hauen«<sup>1</sup>. Arguably as importantly, Mommsen shared with historians such as Wehler, Kocka, and his twin brother Hans Mommsen, the conviction that it was crucial for historians to address a wider audience as public intellectuals, by frequently publishing in daily and weekly papers as well as by not shying away from controversial and politicized debates, such as the Historikerstreit of the 1980s.

The volume opens with an excellent chapter by the editor Christoph Cornelißen that places Wolfgang J. Mommsen's academic trajectory into its broader generational context. He cautiously and convincingly discusses the degree to which the generational model can be useful for historiographical developments and analyzes the connections between historiographical and political departures of the 1970s. In addition, Cornelißen discusses Mommsen's studies on the German Empire as a generational product and reveals the extent to which his critical historiographical perspective was linked to his youth and early adulthood experiences in Nazi Germany and the early Federal Republic. As a result, and most importantly, Cornelißen outlines a number of issues that historians working on the historical profession's developments during the 1970s and 1980s should tackle. Yet one aspect Cornelißen only touches upon (and which

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Wolfgang Mommsen, in: Rüdiger Hohls, Konrad H. Jarausch (Hg.), *Versäumte Fragen. Deutsche Historiker im Schatten des Nationalsozialismus*, Stuttgart, München 2000, p. 214.

would have deserved greater attention) is the international context of West German historiography. Developments in the United States, of crucial academic importance for many of Mommsen's contemporaries, are barely mentioned, and the same is true for England, where Lawrence Stone (not Norman Stone, as Cornelißen writes) in the late 1970s called for a »return to the narrative«, as well as France. Considering the manifold international contacts of many of the historians under review, this primarily national focus is puzzling.

The rest of the volume is divided into four—partially overlapping—categories: part I (»Generation und Forschungsinteresse«) contains essays on specific topics often tackled (or avoided) by the »1945ers«. The articles of part II (»Werk- und Rezeptionsanalysen«) deal, for the most part fairly specifically, with issues which Wolfgang J. Mommsen extensively wrote about. Part III (»Zur Max-Weber-Rezeption«) focuses on facets of the reception of the iconic social scientist on whom Mommsen in 1959 published his now classic dissertation. The last section, part IV (»Der Blick von außen«), contains disparate texts on related historiographical matters.

Two questions implicitly or explicitly are at the center of most of the volume's essays collected in parts I to III: the first relates to the usefulness of the generational concept for historiographical studies, and many authors point to its limitations rather than its strengths. They emphasize (in my view convincingly) not only the widely varying political, confessional, and methodological orientations of the »1945ers« but also the similarities between the left-liberal members of that generation and their younger colleagues such as Jürgen Kocka and Hans-Jürgen Puhle. The second question concerns Wolfgang J. Mommsen's methodological »modernity«. Mommsen, after all, already in his 1971 inaugural lecture called for a »Geschichtswissenschaft jenseits des Historismus«, and later published on the methodological developments of the West German historical profession<sup>2</sup>. In contrasting his earlier ambitious program with his later writings, all authors seem to agree that Mommsen's own magna opera did not live up to the high expectations.

It is difficult to argue that Mommsen ever employed the interdisciplinary methodologies he advocated in the early 1970s. Still, the implications of this assessment for Mommsen's overall historiographical significance are less straightforward. First, the question of what constitutes a "modern" methodology will remain eternally contested, and most, if not all, of the optimistic programmatic statements of the late 1960s and early 1970s appear dated to many historians today. Second, scholars can contribute to historiographical progress in different ways, and the encouragement of one's students to venture in different directions is one of them. Looking at the long and distinguished list of Wolfgang Mommsen's students, it is clear that he never strove to form a school in the narrow sense, and that the results seem to prove him right.

The book's last section offers a few »perspectives from outside«. Christof Dipper contrasts the group of

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<sup>2</sup> Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *Geschichtswissenschaft jenseits des Historismus*, Düsseldorf 1971.

historians born in 1943 with the »1945ers« and argues that while the latter tended toward an exaggerated politicization of historiography, the slightly younger cohort avoided this problematic tendency. The fact that Dipper himself belongs to the cohort he intends to analyze, however, turns his article into a self-congratulatory exercise. In addition, a look at his fellow 1943ers reveals that some of them were (and still are) rather political scholars, for example the former director of the Institut für Zeitgeschichte, Horst Möller, even though they preferred to exert political influence behind the scenes rather than publicly.

Despite such minor objections, the *Gedenkschrift* offers many important insights into historiographical developments of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, and thus should be read by anyone interested in this subject.