

# On the death of German historian Ernst Nolte

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The historian Ernst Nolte, who succumbed to a brief but serious illness on Thursday at the age of 93, has been dead, at least from the standpoint of his academic reputation, for thirty years. The *Historikerstreit* (Historians' Dispute), which he initiated in 1986 with his downplaying of National Socialism, culminated in his defeat and isolation.

Well-respected historians and intellectuals, such as Jürgen Habermas, Hans-Ulrich Wehler, Heinrich August Winkler, Hans Mommsen and Eberhard Jäckel sharply attacked him and demonstrated that he was relativizing the worst crimes in human history. Nolte subsequently moved only in ultraconservative and explicitly right-wing extremist circles.

Despite this, Nolte's ideological and political resurrection occurred prior to his physical death. In 2000, the conservative Germany Foundation, aligned with the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union, awarded him the Konrad Adenauer Prize. However, CDU Chairwoman Angela Merkel refused to personally present the prize to Nolte. The future chancellor, whose rapid political rise was thanks not least to her keen sense of expediency, decided at the time that it would be damaging for her career.

This has now changed. In recent years, leading media outlets—including *Die Welt*, *Der Spiegel* and the *European*—have offered Nolte a platform for his revisionist historical theses, without any objections being raised. Jörg Baberowski, an historian at Berlin's Humboldt University, attempted to legitimize him in *Der Spiegel* in 2014, stating, "Nolte was done an injustice. Historically speaking, he was right." When the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) protested against this, the media responded with a wave of indignation. "Mobbing: Trotskyist style," was one headline in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ).

The obituaries now praise Nolte, with few exceptions.

Berthold Seewald wrote in *Die Welt* that "many accusations in the *Historikerstreit* arose from an over-

dramatization," and complained about the "timeworn method of disavowing undesirable theses through an—alleged—association with Nolte."

Bernhard Schulz raved in the *Tagesspiegel* and on *Zeit Online*, "He was concerned with understanding: not simply about who and what, but about the why of history. He was called, with certain undertones, a philosopher of history; given his life's work this is an honour."

Lorenz Jäger in the FAZ linked Nolte's "palpable isolation" to the "sharp attacks" of his opponents and his "own misfortune"—as if the justification of Nazi crimes was merely a "misfortune."

Yet Nolte did not moderate his extremist views as he grew older; rather he articulated them ever more openly.

While during the *Historikerstreit*, Nolte formulated his thesis that the "'class murder' of the Bolsheviks [was] the logical and factual precursor of the 'race murder' of the National socialists" in an esoteric language and placed a question mark over it, in the 1990s his downplaying of National Socialism was on the verge of Holocaust denial.

When *Der Spiegel* asked him in 1994 whether he had "doubts about the deliberate mass extermination of the Jews by gas," he answered, "I cannot rule out the possibility that a comparatively greater number of victims died from epidemics, mistreatment and mass shootings than were killed in the gas chambers." The inspection of gas chambers for traces of hydrogen cyanide by the American Holocaust denier Fred Leuchter was described by Nolte as "important."

In the same year, Nolte described the "indiscriminate stigmatisation of 'anti-Semitism'" as a "simple, and yet effective, weapon." Four years later, he asserted that Hitler had "substantial reasons" for viewing the Jews as hostile from 1939 onwards, "and for adopting corresponding measures."

In 2014, *Der Spiegel* cited his assertion—in the same article in which Baberowski praised his historical correctness—that Poland and Britain bore significant responsibility for the Second World War because they did not unite with Hitler. He blamed the Jews for having

“their own stake in the Gulag,’ because some Bolsheviks were Jews.”

In September of the same year, the *European* published without comment an article by Nolte entitled “Breaking the taboo.” In it, Nolte complained that after Germany’s defeat, Hitler was transformed “from the liberator to the ‘absolute evil’” who could “not be spoken of seriously or in a scholarly manner.” He added that “this one-sided view continues to damage us today.”

Missing from the official policies of the German government were “tendencies of ‘self-assertion,’” for which Hitler could emerge as the “forgotten representative,” Nolte went on. In this regard, he referred to Hitler’s efforts to combat “the tendency of the ‘death of the people’” and accused the government of a policy of “tolerating and even promoting unregulated immigration.”

Why have these right-wing extremist declarations, unlike in 1986, been met with no opposition? Why was Nolte given a forum to express them? And why are so many obituaries now praising him?

This can be explained only by the return of German militarism and the rightward lurch of the academic milieu bound up with it. Noting the deep-rooted opposition to militarism within the population, we wrote in the foreword to *Scholarship or War Propaganda*, a book that examines the conflict between the IYSSE and right-wing professors Baberowski and Herfried Münkler at Humboldt University and other advocates of German great power politics: “The public relations campaigns of the defence ministry and the propaganda of the media are not sufficient to overcome this deep-rooted opposition. A new narrative of the 20th century is required, a falsification of history that conceals and justifies the crimes of German imperialism.”

Nolte’s downplaying of the crimes of National Socialism suits this narrative. He embodied more than anyone else the continuity of the German ruling elites through a history rich in crimes and catastrophes.

Ernst Nolte was born on January 11, 1923, to a bourgeois Catholic family in Witten, North Rhein-Westphalia. On the same day, French troops occupied the Ruhr region, including Nolte’s birthplace, provoking catastrophic inflation and social unrest culminating in a failed uprising by the Communist Party in October and Hitler’s attempted coup in Munich in November.

Although Nolte did not consciously experience these events, they were a decisive factor in his life and his anticommunism, which subsequently made him into an

apologist for Hitler.

A disfiguring of his hand at birth prevented Nolte from being drafted into the *Wehrmacht* and sent to the front like so many others in his generation. He studied philosophy, German and classical philology and became a pupil of Martin Heidegger.

Last year, Nolte told *Tumult* magazine of his infatuation with the philosopher who contributed greatly to the subordination of the universities to the Nazi regime. “From his first words, [Heidegger] became an orator who spoke of Heraclitus’s Logos with the utmost concentration and with his gleaming eyes transformed the entire audience into his devoted listeners.”

In the last weeks of the war, Nolte visited Heidegger in the town of Messkirch, held extensive discussions with him and agreed to write a dissertation on philosophy under Heidegger “and thereby to belong permanently to his closest circle.” This failed due to the allies’ removal of Heidegger’s authority to teach.

Nolte became a secondary school teacher for ancient languages and German. In 1952, he received his doctorate on the topic of “self-alienation and the dialectic in German idealism and Marx.” Only in 1963 did he achieve the status of a professor of history with his book *Fascism in its Epoch*. This book, which compared Italian, German and French fascism, is considered a classic and does not yet clearly display his later right-wing tendencies.

However, by the time of the student movement in the late 1960s, Nolte was already on the right politically. In 1970, he cofounded the Freedom of Scholarship League, which saw itself as the mouthpiece for university professors against the “terrorist views of ideological, fanatical groups at universities,” i.e., the rebelling students, and against the further “democratisation” of the universities.

Then on 6 June 1986, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* published Nolte’s article “The past that will not pass away,” thus initiating the *Historikerstreit* and launching Nolte’s career as the premier historian of Nazi apologetics.



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