

## REVIEW ESSAYS

### WRITING THE NATION INTO HISTORY

THE PAST AS HISTORY: NATIONAL IDENTITY AND HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN MODERN EUROPE. By Stefan Berger, with Christian Conrad. Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. Pp. xiii, 570.

#### ABSTRACT

This article considers the fruits of an elaborate multi-year European Science Foundation (ESF)-sponsored research project on the reciprocal dynamics joining nineteenth- and twentieth-century historiography to the varying trajectories of European state-formation. It reads the culminating volume in the eight-book series sponsored by this ESF project against the wider associated discussions and the larger context of the contemporary historiography of nationalism. It seeks to draw out the defining features of the approach involved (conceptually, methodologically, intellectually, politically), while pointing to a number of the entailments and lacunae. In particular, it considers some of the attenuations and omissions resulting from the adoption of an overly institutional and “top-down” approach to the chosen thematic of “nation and narration.”

*Keywords:* historiography, nation-building, Europe, race, universities, transnational, comparative, popular culture

With career-long consistency and impressive results, Stefan Berger has worked for many years on the complex interconnectedness between historiography and nation-forming, between nationalism and the writing of history, between historical scholarship and national identification.<sup>1</sup> This had already begun with his earliest book, *The British Labour Party and the German Social Democrats, 1900–1931* (1994), which explored such questions more obliquely. Uncommonly for its time, it not only took an explicitly comparative approach, but also read the contrasting and convergent elements of left-wing party-formation through the differences between national political cultures and the associated patterns of historiographical understanding. While teaching in South Wales (at University of Wales, Cardiff 1991–2000; University of Glamorgan 2000–05), he then deepened this comparative interest toward the study of coalfield societies and their

1. The title page of *The Past as History* carries Christoph Conrad’s name as an auxiliary author. However, as the Preface explains, “the writing of the book fell almost exclusively to Stefan Berger” (x), so for reasons of practical convenience, I refer throughout my discussion to Berger alone. No slight is intended to Conrad, who (as Berger makes clear) both helped conceptualize the book and joined continuously in the life of the ESF project during 2003–08. He also participated in the writing process as Berger’s key interlocutor and reader.

labor movements, while expanding into comparative labor history more elaborately.<sup>2</sup> He also established himself as a leading historiographer.<sup>3</sup>

This combination of social and intellectual history has served Berger well. Between 2003 and 2008, he joined with Swiss historian of *mentalités* Guy Marchall to co-chair a European Science Foundation (ESF) research program on “Representations of the Past: The Writing of National Histories in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Europe.” Mobilizing over 200 scholars from more than twenty separate countries in an intensive series of workshops and conferences, this project “looked in depth at different aspects of the interrelationship between history writing and the construction of national identities.” Its four networks focused on “the institutionalization and professionalization of historical writing” (led by Ilaria Porciani and Jo Tollebeek); “the interrelationship of national master narratives and other non-spatial master narratives, such as religion, ethnicity/race, class, and gender” (Stefan Berger, Chris Lorenz); “the spatial others of ‘nation’ in history writing, i.e. subnational and transnational forms of history writing, including local, regional, European, imperial, and global/universal history” (Matthias Middell, Lluís Roura y Aulinas); and “the role of borders and borderlands in the construction of national histories across Europe” (Tibor Frank, Frank Hadler). In the resulting eight-volume published series, these four themes were extended by two more, concerning “Historians as Nation Builders in Modern Europe” (Berger, Lorenz) and “The Uses of the Middle Ages in Modern European States” (Robert J. W. Evans, Guy Marchall). The menu was completed by a splendidly produced atlas charting the institutional growth of European historical scholarship between 1800 and the present, along with Berger’s capstone volume here under review.<sup>4</sup>

2. See *Toward a Comparative History of Coalfield Societies*, ed. Stefan Berger, Andy Croll, and Norman LaPorte (London: Ashgate, 2005); also *Nationalism, Labour and Ethnicity*, ed. Stefan Berger and Angel Smith (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1999); *The Force of Labor: The Western European Labor Movement and the Working Class in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Stefan Berger and David Broughton (Oxford: Berg, 1995). Berger now holds the Chair of Social History and Social Movements at the Bochum-based University of the Ruhr.

3. See Stefan Berger, *The Search for Normality: National and Historical Consciousness in Germany since 1800* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1997); Berger, *Inventing the Nation: Germany* (London: Arnold, 2004); *Writing National Histories: Western Europe since 1800*, coedited with Mark Donovan and Kevin Passmore (London: Routledge, 1999), and *Writing History: Theory and Practice*, coedited with Heiko Feldner and Kevin Passmore [2003] (London: Bloomsbury, 2010).

4. Full details, all published by Palgrave Macmillan: Vol. I: *Atlas of the Institutions of European Historiographies: The Making of a Profession, 1800–2005*, ed. Ilaria Porciani and Lutz Raphael (2010); Vol. II: *Setting the Standards: Institutions, Networks, and Communities of National Historiography*, ed. Ilaria Porciani and Jo Tollebeek (2012); Vol. III: *The Contested Nation: Ethnicity, Class, Religion, and Gender in National Histories*, ed. Stefan Berger and Chris Lorenz (2008); Vol. IV: *Transnational Challenges to National History Writing*, ed. Matthias Middell and Lluís Roura y Aulinas (2012); Vol. V: *Disputed Territories and Shared Pasts: Overlapping National Histories in Modern Europe*, ed. Tibor Frank and Frank Hadler (2011); Vol. VI: *Nationalizing the Past: Historians as Nation Builders in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Europe*, ed. Stefan Berger and Chris Lorenz (2010); Vol. VII: *The Uses of the Middle Ages in Modern European States: History, Nationhood, and the Search for Origins*, ed. R. J. W. Evans and Guy P. Marchall (2011); Vol. VIII: Berger and Conrad, *The Past as History*. A variety of related publications also appeared along the way, including *Narrating the Nation: Representations in History, Media, and the Arts*, ed. Stefan Berger, Linas Eriksonas, and Andrew Mycock (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008); *Writing the Nation: A Global Perspective*, ed. Stefan Berger (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); and *Popularizing National Pasts, 1800 to the Present*, ed. Stefan Berger, Chris Lorenz, and Billie Melman (London: Routledge, 2012).

By now a strong scholarly consensus has gathered around history's nineteenth-century emergence as a recognized academic discipline. Beginning earlier in the century and quickening through the pre-1914 decades, its creation as a subject for study at university broadly kept pace with processes of nation-forming, matched by an equally novel institutional complex of archives, libraries, academies, museums, and learned societies and their journals, inside the wider associational field of civil society. Country by country, a mounting store of scholarship has confirmed this picture, while broadening toward the academic disciplines at large. In the modern British field this dated from the early 1980s, building from John Burrow's pioneering study of liberalism and historiography, his coauthored account of "the science of politics" with Stefan Collini and Donald Winch, and monographs like Philippa Levine's on history's relation to antiquarianism and archaeology.<sup>5</sup> A rich corpus of equivalent work appeared for Germany too, tracing historical interests across academic disciplines more widely, from philology, archaeology, and theology to the "sciences of state" (*Staatswissenschaften*), economics, geography, and nascent sociology.<sup>6</sup> This same picture can be replicated for most national historiographies. An earlier unevenness in our knowledge across Europe as a whole has also been mitigated by the cultural machinery of European integration—not just by the ESF as such, but through multiple trans-European research networks and interuniversity consortia, by foundations like Soros, by particular institutional crossroads like the Central European University and European University Institute, and by countless individual collaborations.

One of Berger's many virtues is that he marshals precisely this immense richness of empirical knowledge by means of an exceptionally capacious critical understanding. He provides a stock-taking of the most erudite, theoretically sophisticated, dauntingly comparative, and imposingly well-informed kind. Using a version of the "field theory" associated with Pierre Bourdieu, he sees the production of "national histories" as an instance of the "social conditioning of knowledge" in Karl Mannheim's sense, borne by the material processes of nation-building and rivalries among nations following the French Revolutionary

5. John Burrow, *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981); John Burrow, Stefan Collini, and Donald Winch, *That Noble Science of Politics: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Intellectual History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Philippa Levine, *The Amateur and the Professional: Antiquarians, Historians, and Archaeologists in Victorian England, 1838–1886* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986). For a more recent survey: Michael Bentley, *Modernizing England's Past: English Historiography in the Age of Modernism, 1870–1970* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

6. Especially David F. Lindenfeld, *The Practical Imagination: The German Sciences of State in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Friedrich Lenger, *Werner Sombart, 1863–1941: Eine Biographie* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1994) and *Sozialwissenschaft um 1900: Studien zu Werner Sombart und einigen seiner Zeitgenossen* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2009); Erik Grimmer-Solem, *The Rise of Historical Economics and Social Reform in Germany, 1864–1894* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Suzanne L. Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009); J. Laurence Hare, *Excavating Nations: Archaeology, Museums, and the German-Danish Borderlands* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015). For a particular historian densely contextualized, see Roger Chickering, *Karl Lamprecht: A German Academic Life (1856–1915)* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1993).

and Napoleonic eras (3). With characteristic care and completeness, he concedes not only the deep-historical diversity and persisting unevenness in the full range of Europe's national-state trajectories, but also the evident importance of the medieval and early modern antecedents.<sup>7</sup> He opts nonetheless for a forthrightly modernity-centered framework, heavily indebted to Reinhart Koselleck's conception of the Enlightenment-related *Sattelzeit* ("saddle period"). Astutely aware of the salient patterns of thinking about nationhood and nationalism since the 1980s, while thoroughly versed in the bewilderingly elaborate literatures for particular cases, he asks: "how were national forms of historical knowledge shaped at specific times and places in modern Europe and how did they change over time?" (3) In his resulting actor-centered account, the roster of historians included not just the expanding numbers of academically accredited university-based scholars, but a wider array of writers, publicists, and private practitioners that reached in principle all across the arts, museums, and popular culture. Within the terms of the ESF project and for the purposes of this particular book, however, "writing" or "narrating the nation" is attributed to historians in the stricter professional sense.

Berger is nothing if not attentive to complexity and nuance. Very few debates, key interventions, pertinent theories, or methodological departures of the past two centuries elude him, whether immediately in the multivolume *Writing the Nation Series* per se or elsewhere in his *oeuvre*. Nearly all of the current book's substantive treatments distill the longer discussions initially tried out in some earlier essay or volume. This is notably true of the Introduction ("Constructing the Nation through History," 1-27). Thus a few sentences on François Hartog's changing "regimes of historicity" (5) follow an extensive explication earlier in *The Contested Nation*, just as the permeable boundaries "between history writing and myth making" (10) were first explored in *Nationalizing the Past* and in Berger's long-running conversation with Chris Lorenz.<sup>8</sup> Countless references and insights, encountered here in necessarily succinct or elliptical form, go back to such earlier efforts: from microhistory and *Alltagsgeschichte* to gender history and critiques of "orientalism"; from the rise of comparative and transnational analysis to the fresh challenges of the global; from borderlands and hybridity to the terrain of the popular; and so forth. The entire exposition in *The Past as History* reflects these larger, cumulative labors of the ESF project in that sense.

Yet this both attenuates and concentrates Berger's account. It draws the concept of national history around a presumed core of commonalities and affiliations more restrictively than the unruly complexities of any particular national past can actually allow; and it renders the nation as far too contextually self-sufficient.

7. His classic typology separates: (a) the longer-run territorial sovereignties of the western European seaboard; (b) the dismantled sovereignties of Poland, Lithuania, Hungary, and the Bohemian lands; and (c) the sovereignties-in-prospect of the so-called "historyless peoples" in Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean.

8. See Berger and Lorenz, "Introduction: National History Writing in Europe in a Global Age," in *The Contested Nation*, esp. 11-23; Lorenz, "Drawing the Line: 'Scientific History' between Myth-Making and Myth-Breaking," in Berger, Eriksonas, and Mycock, eds., *Narrating the Nation*, 35-55. The entire contents of these two volumes and some of the others, notably Berger and Lorenz, eds., *Nationalizing the Past*, vitally inform the detailed summary treatments in *The Past as History*, which entirely presuppose the imposing knowledge base and the intensive groundwork conducted during the life of the ESF project.

On the one hand, historical writing qualifies for Berger's discussion only by dint of its "national" meanings—by feeding into the forming of national identity and helping fashion the national meta-narrative concerned—whatever the particular author's conscious purposes. Yet on the other hand, Berger makes that national past into far too efficient a container. He even slips sometimes toward tautology: "national" histories can be any whose authors observe the practical dictates or circumstantial logics of a national setting (linguistic and territorial borders, geography, institutional memberships, civic identification, underlying cultural affiliations); those histories' contents become in consequence *ipso facto* "national." Whether or not historians were consciously writing for or about the nation, the logics of national belonging and the necessary entailments of the national-state setting translated perforce into "national" contributions—from governmental action and explicitly patriotic imperatives to the social patterning of a shared political life and the institutional effects of schooling, conscription, religious and other kinds of ritual observance, residential sociality, and so on. The implicit tendency of Berger's account is to enlist any possible historical writing in this direction, implying a default process of national-state integration. Thus historiography may work to confirm the national narrative (may "narrate the nation") without openly averring its priority. As Berger remarks, "the pervasiveness of national history guarantees the propping up of collective national identities and national master narratives" (376). "No reader of this volume," he concludes, can "escape the sense of the sheer power and longevity of national histories and their influence on national identity formation across Europe" (373).

On that basis, Berger orders his account chronologically into five chapters, framed by a strong Introduction and Conclusion. The first ("National History before the Nation State—from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment," 20-79) sets the scene, and the next ("The Invention of European National Traditions during the First Half of the Nineteenth Century," 80-139) explains the originary symbiosis of nation-forming and historical scholarship: "Only by endorsing the national principle with all its energy . . . was historical science able to establish itself against other sciences and free itself as a discipline in its own right."<sup>9</sup> The third chapter, the longest of the book and foundational for its argument, then charts the pan-European institutionalizing and professionalizing of history as an academic discipline ("Scientificity and Historiographical Nationalism," 140-221). The last two chapters carry the story through the twentieth century, hinging on the end of the Second World War: if the century's first half saw the climax of patriotic historiography, leaving little space beyond its aggressively embattled reach (226-284), then its second half registered both the moral-political resilience and organized recrudescence of "national master narratives," helped by the Cold War's complicated entailments (285-357). Closer to the present, Berger cautiously detects a widening ambivalence of some historians against the hegemony of "the national principle" (always unevenly by country), as political diversity, transnational communications, plural methodologies, expanding subject-matters, and the historical profession's changing sociology all loosened its hold on the

9. Wilhelm Giesebrecht (1814-89) in the first volume of the *Historische Zeitschrift* in 1859, quoted by Berger, *Past as History*, 80.

possible forms of historical writing. If the close of the Cold War enabled a definite “re-nationalizing” of historical consciousness, accordingly, then, the dismantling of its constraints combined with the unfolding consequences of European integration to enable a more “self-critical and self-reflexive” relation to the national historiographical paradigm. At the same time, so long as the nation continues supplying the main sites of education, research, archiving, and memory, its true susceptibility to being transcended will stay an open question: “Methodological developments such as the move to comparative, transnational, and memory history have had the ambiguous effect of questioning and reinforcing the national framework at the same time” (357).

In its critical historiographical breadth and genuinely European scope, Berger’s book is a *tour de force*. It succeeds best in its nineteenth-century chapters, which cleave most readily to the critical history of ideas and their forms of institutional realization. Here Berger builds confidently on foundations that a wealth of previous scholarship can provide. It was precisely through the process of constructing the national past (“writing the nation”), he argues, that historians acquired their cultural recognition, supplying the imagined nation with a primary authorized voice. Profoundly informed by Romanticism and the diffusion of the ideas of Johann Gottfried von Herder, specifically *national* thinking emerged during the earlier nineteenth century in dialectical conversation with Anglo-Scottish and French versions of a universal history. Essayed originally in Poland, Ireland, and Greece, such thought coalesced more elaborately in German-speaking Central Europe, before permeating intellectual life further to the east. Formed in the discursive landscape left by the French Revolution and inspired by idealized projections of the particular *Volk* (people) concerned, nationalists believed passionately in the unassailable authenticity of their nation’s cultural longevity, presenting its growth and unique characteristics as the organic unfolding of a deep-historical essence. As the nation realized its political faculties of statehood, so did its historians acquire their recognized institutional arenas: “the thorough nationalization of historical writing coincided with the professionalization of the historical discipline” to put historians “in the vanguard of nation-builders across Europe.”<sup>10</sup> They secured that role via the later nineteenth-century state’s distinctive architecture of higher learning—namely, “university departments of history, national academies, archives, libraries, dictionaries, museums, as well as the setting up of historical associations, commissions, journals, and source editions” (22). The pervasive influence of what Berger calls *historism* became “a means of lending ‘scientific’ authority to the subject of history writing.” It “credit[ed] its practitioners with a special role as interpreters of the past who possessed, through their science, the key to understanding the present and predicting the future.”<sup>11</sup>

10. Stefan Berger, “The Power of National Pasts: Writing National History in Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Europe,” in Berger, ed., *Writing the Nation*, 54.

11. *Ibid.* In translating the German *Historismus*, Berger prefers “historism” to the more usual “historicism,” which he reserves for the German *Historicismus*. As defined by Karl Popper, the latter “is based on the notion that history develops according to predetermined laws towards a particular end,” whereas the former denotes historical process or historicity per se. For Berger, “historism” derives from the thinking and practice of Leopold von Ranke, reflecting “an evolutionary, reformist concept which understands all political order as historically developed and grown.” See Berger, *Past as History*, 22, note 58.



This case is entirely persuasive, as far as it goes. If devolving more straightforwardly into country-by-country coverage and base-touching completeness, the twentieth-century chapters work very well too. To an extent this survey-quality follows from Berger's basic intellectual method. Each chapter leads with its overarching thematics, which are then developed via cascading country-by-country illustrations, some more extensively developed than others. Although never less than apposite and telling, these surveys necessarily contain some lacunae. The treatment of Michail Pokorovskii (268-274) omits Roman Szporluk's edition of his essays, for example, which would itself open a fascinating window onto less obvious pathways of national historiography, given Szporluk's provenance as a Ukrainian Pole growing up partially on Soviet territory, who left Poland for study in Oxford (1958-61) and thence for an academic career in the United States.<sup>12</sup> While noting the impact of anti-fascist and anti-Communist emigrations ("History Writing from Exile," 277-82), Berger misses much of this cross-fertilizing, which works subtly against the sufficiency of his national paradigm. Thus from Lewis Namier and Geoffrey Elton to Michael Postan and Eric Hobsbawm, emigrés were decisive for British intellectual life in the twentieth century, whether in historical studies or across the social sciences, philosophy, and some other parts of the humanities more generally.<sup>13</sup> This pointedly calls into question the aptness of the "national principle" for capturing these more diverse grounds of historiographical innovation during the period. In another instance, neither of the earliest trailblazers of Soviet history in Britain (E. H. Carr, Leonard Schapiro) nor the twin pioneers there of post-1917 Soviet social history (Teodor Shanin, Moshe Lewin) conform to the national-historiographical model: the complicated international orientations of the one pair and the patently cosmopolitan affiliations of the other (namely Jewish, Lithuanian, Polish, Soviet, Israeli, French, British) lead in quite different directions. Their chosen specialties place these figures already beyond the framework Berger wants to provide, suggesting the self-confirming selectivity of his approach.<sup>14</sup>

These attenuations follow from Berger's method. Rather than the fleetingly illustrative citations to this or that particular historian's work (impressively

12. After his Oxford studies with Isaiah Berlin and John Plamenatz, Szporluk (born 1933) received his PhD from Stanford, teaching first at the University of Michigan (1965-91), thereafter at Harvard. See Michail N. Pokorovskii, *Russia in World History: Selected Essays*, ed. Roman Szporluk (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970). Szporluk's own works might have further enhanced and complicated Berger's rendition of the nationalism/historiography relationship. See Roman Szporluk, *The Political Thought of Thomas G. Masaryk* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), and *Communism and Nationalism: Karl Marx versus Friedrich List* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

13. Many years ago, Perry Anderson emphasized the transplanted or derivative qualities of British intellectual life and its indebtedness to continental infusions. See Anderson, "Components of the National Culture" (originally 1968) and its subsequent updating, "A Culture in Contraflow," in Perry Anderson, *English Questions* (London: Verso, 1992), 48-104, 193-301. For the obverse: Richard J. Evans, *Cosmopolitan Islanders: British Historians and the European Continent* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Berger notes the influence of Pavel Gavrilovič Vinogradov (1854-1925), but not the wider importance of Russian intellectual emigration for British agrarian history and thence for national thought. See especially Peter Gatrell, "Historians and Peasants: Studies of Medieval English Society in a Russian Context," *Past and Present* 96 (August 1982), 22-50.

14. None of the four appears in Berger's book.

wide-ranging in themselves), the complexities ideally deserved more extensive critical exegesis. Thus in closing his treatment of “re-nationalization” (“The Return of a More Positively Accentuated National History in the 1980s,” 318-325), Berger refers only in passing to the “much more measured and differentiated assessment of the [Italian] Resistance” (325) provided by Claudio Pavone’s 1991 book on the subject, which moved debate finally beyond its long-entrenched celebration/debunking dichotomy. Yet Pavone’s magisterial account invited the more detailed and nuanced explication which might have been still more illuminating.<sup>15</sup> To cite another case, Berger’s treatment of post-Communist historiography (“The Impact of the End of Communism on National History Writing in Eastern Europe,” 325-334) seems surprisingly bounded. Some of the more challenging and sophisticated contributions—like István Rév’s remarkably penetrating *Retroactive Justice: Prehistory of Post-Communism* (2005)—go unmentioned.<sup>16</sup> Here again, given the current florescence of historiography around the antecedents of contemporary human rights, the earlier context of Nuremberg and other post-1945 trials, and the burgeoning discourse of “truth and reconciliation,” a major chance has been missed. Each of these contexts, whose implications are deeply unsettling for the collective cultural resources and consensual habits of postwar European democracy, describe grounds of contemporary historiography that exceed the framework of the “national principle” Berger prefers.

In considering the distinctiveness of our contemporary period, Berger is definitely attentive to both the post-1960s dynamics of historiographical diversification and the incipient forms of pluralization now detectable in the present. But the consequences of an overly centered perspective for earlier periods are also worth pondering. Thus on the one hand, Berger methodically disassembles the variety of grounds of identification occurring *beneath* and *beyond* the level of the national—“ethnicity/race and nation”; “religion and nation”; “class and nation”; “gender and nation”; along with the spatial coordinates of regions, borderlands, and larger transnational and imperial contexts of action and thought.<sup>17</sup> Yet these other domains function as essentially *subnational* inside a definite hierarchy of determination. Efficacy and meaning travel *downwards* from the decisive level of the nation’s superordinate importance. “What was striking everywhere” in the nineteenth century, Berger argues, “was the extent to which national history subsumed other spatial and non-spatial forms of history writing” (365). Furthermore, the professionalizing and institutionalizing of historical research worked *with* the grain of this politics of nationhood. Even while denouncing Romantic national narratives of the earlier nineteenth century for their “historical myths and half-truths,” these “more rigorous positivist historiographies did not abandon the national orientation of history writing.”

Quite the contrary, they gave the national storeyines even firmer “scientific” grounding. Professing to be part and parcel of an international community of professional historians

15. See Claudio Pavone, *A Civil War: A History of the Italian Resistance* (London: Verso, 2013).

16. On Rév’s archiving ambitions, see Richard Byrne, “Buried in the Files,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (November 4, 2005), A14-A17.

17. See Berger and Lorenz, “Conclusion: Picking up the Threads,” in Berger and Lorenz, eds., *Contested Nation*, 531-552.



striving to achieve the same high standards of craftsmanship in framing their stories, historians struggled to maintain the cohesion and singularity of national histories in the face of competing narratives of religion and class which threatened to challenge the national paradigm. Under the circumstances, national histories were remarkably successful in subsuming those alternative narrative frameworks under their genre.<sup>18</sup>

This exorbitance of the specifically national field of meaning leaves scant space for other kinds of political agency—for the subtle, messy, confused, and unfinished negotiations through which political subjects (whether individual or collective) usually come to their intended and often partially unconscious place in the nation. Entirely legitimately, Berger conducts his own analysis at the level of the nation per se by considering the institutional development of historical learning, history's coalescence into a discipline, the biographies of historians, the contents of their key works and debates, the overt intersections of history with politics, and so forth—at the level of “institutions, states, leading historians, and master narratives,” in his own summary (19). But fully to grasp the dialectics of “national identity and historical consciousness in modern Europe,” surely we need the microhistorical registers too. Only by tracking those larger ideas of the nation into more mundane locations of popular culture, family life, personal relations, and everyday social practices will we understand just how effectively these historically licensed ideas of the nation can be harnessed and reproduced. Berger sees this, matching his own “top-down perspective” to an intimate historiography of the future that would pay due attention to historians' lives—their “practices, personal emotions, working habits, rhetorical strategies, ethical dispositions and beliefs, as well as family matters and political engagements” (20). But if realized, that *desideratum* would also profoundly shift the picture. For example: in 1933, twenty-nine-year-old Lucie Varga (formerly Rosa Stern), a twice-married single mother from an assimilated Hungarian-Jewish family background, left Vienna for Paris, armed with a PhD on the history of the idea of “The Dark Ages.” She began a four-year research collaboration (and eventual love relationship) with Lucien Febvre, while pursuing her own research into the religious and social history of the Middle Ages. From 1937–39 she published articles on the origins of Nazism/fascism and on the folk culture of two Alpine valleys, richly informed by British anthropology, folklorist ethnology, German-speaking historical scholarship, and psychoanalytic thinking. Severed in 1937 from Febvre and *Annales*, she survived on a variety of improvised jobs, before dying in Toulouse from a diabetic coma in 1941. She pioneered much of the thinking that went into the *Annales*-associated history of *mentalités*.<sup>19</sup> Her brief career (suppressed until the early 1990s) speaks to any number of questions covered by *The Past as History*, including the history of women in the profession, which Berger mentions only briefly (208–210, 282–283). How do we fit Lucie Varga into Berger's framework?

Many further discussions might be crystalized from this extraordinarily rich book. Surprisingly, Berger neglects questions of “race,” citing only its equivalence

18. Berger, “Power of National Pasts,” 55.

19. See the brilliant couplet of treatments by Peter Schöttler, “Lucie Varga: A Central European Refugee in the Circle of the French *Annales*, 1934–41,” and Natalie Zemon Davis, “Women and the World of the *Annales*,” *History Workshop Journal* 33 (Spring 1992), 100–120, 121–137.

with some “other ‘essentially contested concepts,’ such as ethnicity, . . . class, and people” (13-14).<sup>20</sup> Yet in most of Europe until the watershed of World War II, racial and national differences stayed intimately interconnected. Initially quite fungible with other names for the subdivisions of humankind (nation, people, tribe, stem), “race” coalesced by the mid-nineteenth century into a term for populations sharing the same physical characteristics, cultural traits, and social forms deemed both hereditary and unalterable. Though powered forward by biologically evolutionist, social Darwinist, and eugenicist lines of thought, such thinking continued stressing the habits and rituals, institutional traditions, social behavior, and natural environments that gave race its continuity through time. According to Houston Stewart Chamberlain, “race-building” had its foundations in “marriage, custom, intellectual progress, national politics, scientific discoveries, and culture.”<sup>21</sup> To this came a larger vision of the nation’s perilous future in a global environment teeming with yellow, black, and brown inferior peoples. If race had once been a lens for the variety of cultural differences across the discoverable human world, sustaining universalist notions of “human kind” or the “human race,” then its later theorists saw those divisions adversarially, fearing the prospects for survival. “Race” offered to explain those larger “civilizational” patterns of conflict beyond the rhythms and boundaries of the national state. When the fates of peoples seemed ever more subject to a distant overseas (or the landward dangers of the German East), “race” offered to bring nation and empire meaningfully together. As nationally conceived ideals of progress started to fray, the British and the French, or the Germans and any other Europeans, were able to place themselves inside a different providential story. By the early 1900s, the discourse of the nation was not separable from its racialized notations. This breadth is captured plainly enough by Otto Hintze (1861–1940):

History does not talk about races, but about nations. None of those nations represents a pure race, all grew out of racial mixture. What holds them together is not the same blood, but language and culture. That is especially true for the German nation. In comparison the German nation is still not as fixed and homogeneous as the English or the French nations. It still lacks a racial physical foundation. Therefore nothing is more important than to create a strong and fixed national unity in our homeland. In this sense a strong homeland policy is the precondition of world politics—and here we especially think about our endangered eastern regions. A kind of racial politics toward the east will be absolutely vital for our future. We have a stock of humans just as fit as in other nations—let us take care to transform it into the German race of the future.<sup>22</sup>

Second, Berger draws the line between academic history and popular culture far too cleanly. At one pragmatic level he sees this: for this book’s purposes,

20. Here Berger cites W. B. Gallie, “Essentially Contested Concepts,” in Gallie, *Philosophy and Historical Understanding* (New York: Schocken, 1964), 157-191.

21. Houston Stewart Chamberlain, *The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century*, 2 vols. [1899] (London: Bodley Head, 1911), quoted by Christian Geulen, “Culture’s Shadow: ‘Race’ and Postnational Belonging in the Twentieth Century,” in *Racism in the Modern World: Historical Perspectives on Cultural Transfers and Adaptation*, ed. Manfred Berg and Simon Wendt (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), 72.

22. Otto Hintze, “Rasse und Nationalität und ihre Bedeutung für die Geschichte,” in *Soziologie und Geschichte: Gesammelte Abhandlungen zur Soziologie, Politik und Theorie der Geschichte*, ed. Gerhard Oestreich, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. [1903] (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1964), 46-65, quoted in Geulen, “Culture’s Shadow,” 72-73.

non-academic histories and other forms of popular history were consciously bracketed. Moreover, he does sometimes cross that line nonetheless, as in various treatments of official memory. By restricting archival access and actively managing scholarly publication and research, the Swiss government successfully protected a benignly heroic image of Switzerland's wartime neutrality until well into the 1970s; in postwar Scandinavia national histories commonly "idealized the nation in wartime"; and a "dearth of professional history writing in Luxembourg" preserved popular resistance myths there much longer than in Belgium and the Netherlands (300, 303, 306).<sup>23</sup> Berger notes current interest in public history under the German rubric of "historical culture" (*Geschichtskultur*), only to set it aside as too unwieldy. Across his book as a whole, however, this distinction between scholarly history and the non-academic forms of engagement with the past ("representations of history and memory as expressions of collective national identities") seems less than clear-cut. Historical fictions are already a significant exception, and Berger himself concedes that the "boundaries of 'scientific' history writing" are "permeable" (20). As he knows, recent British historiography contains compelling examples of creative boundary-crossing in exactly this sense, whose importance deserved some sustained attention. Thus Raphael Samuel's *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (1994/2012) and *Island Stories: Unravelling Britain* (1998) are included in the Bibliography, but not treated in the text.<sup>24</sup> By these means, "a fuller and more rounded picture of the ways in which national master narratives came about and gained popularity in different contexts" might become less elusive than he thinks (20).

Finally, what might be the future prospects for displacing or getting beyond the national historiographical paradigm? Berger disavows wanting to further "the political project of debunking national histories and identities in order to strengthen Europeanness" by delivering the differently oriented historiography that the EU seems to require. Rather, he urges honoring the justified resilience of the given national histories and celebrating a "weak collective European identity" instead (378). "Europeanizing" the writing of histories might then mean taking up "specific themes" that both operate across European societies and can be treated in "a comparative and transnational fashion."<sup>25</sup> National history can also "be written in a more subtle, tolerant, and self-reflexive form." Carefully *deconstructing* and *demythologizing* national histories—seeking "to increase the distance between collective identity construction and history writing"—can help impede the aggressively patriotic mobilization of those older identity-based histories

23. The University of Luxembourg was founded only in 2003.

24. Patrick Wright's equally brilliant *oeuvre* goes unmentioned. See Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* [1985] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Wright, *A Journey through Ruins: The Last Days of London* [1991] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Wright, *The Village That Died for England: The Strange Story of Tyneham* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002).

25. See Berger, "Narrating the Nation: Historiography and Other Genres," in Berger, Eriksonas, and Mycock, eds., *Narrating the Nation*, 3. As Berger argues, "the rather dubious balance sheet of nation-building processes in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe" counsels against any "attempt [at] nation-building at the European level." Here he responds to the essay by Allan Megill, "Historical Representation, Identity, Allegiance," in Berger, Eriksonas, and Mycock, eds., *Narrating the Nation*, 19-34.

(379). This in turn would encourage “more heterogeneous, less exclusive, and more playful forms of national history, allowing for plurality and even incommensurability of the many stories” involved. That more generously and self-consciously pluralist approach to “writing the nation” would be “an important step in weakening the link between grand narratives and identity construction” (377, 376). It could harmonize “easily with more cosmopolitan and transnational perspectives” (377):

The aim must be to arrive at polycentric and polyperspectival understandings of the many interconnected histories that form the sum total of human experience. Instead of naturalizing nations, transnational approaches have allowed historians to think about the constructedness of national story-lines as well as to consider the history of individual national historiographies in their interaction with others while at the same time highlighting the parallel processes of transnationalism of historiographies. (17)

Careful symptomatic readings of the whole published corpus of the ESF project would show it to be far more instrumentally beholden to the EU-driven purposes than Stefan Berger concedes. Europeanization *qua* European integration remains inescapably the subtext of this entire grandiose exercise. But Berger deserves to be taken at his word. Since 2008 the European project has fallen on distressingly hard times. If relying currently more on inertia than any positive energies, European belonging retains deep potential support. But skepticism, indifference, and hostility have all grown. Across nearly every EU member-state, a swelling radical-nationalist resurgence breathes new life into earlier patriotic historiographical forms, borne by varying degrees of virulence and popular agreement, keyed to associated registers of anti-Islamic, anti-immigrant xenophobia. Older grand narratives are being refurbished. They confirm the urgency of Berger’s eloquently sober concern.

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