

MEMORIAL

Hans-Ulrich Wehler (1931–2014)

HANS-ULRICH Wehler died at his home in Bielefeld on July 5, 2014. He was one of the most influential historians of twentieth-century Germany, an enormously productive scholar who authored some three dozen books, including the five-volume *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte* that appeared between 1987 and 2008. He came to the fore in the early 1970s as a powerful advocate of a critical social history, and remained a central figure within the field of modern German history for the next forty years. Wehler's influence in the profession extended far beyond his own writings, thanks to the role he played as an editor of books and journals, a mentor, and, not least, a writer of reviews. He was also one of the most prominent public intellectuals of the Federal Republic, weighing in with his distinctive voice on historical and political questions of the day. His contribution to the *Historikerstreit* of 1986–1987 is just one of many examples. Wehler was a well-known figure in the USA, where he held a series of one-year visiting professorships at Harvard (1972, 1989), Princeton (1976), Stanford (1985, 2004) and Yale (1997). He also lectured in Britain, Japan, and Israel. He became an honorary member of the American Historical Association in 1999, just the eighth German to be thus honored, and an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2006. This was a measure of his standing internationally.¹

Hans-Ulrich Wehler was born in 1931 into a Calvinist family. His father Theodor was a small businessman who was posted as missing in action during World War II – it was not until 1963 that the family finally learned of his death in a prisoner-of-war camp. Wehler's birthplace was Freudenberg, near Siegen, but he spent most of his youth in Gummersbach. By coincidence, he and his life-long friend and intellectual ally Jürgen Habermas grew up together in this small Rhenish town east of Cologne. They belonged to the “45'er”

¹Wehler also received the “Staatspreis” of the Land North Rhine-Westphalia in 2003, the Helmholtz Medal of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences in 2004, and the Lessing Prize for Criticism in 2014.

generation, too young to have been compromised by the criminality of the “Third Reich,” but old enough to have been in the Hitler Youth and, in some cases, even to have manned anti-aircraft guns. Wehler himself helped to put out fires in Cologne and performed the grim task of pulling charred corpses from the rubble after air raids.² This was the generation that would, in time, be decisively important in changing how people in the Federal Republic came to terms with the German past.

After completing his *Abitur*, Wehler went to study in Bonn. He then spent a year and a half in the USA, the first of many stays that created a life-long attachment to the country that, for him, embodied “Western” values. He went on a Fulbright scholarship to Ohio University in Athens, Ohio, where he worked with Frederick D. Kershner, Jr., a former student of Merle Curti, and was introduced to interdisciplinarity. He took courses in economics and journalism—regarded himself at the time, in fact, as a future journalist. Wehler lodged with an American family, staunch liberals who became almost “second parents.”³ The exchange year was a classic rite of passage for talented young students of Wehler’s generation. What was unusual in his case was that he managed to acquire a social security card and was thus able to work. He drove cars from a factory in Detroit to the West Coast, then hitchhiked back to the Midwest. He subsequently went out to California and worked as a welder in North Hollywood during the second half of 1953.⁴ If this was not quite Jack London, it was nonetheless bold. Returning to Germany, Wehler continued his studies at Cologne. He worked with a key figure in the opening up of postwar West German history, Theodor Schieder, who gathered around him a gifted group of young historians. Wehler overlapped in Cologne with his near-contemporaries Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Thomas Nipperdey, as well as with the somewhat younger Lothar Gall.

Wehler earned his doctorate in 1960 with a work on German Social Democracy and the national question, published two years later as *Sozialdemokratie und Nationalstaat*.⁵ The study was notable for the fact that Wehler took the trouble to learn Polish in order to use sources in that language. This first work was a richly sourced book that also painted in bold strokes. Wehler now embarked on his *Habilitation* research. Funding from the American Council of Learned Studies (ACLS) took him back to the USA in 1962–1963 to conduct

²“Ich habe knüppeln gelemnt,” interview of Wehler by Philipp Gut and Peer Teuwsen, *Weltwoche*, Sept. 17, 2008.

³In interviews given in later years, Wehler noted that, as a young man, he was looking for father figures, who included Theodor Schieder and Hans Rosenberg. See Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Eine lebhaftige Kampfsituation. Ein Gespräch mit Manfred Hettling und Cornelius Torp* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2006), 18.

⁴Philipp Stelzel, “Rethinking Modern German History: Critical Social History as a Transatlantic Enterprise,” Ph.D., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (2010), 169–70.

⁵*Sozialdemokratie und Nationalstaat. Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie und die Nationalitätenfragen in Deutschland von Karl Marx bis zum Ausbruch des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Würzburg: Holzner, 1962).

research on American imperialism, accompanied by his wife Renate and their son Markus. He worked in the Library of Congress and the National Archives, but his base was in Stanford. Like others before and since, he came to the conclusion that the life of the mind was pursued more energetically across the Bay in Berkeley, where the émigré historian Hans Rosenberg was now on the faculty. Wehler was influenced by Rosenberg's critical perspective on Prussian social history and the malign role played by the Junkers. Rosenberg, for his part, was an admirer of Wehler's book on Social Democracy. Wehler's regular exchange of letters with Theodor Schieder during this year reveals the degree to which his steadfast admiration for the USA was also tempered by impatience with American complacency, especially on the race question. He wrote, with an ironic allusion to Karl Marx, of how he looked forward to escaping "the idiocy of American suburban life."⁶

Returning to a Federal Republic that had been roiled in his absence by the "Spiegel Affair," Wehler prepared his work for submission as a *Habilitationsschrift*. This he did, unsuccessfully, in 1964. The chain of events was complicated, though there is no doubt that the episode was understandably traumatic for Wehler. There was suspicion among conservative historians in Cologne about this young critic of US "social imperialism." What provided them with an opportunity to block his Habilitation was the fact that—as Wehler himself fully acknowledged—the arguments he was making were very close to the groundbreaking work coming out of the "Wisconsin School" around William Appleman Williams, especially Walter LaFeber's *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860–1898*, which came out in 1963. Wehler then turned his legendary energy to a work that examined the German acquisition of colonies in the 1880s from the same analytical perspective, while incorporating some of his American material for comparative purposes. Despite continuing opposition from some conservative professors, he gained his Habilitation in 1968 with this work, which was published as *Bismarck und der Imperialismus*, a book substantial in both heft and argumentative weight that helped to set off a lively debate in Germany and in the Anglo-American world about the domestic origins of German imperialism.⁷ Wehler later published his American research as *Der Aufstieg des amerikanischen Imperialismus. Studien zur Entwicklung des Imperium Americanum 1865–1900*, which was well-received by those U.S.-based historians able to read it.⁸ Theodor Schieder strongly supported Wehler through the travails of the Habilitation. When Wehler published a second edition of his book on Social Democracy and the nationality question in

⁶Stelzel, "Rethinking Modern German History," 178.

⁷*Bismarck und der Imperialismus* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer und Witsch, 1969); "Bismarck's Imperialism 1862–1890," *Past and Present* 48 (1970): 119–55.

⁸*Der Aufstieg des amerikanischen Imperialismus. Studien zur Entwicklung des Imperium Americanum 1865–1900* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1974).

1971, it bore the dedication “Für Theodor Schieder 1955–1970,” in recognition of what he owed to his mentor in the formative years of undergraduate and doctoral study, then as Schieder’s *Assistent*, before he became a *Privatdozent* during his last two years in Cologne.⁹

Wehler taught American history for one year at the John F. Kennedy Institute of the Free University in Berlin before taking a position as professor at the new university of Bielefeld in 1971.¹⁰ He taught there until his retirement in 1996. After having a house built on the hillside outside the town, he continued to live in Bielefeld for the rest of his life. (The building of the house caused travails of a different kind, when difficulties with the general contractor left Wehler to orchestrate the work of plumbers and electricians.) Bielefeld was in every sense his home, but “Bielefeld” also came to stand for a particular idea of history. An exceptional group of scholars gathered there. These clusters of talented innovators sometimes occur, perhaps especially at times of beginnings (or new beginnings). One thinks of the University of Strasbourg, rebuilt as a French institution after World War I, which benefited from the combined talents of Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre, and Maurice Halbwachs.¹¹ The University of Bielefeld, founded in 1969, appointed exceptional, forward-looking scholars in many subjects. Niklas Luhmann became a professor of sociology. Dieter Grimm taught law there from 1979 until he became a justice of the *Bundesverfassungsgericht* in 1987. The History Department boasted an exceptional gathering of talent, which included two leading figures from an earlier generation: the intellectual historian Reinhart Koselleck, one of Germany’s greatest twentieth-century historians, who held a chair in Bielefeld from 1973 until his retirement in 1988; and the émigré economic historian Sidney Pollard, who moved there from England in 1980. Jürgen Kocka, ten years Wehler’s junior, arrived, like Koselleck, in 1973. He and Wehler were the guiding spirits of what came to be known as the “Bielefeld School.”

Bielefeld was a new university and Wehler saw himself, above all, as a modernizer. He was impatient with the established guild of German historians, hostile to historicism, scornful of naïve empiricism, a critic of *Geistesgeschichte* and traditional political history. History should, he believed, be a critical social science discipline that drew on the methods and resources of neighboring disciplines: political science, sociology, economics. Theory was to be boldly grasped and used to stake out theoretically explicit positions. He made use of Marx, in itself a provocation at the time, but the figure to whom he was, from the start, most

⁹ *Sozialdemokratie und Nationalstaat. Nationalitätenfragen in Deutschland 1840–1914* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht: Göttingen, 1971).

¹⁰ His title was Professor für Allgemeine Geschichte des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts.

¹¹ A cross-disciplinary German example—although one that would have made Wehler shudder—might be the close cooperation of historian Karl Lamprecht, geographer Friedrich Ratzel, and psychologist Wilhelm Wundt in Leipzig during the years on either side of 1900.

intellectually indebted was Max Weber. Wehler was, in short, a classic advocate of social science history of the kind advocated by progressive non-Marxist as well as Marxist historians in many parts of the West in the 1960s and 1970s—though without the interest in anthropology characteristic of most self-consciously “modernizing” historians in France, Britain, and the USA. This lack of interest in anthropology was, I think, very German, notwithstanding the fact that Wehler saw the task of modernizing German history as a matter of recasting it in an Anglo-American mold: his Max Weber was the Americanized Weber of Talcott Parsons and Edward Shils, exported to the USA then reimported to the Federal Republic.¹²

The other distinctively German aspect to Wehler’s belief in history as critical social science was the civic role he wanted history to play. This was very much a part of his (and his generation’s) confrontation with the recent German past. For Wehler, history should be enlightened and emancipatory, a weapon to challenge the complacency he discerned among postwar German historians and in the wider society, especially the tendency to bracket Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich as an “aberration,” or *Betriebsunfall*. Wehler’s underlying question was how 1933 had been possible, and he sought the answer in the longer trajectory of modern German history. That history, in his view, had been marked by a “failed revolution” of the Western kind and a partial, or faulty, modernization in which economic dynamism had not been matched by an equivalent modernization of social values or politics. He argued, in short, that there had been a German “special path,” or *Sonderweg*.

Wehler’s critical approach to the history of the *Kaiserreich* was already evident in his book on Bismarck and imperialism. It was set out explicitly in two works from the early 1970s. The first was the essay collection published in 1970 as *Krisenherde des Kaiserreichs*.¹³ The second was *Das deutsche Kaiserreich 1871–1918*, his short and pointed structural analysis of Imperial Germany.¹⁴ Here he set out his arguments about the supposedly faulted development of Germany, the authoritarian “pseudo-constitutionalism” of the *Kaiserreich*, the malign role played by the pressure groups of estate agriculture and heavy industry, the continuing power exercised by the old elite, the means the latter used to inculcate loyalty and exclude opposition, as well as the final gamble undertaken in 1914 as a “flight forward”

¹²This was Weber as the apostle of “modernization”—in other words, the Weber of a scholar such as Wolfgang Schluchter (*Die Entwicklung des okzidentalen Rationalismus. Eine Analyse von Max Webers Gesellschaftsgeschichte* [Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1979]), not the Weber much more ambivalent about modernity who appeared in the following decade in works such as Wilhelm Hennis, *Max Webers Fragestellung* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1987), and Detlev Peukert, *Max Webers Diagnose der Moderne* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989).

¹³*Krisenherde des Kaiserreichs 1871–1918. Studien zur deutschen Sozial- und Verfassungsgeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970).

¹⁴*Das deutsche Kaiserreich 1871–1918* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1973). Translated as *The German Empire 1871–1918* (Dover, NH and Leamington Spa: Berg, 1985).

(*Flucht nach Vorne*) from domestic conflicts. At the end, Wehler took up the persistence of the Old Regime even during the Weimar Republic, and argued that the incubus of the past prepared the way for Hitler. This slim blue volume, based on lectures delivered in Cologne in the late 1960s, became required reading for younger scholars. It is now in its tenth edition. The book was criticized on many grounds: for its foreshortening of German history, neglect of countervailing tendencies, lack of nuance—perhaps above all for its determination to take hold of German history and wrestle it to the ground.¹⁵ In response to his critics, Wehler argued that the book served a didactic purpose, setting out clear hypotheses and arguments with which others could then engage. The importance of establishing one's position clearly in the interests of debate—his “agonistic principle”—was something Wehler always emphasized.

It is striking in retrospect just how quickly Wehler established his presence in the discipline in the early 1970s. In addition to the three books that came out between 1969 and 1973, he edited an astonishing number of works in the same years. He was one of the editors of the *Neue Wissenschaftliche Bibliothek* established in the 1960s by the Cologne publisher Kiepenheuer and Witsch: the large, bright, yellow paperbacks instantly visible on the shelves of every German scholar of a certain age. These were books that collected key articles in a given field, often fields they helped to define, accompanied by an editor's introduction. Wehler edited *Moderne deutsche Sozialgeschichte* (1968), followed by *Imperialismus* (1970), *Geschichte und Soziologie* (1972), and *Geschichte und Ökonomie* (1973).¹⁶ In 1971 he edited a book on *Geschichte und Psychoanalyse* for a different series from the same publisher.¹⁷ Some of his introductions subsequently formed the content of a slender paperback Wehler published in 1973 under the title *Geschichte als historische Sozialwissenschaft*.¹⁸ It appeared, like the *Kaiserreich* book, with the Göttingen house Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, which also published in 1975 a little book of Wehler's on modernization theory and history.¹⁹

There was much ground-clearing and agenda-setting in this flurry of books. In fact, as Jürgen Kocka has pointed out, Wehler had, in his introduction to an

¹⁵See Thomas Nipperdey, “Wehlers ‘Kaiserreich.’ Eine kritische Auseinandersetzung,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 1 (1975): 539–60; Hans-Günther Zmarzlik, “Das Kaiserreich in neuer Sicht?,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 222 (1976): 105–26. See also David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

¹⁶*Moderne deutsche Sozialgeschichte* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer und Witsch, 1968); *Imperialismus* (Cologne, 1970); *Geschichte und Soziologie* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer und Witsch, 1972); *Geschichte und Ökonomie* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer und Witsch, 1973).

¹⁷*Geschichte und Psychoanalyse* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer und Witsch, 1971).

¹⁸*Geschichte als historische Sozialwissenschaft* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1973). Paul Nolte has noted Wehler's close relationship with a new history editor at Vandenhoeck, Winfried Hellmann, who was sympathetic to Wehler's views and greatly admired his drive; see Paul Nolte, “Innovation aus Kontinuität: Hans-Ulrich Wehler (1931–2014) in der deutschen Geschichtswissenschaft,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 299 (2014): 602.

¹⁹*Modernisierungstheorie und Geschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975).

edited collection of essays by Eckart Kehr, sketched out a social history agenda—something that read like a “manifesto of a new history”—when he was just thirty-three.²⁰ Kehr was an émigré historian who died very young in Washington, D.C. in 1933, just after the Nazi seizure of power. He was a scholar whose work on the role played by social and economic interests in Imperial politics made him an outsider among German historians of the 1920s.²¹ In reclaiming Kehr’s work and publishing his essays under the provocative title “The Primacy of Domestic Policy,” Wehler both honored an overlooked historian of the past and enlisted him in contemporary debates. Something similar was at work when, in 1974, Wehler edited a *Festschrift* for Hans Rosenberg under the title “Social History Today.”²² This, too, was one of the ways in which Wehler staked out a position on behalf of a new kind of critical history in these years. It was even more pointed in the five-volume edited collection, *Deutsche Historiker*, which appeared at the beginning of the 1970s.²³ There were entries for Leopold von Ranke, Heinrich von Treitschke, Johann Gustav Droysen, Heinrich von Sybel, and Friedrich Meinecke, as well as for Gerhard Ritter, the conservative critic of Fritz Fischer (and, before that, of Eckart Kehr). But Wehler also found space for figures who were, for one reason or another, either heterodox members of the historical profession or not members at all – Marx and Friedrich Engels, Weber and Werner Sombart, Karl Kautsky and Eduard Bernstein, Georg Gottfried Gervinus and Karl Lamprecht, Arthur Rosenberg and Eckart Kehr.

The editor’s preface that preceded each volume also had something of the manifesto to it. Wehler emphasized that the biographical essays were written mostly by younger historians, drew attention to the inclusion of “outsiders” as subjects, and underscored the didactic purpose of the volumes with references to the importance of self-conscious reflection on history and its social function. A quotation near the end of the preface of the first volume captures the tone: “Alfred N. Whitehead’s famous dictum that ‘any discipline which delays in forgetting its founders is lost’ may well apply to History. But before this break has been completed—and not a few of us regard a reorientation in respect to epistemological (*erkenntnisleitende*) interests, methods, and emphases as indispensable—

²⁰Jürgen Kocka, “Er hat uns elektrisiert,” *Die Zeit*, July 10, 2014. The essay collection was *Der Primat der Innenpolitik. Gesammelte Aufsätze zur preussisch-deutschen Sozialgeschichte im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1965). In the late 1960s Wehler also edited works by two earlier nineteenth-century figures. See Gustav Mayer, *Radikalismus, Sozialismus und bürgerliche Demokratie*, Hrsg. und mit einem Nachwort versehen von Hans-Ulrich Wehler (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1969), and Friedrich Kapp, *Vom radikalen Frühsozialisten des Vormärz zum liberalen Parteipolitiker des Bismarckreichs. Briefe 1843–1884*, Hrsg. und eingeleitet von Hans-Ulrich Wehler (Frankfurt/Main: Insel, 1969).

²¹Eckart Kehr, *Schlachflottenbau und Parteipolitik 1894–1901* (Berlin: E. Ebering, 1930).

²²*Sozialgeschichte heute. Festschrift für Hans Rosenberg zum 70. Geburtstag* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1974).

²³*Deutsche Historiker* vols. I and II (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971) and *Deutsche Historiker* vols. III, IV, V (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1972).

one should know the past of historical scholarship.”²⁴ This is impressively confident, but it comes over as more than a little chilly and dismissive.

For Wehler the first half of the 1970s was a busy time of agenda-setting on behalf of critical social history. The production of edited volumes on a truly heroic scale and the creation of a counter-canon of progressive historians took place parallel to Wehler’s own impressive output. These efforts continued in later years: at the end of the 1970s Wehler edited essays by two more German émigré historians, Veit Valentin and Alfred Vagts.²⁵ He also compiled and published large bibliographies of modern German social history and economic history, as well as a smaller bibliographical volume on imperialism.²⁶ Further edited publications came out of conferences.²⁷ It was, however, two other editorial positions that Wehler assumed in the 1970s that would, in the long term, be even more important for the profession. In 1972 he became a founding editor of *Kritische Studien zur Geschichtswissenschaft*, the historical monograph series published by Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht; he remained a member of the editorial board until 2011. Then, in 1975, he helped to found a new historical journal, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, where he served as one of the three principal editors (along with Hans Berding and Jürgen Kocka) for thirty years. The journal, roughly modeled on the English *Past and Present*, competed directly with the established *Historische Zeitschrift*—edited by Wehler’s mentor Theodor Schieder.

There was evident programmatic thinking behind these undertakings. The monograph series was called “Critical Studies”; *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* was pointedly subtitled “A Journal for Historical Social Science.” Certain kinds of history were clearly favored. At the same time, both series and journal had breadth. There were *Kritische Studien* volumes on economic and social history, demography, migration, crime, and, later, religious history and women’s history as well. Many of the early essay collections by established scholars were predictably concerned with economic history, especially the history of industrialization, but others featured scholars such as Rolf Engelsing and Thomas Nipperdey, neither of whom shared Wehler’s interests or views on history. One of the monographs in the series, Willi Oberkrome’s fine study of German *Volksgeschichte*, presented a view of the strands that went into the making of

²⁴ *Deutsche Historiker*, vol. I, 3–4.

²⁵ Veit Valentin, *Von Bismarck zur Weimarer Republik. 7 Beiträge zur deutschen Politik*, hrsg. und eingeleitet von Hans-Ulrich Wehler (Cologne: Kiepenheuer und Witsch, 1979); Alfred Vagts, *Bilanzen und Balancen. Aufsätze zur internationalen Finanz und internationalen Politik*, hrsg. von Hans-Ulrich Wehler (Frankfurt/Main: Syndikat, 1979).

²⁶ *Bibliographie zur modernen deutschen Sozialgeschichte (18.–20. Jh.)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976); *Bibliographie zur modernen deutschen Wirtschaftsgeschichte (18.–20. Jh.)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976); *Bibliographie zum Imperialismus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977).

²⁷ For example, Hans-Ulrich Wehler, ed., *Klassen in der europäischen Geschichte. 9 Beiträge* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979).

modern German social history that was strikingly at odds with Wehler's, emphasizing how some politically compromised scholars of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s were, at the same time, methodologically innovative—that the things that compromised them (the interest in settlement, language, everyday culture) were, in fact, exactly what had made them innovative.²⁸ As for the journal, it is worth taking note of the five *Sonderhefte* of *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* that Wehler personally edited between 1975 and 1990. They covered topics as disparate as the German Peasants War of 1525, the American Revolution, modern German historiography, Prussia, and the European nobility.²⁹ *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* may, in general, have been more predictable and narrow in the range of articles it published than *Past and Present*, but it was also pioneering in areas such as comparative history and in establishing discussion forums. It also opened its pages to historians of differing views, perhaps most famously when it published Thomas Nipperdey's very critical review of Wehler's *Kaiserreich* book.³⁰

Wehler's own writings and the work of institution-building, organizing, and editing at which he excelled: these were the principal ways in which he placed his stamp on what, by the end of the 1970s, was increasingly coming to be known as the "Bielefeld School." But there was something else important, and that was Bielefeld itself. An extraordinary number of talented young historians who would later make their mark in the profession passed through the university, occasionally as undergraduates, more often as doctoral students and/or candidates for Habilitation. The list includes (in alphabetical order) Olaf Blaschke, Dirk Bönker, Rudolf Boch, Gunilla Budde, Ute Daniel, Andreas Etges, Ute Frevert, Robert von Friedeburg, Christian Geulen, Vito Gironda, Svenja Goltermann, Hedda Gramley, Manfred Hettling, Christina von Hodenberg, Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, Bernd Holtwick, Ralph Jessen, Frank-Michael Kuhlemann, Birthe Kundrus, Thomas Mergel, Josef Mooser, Sven Oliver Müller, Paul Nolte, Till van Rahden, Andreas Renner, Hanna Schissler, Hans Waltert Schmuhl, Cornelius Torp, Thomas Welskopp, Monika Wienfort, and Benjamin Ziemann.³¹ The list is not only impressive, but also includes many scholars who made names for themselves with work very different in approach from Wehler's (or Kocka's)—work that often challenged the "Bielefeld School." That is not something that can be taken for granted; in fact, one of

²⁸Willi Oberkrome, *Volksgegeschichte. Methodische Innovation und völkische Ideologisierung in der deutschen Geschichtswissenschaft, 1918–1945* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993). This was vol. 101 of the series. It was painful for Wehler when it became clear in the 1990s how his own mentor Theodor Schieder had been seriously compromised as a historian during the Third Reich.

²⁹These were, respectively, *Sonderhefte* 1 (1975), 2 (1976), 4 (1978), 6 (1980), and 13 (1990).

³⁰Nipperdey, "Wehlers 'Kaiserreich.'"

³¹My thanks to Sven Oliver Müller for his assistance in compiling this list. I should point out that the list includes not only Wehler's own immediate advisees, but also others who worked with colleagues at Bielefeld whose work he nonetheless helped to shape.

Wehler's most attractive quality was that he encouraged the scholars he mentored to find their own voices.

Bielefeld was also a place to which non-Bielefelders were pleased to be invited, usually to speak at the weekly colloquium run for many years by Wehler and Kocka. It was always an intellectually strenuous experience, but exhilarating and rewarding as well, and it illustrated two more of Wehler's best qualities. One was his outstanding ability to lead discussion, whether in a seminar or conference setting. This is an underrated accomplishment. Most historians do it poorly, few do it really well: Wehler did it superbly, not just directing traffic but allowing themes to emerge, grouping questions, moving discussion along, and—not least—making sure that speakers answered the questions they had been asked. The other quality that was bound to strike a visitor to Bielefeld was Wehler's personal charm. He was a friendly and solicitous host who radiated warmth. Disagreement over historical questions was never accompanied by personal rancor.

I was in Bielefeld on quite a few occasions between 1977 and 1995. I was there twice during 1985, the first time to present at the colloquium, the second to participate in a symposium at the Zentrum für interdisziplinäre Forschung on “*Bürgerlichkeit*”—for this was the era when Bielefeld discovered the bourgeoisie.³² By this time Wehler was already well embarked on the first volumes of his *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*. He wrote in a “Nachwort” to *Das deutsche Kaiserreich* that he had originally planned to include a section on social structure and social change, and gave notice of a future work that would deal with the history of German society from the end of the eighteenth century to the present.³³ Wehler fleshed out the shape of this book for the first time in a *Festschrift* for Fritz Fischer's seventieth birthday in 1978, where he called it an “experiment.”³⁴ From 1981 he gave sustained attention to the project and the first two volumes appeared in 1987, covering the period from the Old Regime to 1849.³⁵ The third volume (1849–1914) followed in 1995, the fourth volume

³²Jürgen Kocka, ed., *Bürger und Bürgerlichkeit im 19. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987); Idem, ed., *Bürgertum im 19. Jahrhundert. Deutschland im europäischen Vergleich*, 3 vols. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988), parts of which were published in English in Jürgen Kocka and Allan Mitchell, eds., *Bourgeois Society in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Providence, RI and Oxford: Berg, 1993). This emphasis on the bourgeoisie was surely a response to the anti-Sonderweg arguments in Blackburn and Eley, *Peculiarities*.

³³Wehler, *Kaiserreich*, 277–78.

³⁴“Vorüberlegungen zu einer modernen deutschen Gesellschaftsgeschichte,” in *Industrielle Gesellschaft und politisches System. Beiträge zur politischen Sozialgeschichte. Festschrift für Fritz Fischer zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Dirk Stegmann, Bernd-Jürgen Wendt, and Peter-Christian Witt (Bonn: Verlag Neue Gesellschaft, 1978), 3–20. Nolte, “Innovation aus Kontinuität,” 607–10, is very good on the genesis of the book.

³⁵*Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, vol. 1: *Vom Feudalismus des Alten Reiches bis zur defensiven Modernisierung der Reformära 1700–1815*; vol. 2: *Von der Reformära bis zur industriellen und politischen “Deutschen Doppelrevolution” 1815–1845/49* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1987).

(1914–1949) in 2003, and the final volume (1949–1990) in 2007.³⁶ In the first paragraph of the Introduction to Volume 1, Wehler tells us that his aim was to write an “outline of the history of society in modern Germany.”³⁷ The complete work contains 4,800 closely printed pages—more than 4,000 pages of text. Some outline!

Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte is a remarkable work. Scale, command of detail, the sheer intellectual energy of the undertaking—all are impressive. Any work of this size needs a strong formal design to bear the weight of information. Wehler invented the structure he needed by organizing his account around four dimensions or “axes”: economy, culture, political rule (*Herrschaft*), and social inequality, which really meant the analysis of class and classes. He uses this framework throughout the five volumes, with advantages for the reader who wants to move backwards and forwards tracing changes over time. Wehler’s elaborate system of subheadings (e.g., in Volume 1: “Zweiter Teil, III, 2. d): Gewerbereformen und Finanzpolitik”) lends itself to caricature, but also makes for ease of reference. The same applies to the enumeration of points within the text. In Volume 3 we are told about three aspects of the transformation of the *Stadtbürgertum*, four phases of demographic transition, five forms of urban expansion, six indicators of growth in the agricultural sector, seven challenges that fostered the interventionist state, eight aspects of social militarism, nine major points on the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war—which calls to mind the apocryphal story about the professor of history overheard proposing marriage (“I love you, and I have seven main reasons”). But the numbers also signal one of Wehler’s strengths: his capacity to order and categorize existing knowledge on a subject, to use concepts precisely and systematically, to weigh, evaluate, and come to conclusions. This is history driven by arguments.

The same virtue is evident in the formidable apparatus of notes. Criticized by many, these certainly have the disadvantage that individual quotations are hard (even impossible) to locate—some notes include more than a hundred entries. But this is offset by the fact that, on subject after subject, the notes lay out the literature and terms of debate.³⁸ This monument to Wehler’s industry is also evidence of his commitment to transparent intellectual exchange. In practical terms, the notes serve as a bibliographical starting point on hundreds of topics. It is worth recalling that Thomas Nipperdey’s three-volume history of nineteenth-century Germany, with which Wehler’s work is often compared, contains

³⁶ *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, vol. 3: *Von der Deutschen Doppelrevolution bis zum Beginn des Ersten Weltkrieges 1849–1914* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1995); vol. 4: *Vom Beginn des Ersten Weltkrieges bis zur Gründung der beiden deutschen Staaten* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2003); vol. 5: *Bundesrepublik und DDR 1949–1990* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2007).

³⁷ Vols. 1, 6.

³⁸ The lapidary and harsh comments on certain works are a less attractive feature of the notes.

no notes at all.³⁹ Wehler's heavily "structural" account also quotes more often from contemporaries than Nipperdey's narrative does.

One is repeatedly struck in the *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte* by Wehler's independence of judgment and willingness to revise familiar views, including his own. That is especially true in the longest, middle volume of the five, where Wehler returns to issues dealt with in his earlier writings, including *Das deutsche Kaiserreich*. "Organized capitalism" is found wanting as a concept; the "Great Depression" has become a great "deflation"; arguments about the "feudalization" of the bourgeoisie are now rejected; a strongly manipulative model of political mobilization has been revised; and instead of the "primacy of domestic policy" we have the interdependence of domestic and foreign policy. There are many other examples. Wehler also made subtle changes in the *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte* as he went along. Demography is not one of his four main variables and has a very modest place in Volume 1. Increasing attention is given to population, and to population movements, in later volumes. The same is true of the impact of war on society, virtually neglected in the case of the French and Napoleonic Wars, rightly given full weight when it comes to the total wars of the twentieth century. Wehler's overall tone is moderate, not polemical. Again and again, we find arguments that are balanced and nuanced, not least in the volume where those qualities are especially welcome, namely the one that deals with World War I, the Weimar Republic, and the Third Reich. The exception is the final volume, which deals with the two German postwar states. Wehler treats the GDR with hostile, dismissive brevity and unloads onto the 68'ers a degree of hostility that seems excessive, denying or ignoring connections that the student movement had to feminism and environmentalism—instead linking it to 1970s urban terrorism via a "slippery slope" argument.⁴⁰

In the earlier volumes there are no groups or institutions towards which Wehler showed comparable bile, though his treatment of Catholicism is predictably hostile. It is impossible to read very far before stumbling over a "papal dictatorship" or "heathen superstition." Wehler was very certain about what was modern and progressive, what was traditional and backward—and no less certain that the former was good, the latter bad. One literary device he uses in his text is the "scharfsinnige Zeitgenosse," there to show the way forward and identify the tendencies, movements, or institutions that failed to move with the

³⁹Thomas Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte 1800–1866. Bürgerwelt und starker Staat* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1983); *Deutsche Geschichte 1866–1918*, vol. 1: *Arbeitswelt und Bürgergeist*; vol. 2: *Machtstaat vor der Demokratie* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1990 and 1992).

⁴⁰"Doch die fatale Fusion eines Holzhammermarxismus mit der Bewunderung für Entwicklungsdiktatoren und der Legitimierung von Gewalt schuf eine Gleitschiene, auf der Wirkköpfe, die sich für Theoriekönige mit Einblick in die Notwendigkeiten des historischen Prozesses und folglich für handlungsberechtigt hielten, in die Konventikel des Terrors abziehen konnten" (vol. 5, p. 319).

times. There is something refreshing about this clear-eyed, uncompromising stance in which everything is either this or that, one thing or another. One can even see why Wehler would be drawn to the analytical tough-mindedness of Max Weber, the intellectual forbear he invoked most admiringly. And yet it remains a puzzle that Weber, of all people—that tortured, ambivalent modernist-of-the-will—should serve as Wehler’s intellectual touchstone. Neither in this work, nor elsewhere in his writings, is there any evidence that Wehler is troubled (as Weber was) by the *Entzauberung der Welt*, except perhaps by the thought that it was not proceeding fast enough.

Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte has all the virtues of social-science history at its best: clarity, analytical penetration, causal arguments, and absence of sentimentality. It also has some of the shortcomings: abstract language, a preoccupation with structures rather than experience, a tendency to discount what cannot be counted. Culture means above all institutions, not content, and has been further narrowed down to the written word. Periodicals, the press, and the novel are in; the visual arts, architecture, design, drama, and music are out.⁴¹ There is more on women, the family, sexuality, and everyday life than one might guess from the topical index to each volume, but still a great deal less than most would probably feel they warrant in a book on the history of society. It is difficult to write fairly about these volumes without pointing out these shortcomings, but the best reason for doing so is that it helps us to understand what kind of historian Wehler was, for it shows where he drew lines around what he considered to be the proper subject of History.

Another example may clarify the point. *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte* is a work that contains many tables but no maps. It has a very highly developed sense of class and power, but almost no sense of space or place. This is a German society without coastline or rivers, forest or mountains, soil or climate, regions or provinces. I raised this issue in a review of Volume 3 in 1996.⁴² Paul Nolte, in his appreciation of Wehler in *Historische Zeitschrift*, quotes me and makes the perfectly fair point that it would be hard for a work like Wehler’s, conceived over decades, to take note of new perspectives.⁴³ My argument was not meant unkindly, however, and was certainly not an attempt to catch Wehler out in some kind of egregious omission. As I noted, this kind of spatial-historical dimension was (still in the 1990s) generally felt to be the preserve of *Landesgeschichte*; more important, Wehler would almost certainly have felt that any step in this direction smacked too much of *Heimat* romanticism or a politically compromised concern with geography and *Landeskunde*, things to be regarded with grave

⁴¹The two twentieth-century volumes do find some space for cinema, radio, and television.

⁴²David Blackburn, “A Thoroughly Modern Masterpiece: Wehler’s *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*. Bd. 3: 1849–1914,” *Neue Politische Literatur* 41 (1996): 189–92.

⁴³Nolte, “Innovation aus Kontinuität,” 611.

suspicion. Germany's past made it close to impossible for the progressive historians of Wehler's generation to embrace the impulses of the *Annales* school, as their counterparts in Britain and the USA did. Wehler did not have a Braudelian bone in his body. Anthropology and *Alltagsgeschichte* were similarly suspect, and no one was more vigorous than Wehler in protecting a "true" social history of the kind that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s from the threat represented by what he viewed as these imprecise, soft-centered, and sentimental challengers. In his mind, they represented regression, not progress. A particular idea of modernity is inscribed in the content and structure of *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*. That is why I called it in my review a "thoroughly modern masterpiece."

During the years in which he was writing his great work, Wehler became one of the leading public intellectuals of the Federal Republic. Like many others, I would receive little packages from Bielefeld at regular intervals, containing copies of articles or reviews from *Die Zeit*, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Der Spiegel*, *Merkur*, and *Weltwoche*. Eventually the most recent paperback would arrive, collecting these occasional pieces between two covers. Wehler published a dozen books of essays or similar general works, mostly with C. H. Beck in Munich, which also published the *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*.⁴⁴ He took a position on every historical issue of the last thirty-five years, from the *Sonderweg* debate to the Goldhagen affair. Often it was a combative position, and a combat that took place on two fronts. On one side were assorted conservatives, apologists for Prussia, and practitioners of a new geopolitical history; on the other stood Marxists, *Alltagsgeschichte*, cultural history, and postmodern theory. Like the opposing sides, the verdicts were also clear in these arguments—for example: Bourdieu good, Foucault bad. Wehler became very sensitive to the challenge posed by non-professionals to professional historians, whether that challenge came from novelist Nicholson Baker writing about World War II or the so-called *Barfußhistoriker* writing about everyday life. In that sense, Wehler was very much the *Ordinarius*, and the sympathy he had shown in the 1970s for "outsiders" to the profession was no longer so keen. His most celebrated foray into historical debates came during the

⁴⁴ *Preussen ist wieder chic—Politik und Polemik in zwanzig Essays* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1983); *Aus der Geschichte lernen? Essays* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1988); *Die Gegenwart als Geschichte. Essays* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1995); *Die Politik in der Geschichte. Essays* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1998); *Umbruch und Kontinuität. Essays zum 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2000); *Konflikte zu Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2003); *Notizen zur deutschen Geschichte* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2007); *Land ohne Unterschichten? Neue Essays zur deutschen Geschichte* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2010); *Die Deutschen und der Kapitalismus. Essays zur Geschichte* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2014). On history specifically, see also *Die Herausforderung der Kulturgeschichte* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1998); *Literarische Erzählung oder kritische Analyse? Ein Duell in der gegenwärtigen Geschichtswissenschaft* (Vienna: Picus, 2007); *Historisches Denken am Ende des 20. Jahrhunderts: 1945-2000* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2001); on non-historical topics, see *Angst vor der Macht? Die Machtlust der neuen Rechten* (Bonn: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 1995); *Die neue Umverteilung. Soziale Ungleichheit in Deutschland* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2013).

Historikerstreit of 1986–1987. Wehler initially stayed in the background when the argument broke out, partly because the deadline for the first two volumes of the *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte* was approaching. But he did provide materials to his close friend, Jürgen Habermas, who initially carried the argument of the liberal left against Ernst Nolte, Andreas Hillgruber, and Michael Stürmer. Then, in 1987, Wehler published a critique of the conservative historians in a book that was subtitled “A Polemical Essay.”⁴⁵ It was a harsh, take-no-prisoners account, and it apparently did real damage to his reputation.⁴⁶

The *Historikerstreit* was at least as much about the changing politics of the Federal Republic in the 1980s as it was about the Third Reich. A central part of the civic responsibility Wehler felt was to hold public figures accountable when they said things—whether as a result of folly or opportunism—that seemed in any way apologetic about the Nazi years. Since such statements were fairly frequent, Wehler was kept busy. An example was the unhappy eulogy for his predecessor Hans Filbinger, delivered in 2007 by Minister President Günther Oettinger of Baden-Württemberg. Wehler called it a “mixture of ignorance, cowardice, and arrogance.”⁴⁷ He expressed views on many issues: Europe, nationalism, education policy, America and anti-Americanism, preventive war, women’s emancipation. He was a powerful (and unusually well-informed) critic of social inequality in the Federal Republic, the subject of his last book, *Die neue Umverteilung*. Norbert Frei has compared it to Tony Judt’s *Ill Fares the Land* (2010) as an impassioned defense of Social Democratic values.⁴⁸ Other positions were more likely to create discomfort among left-of-center observers, such as Wehler’s strong criticism of Turkish entry into the European Union and his defense of Thilo Sarrazin’s controversial book, *Deutschland schafft sich ab* (2010). But like another member of the 45’er generation (and another superb essayist), Hans-Magnus Enzensberger, Wehler had more than earned the right to be an intellectual irritant—even a gadfly—in the eyes of former allies.

Hans-Ulrich Wehler was married in 1958 to Renate Pitsch, the love of his life. They had three sons, Markus, Fabian, and Dominik, as well as eight grandchildren, and Wehler’s family was more important to him than anything else. But after that came work, the self-disciplined hard work that looked, from the outside, very much like a Weberian calling. “Uli liest und schreibt,” said his son Fabian at the funeral.⁴⁹ I first met Uli Wehler forty years ago at the

⁴⁵ *Entsorgung der deutschen Vergangenheit. Ein polemischer Essay zum “Historikerstreit”* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1987).

⁴⁶ Nolte, “Innovation aus Kontinuität,” 616.

⁴⁷ *Land ohne Unterschichten?*, 43.

⁴⁸ Norbert Frei, “Nach Dienstschluss,” *Die Zeit*, July 10, 2014.

⁴⁹ “Abschied von Hans-Ulrich Wehler,” *Westfalen-Blatt*, July 15, 2014.

Braunschweig *Historikertag* of 1974. At the time, seeing this bearded, powerfully built, *sportif* figure dressed in a khaki safari suit, I remember thinking: Ernest Hemingway! I did not know then just how important active sport was to him. A very talented middle-distance runner in his youth, he also played hand ball, a sport for which Gummersbach is renowned, and remained a lifelong swimmer. Another side of Wehler, entirely consistent with his (not uncritical) love of the USA, was an enthusiasm for jazz, the music he heard being played by American GIs at the end of the war. I saw him over the years, in Bielefeld, at conferences elsewhere in Germany, in Cambridge, England in the 1970s, and in Cambridge, Massachusetts in the early twenty-first century. I liked him enormously and wish I had spent more time with him. Uli Wehler combined a powerful, rational intellect (one of his favorite words of approbation was “nüchtern”) with great passion. One often felt these to be in productive tension with one another. Perhaps, then, after all, he resembled the great Max Weber in this respect, too. At the time of his retirement he spoke movingly about one of the central themes in Weber’s “Scholarship as a Calling,” namely the pathos of academic life, in which we write in order to be over-written in our turn.⁵⁰ Uli Wehler will be greatly missed. He was a great figure in the discipline and a great historian. The rest of us will be coming to terms with his work for a long time.

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⁵⁰Hans-Ulrich Wehler, “Rückblick und Ausblick—oder: arbeiten, um überholt zu werden?,” in Paul Nolte et al., eds., *Perspektiven der Gesellschaftsgeschichte* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2000), 159–68.