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## DEBATE

### Stefan Berger responds to Ulrich Muhlack\*

Let me start by thanking Professor Muhlack for the good things he has to say about my book, even if they are neatly contained in a single paragraph on p. 38 of his review. Some of the comments are almost too generous to be true. Thus, for example, Muhlack writes: 'Anyone wanting to find out about particular authors or schools, or facts, in general finds reliable information here. No important name is missing: the overall picture is subtle and differentiated.' Yet, surely, in a brief book, I am bound to miss out some important names. After all, anyone consulting the index would soon find out that there is no entry under Muhlack. However, as the reviewer's generosity is clearly limited, my main task here will be to answer a variety of criticisms made by Muhlack which, for a historian (see note 5), show, at the very least, a lack of empathy.

A book like mine is meant to be controversial, and is therefore bound to attract criticism. In the British context Chris Clark and Richard Evans, among others, have raised more or less well-founded objections.<sup>1</sup> Some have been dismissive, none more so than Dieter Langewiesche who preferred to reject it in the *Historische Zeitschrift* without engaging in any kind of argument. But there have also been different voices: Georg Wiessala in the *Journal of Area Studies* wrote: 'The book leaves an impression of thorough scholarship and intense, systematic treatment of the subject.' For John Breuilly, writing in

\*Stefan Berger's book, *The Search for Normality: National Identity and Historical Consciousness in Germany since 1800* (Providence, R.I. and Oxford, 1997), was reviewed by Ulrich Muhlack in the November 2000 issue of the *Bulletin*, Vol. XXII, No. 2, pp. 36-43.

<sup>1</sup> Chris Clark, 'Manifesto Against the Nation', *Times Literary Supplement*, 10 July 1998, p. 28, and my response, *TLS*, 17 July 1998, p. 17; Richard Evans, 'After Reunification', in id., *Rereading German History 1800-1996: From Unification to Reunification* (London, 1997), pp. 234-47, and my response in Stefan Berger, 'Nationalism and Historiography', *German History*, 18 (2000), pp. 239-59, esp. pp. 257-9.

## Debate

*German Politics*, it is a 'complex and richly informed book. Berger achieves a great deal and his criticisms are persuasive and timely.' Geoff Eley in *Labour History Review* described it as 'an extremely valuable contribution'. The book also received positive responses from German scholars, for example, in reviews by Jörn Echternkamp in *German Studies Review* and Detlev Siegfried in *IWK*. Without spending too much time on the reception of my book, readers of the *Bulletin* who have not read it should know that a wide range of scholars have at least thought it worthy of serious consideration. Muhlack is not one of them; his review aims not to criticize but to discredit.

There are, first of all, a number of passages in Muhlack's review in which the argument(s) of my book are misconstrued. Thus, for example, its intention is not 'to prevent a "renationalization" of German historiography' (Muhlack, p. 36). I am under no illusion as to the limits of my small intervention. Instead, I analysed certain trends towards renationalization and pointed out that, in my opinion, it would be a mistake to encourage those trends. Others, such as Hans Mommsen, Helmut Böhme, and Wolfgang Wippermann have made related arguments over the last decade about the revival of national sentiment in German historiography since 1990.

In my opinion it also misses the point to state that I regard it as "'fashionable" to call traditional national feeling "false consciousness" (p. 252)' (Muhlack, p. 43) What I do say on this page is: 'critical historians never achieved what they themselves had at times declared to be their ultimate goal, namely to replace the apologetic national paradigm with a critical one aimed at the emancipation of the human being from, to use a fashionable phrase from the 1960s, "false consciousness".' This is clearly a historical reference to the neo-Marxist vocabulary of the 1960s and does not express any personal preference for a concept which, in fact, I regard as belonging to a rather primitive form of Marxism of a bygone age.

Furthermore, I do not argue that any 'normality' is simply unattainable because of Auschwitz (Muhlack, p. 36), although it is true that Auschwitz has been the main difficulty for those intent on developing a positive national identity for Germans. A more fundamental point, however, is simply that there is no such thing as normality in questions of national identity. National identity studies became a booming scholarly undertaking in the 1990s. As Lutz Niethammer has recently pointed out, the very concept of identity is

fraught with a number of difficulties.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the main one is the ease with which one can make political capital out of identity. Nowhere was this more obvious than in the celebrations of the ten year anniversary of reunification. The German weekly *Die Zeit* opened on 28 September 2000 with the heading 'Praise to the Germans. Ten Years Since Reunification – a Totally Normal Country'; Manfred Görtemaker, a historian at the University of Potsdam, wrote in the *Berliner Zeitung* of 1 October 2000 of the differences between 1871 and 1989, but he also confirmed the theme of a 'return to normality'; and the *Berliner Tagesspiegel*, in its lead article of 2/3 October 2000, saw the country making the 'transition to a quieter rhythm. What next? Stabilization? Normalization?' At least there was still a question mark. But, without quoting more celebratory statements, the drift of the argument is obvious: normality is rapidly becoming the new German *Sonderweg*. After all, it would seem absurd to read an article in a leading British or French newspaper loudly proclaiming the country's normality.

Finally, Muhlack embarks on a bit of speculation about authorial intention: he describes me as 'a product of the old Federal Republic', and wonders whether I think of myself as 'the embodiment' of a 'transnational message' (Muhlack, p. 37). Although anyone living with a close familiarity of two different cultures cannot help noticing how ludicrously inadequate most national perceptions of self and other actually are, I am unwilling to play the role Muhlack casts me in: a kind of latter-day saint (or devil, as the case may be) of the old FRG. If anything, I have been quite critical in my book of the way in which parts of the left-liberal establishment, after 1989, suddenly found the FRG a wonderful success story which had to be transplanted wholesale to the GDR. Accepting that much progress has been made in the FRG on the road towards a more democratic political culture surely does not mean that one has to be silent on the remaining failures and weaknesses. I am perplexed by the loss of critical awareness of many West German intellectuals towards their own history, all the more so as it often goes hand in hand with the self-congratulatory tone of many people who today proudly proclaim themselves to be 1968ers, insisting that they have changed the face of the republic for

<sup>2</sup> L. Niethammer, *Kollektive Identität: Heimliche Quellen einer unheimlichen Konjunktur* (Reinbek, 2000).

## Debate

good, when, in fact, many of these people would have been termed 'Scheißliberale' in 1968. Only subsequently, for a variety of reasons, have they found it useful to reclaim 1968 as part and parcel of their own history. On a different note, it is, of course, questionable what relevance Muhlack's speculation about authorial intention has anyway.

I could go on correcting rather loose readings of my text in Muhlack's review, but this becomes a bit tedious, and therefore I should like to come to a more substantial charge of his: the claim that I 'misrepresent the actual historiographical intention' of Leopold von Ranke and Gerhard Ritter (Muhlack, p. 39). To begin with, the first chapter of my book, in which I briefly discuss Ranke and Ritter as formative influences on the national tradition in German historiography between the 1800s and the 1950s, of course only sets out the background for the more central evaluation of German historiography after 1945 and in particular after 1989. But the readers of Muhlack's review do not even get as much as a summary of the main arguments of my book which are contained in the subsequent chapters. If the first chapter, as Muhlack writes, 'convincingly demonstrates constancy and continuity' (Muhlack, p. 38), I shall be satisfied. However, to return to Ranke and Ritter: both are surely complex historians whose work is suggestive and has therefore attracted a number of rival interpretations. On none of the pages quoted by Muhlack (pp. 3, 21, 29 f.) do I refer specifically to Ranke writing the history of the victors. What I do argue is that historicism had a tendency to do just that and that 'such thinking ... is already present in Ranke, and his belief in historical development as God's will' (Berger, p. 30). Such a claim strikes me as one of the less original ones in my book, as it is one that many critics of historicism have made.<sup>3</sup> Nor do I suggest that Ranke 'rejected political change' (Muhlack, p. 38). What I do say is that such change had to be gradual: '[His] attitude was conservative in the sense that it seemed to stabilise each existing state with reference to the divine will. Inherently it was directed against change. Only that which had evolved through a historical process was deemed to be politically desirable. Any radical breaks with the past had to be major catastrophes' (Berger, p. 27). When I talk about Ranke's 'great-men' theory

<sup>3</sup> The classic text here is Georg G. Iggers, *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present* (2nd rev. edn; Middletown, Ct., 1983).

(Berger, p. 33), what I am referring to is the simple fact that Ranke most ly wrote the history of states and its actors, most of whom were men. Again I do not think it is too controversial a statement that historism was, among other things, concerned with the history of great men.

Let us look at Ritter next. The point I make here is not contentious. Muhlack admits that Ritter did draw a line from Frederick II to Hindenburg and Hitler in the introduction to his book on Frederick II, first published in 1936. The Nazis certainly received the book very positively. Yet, according to Muhlack, a close reading of the text would reveal Ritter as a severe critic of the National Socialists. Now, my own paragraph on Ritter starts off by saying: 'Individual historians, like Gerhard Ritter ... played a part in the resistance against National Socialism.' I also mention that he did 'risk occasional cautious criticism of Nazi policies'. The only thing I go on to say is that 'Ritter's stance was characterised by a deep ambiguity'. Given that his biographer Michael Matthiesen emphasizes the instrumental influence of Lutheran religion, anti-Semitism, and nationalism on Ritter's early career, I cannot see how such a statement can possibly misrepresent Ritter's stance. Recent research on historiography under National Socialism has clearly revealed that there was a partial identification between the agendas and expectations of conservative nationalist German historians such as Ritter and the National Socialist agenda.<sup>4</sup> The point is not that Ritter was a committed Nazi (which, clearly, he was not), nor to dispute that there are several readings of his richly ambiguous book about Frederick, but that he, and many of his colleagues, at least partially identified with specific aims of the National Socialists. How do we, after all, interpret Ritter's speeches in occupied France during the Second World War? Is it not the case that many traditional Prusso-German conservatives, like Ritter, hoped that the Nazis would lead a revival of the German nation?

<sup>4</sup> Karen Schönwälder, *Historiker und Politik: Geschichtswissenschaft im Nationalsozialismus* (Frankfurt/Main, 1992); Peter Schöttler (ed.), *Geschichtsschreibung als Legitimationswissenschaft* (Frankfurt/Main, 1997); Winfried Schulze and Otto Gerhard Oexle (eds), *Deutsche Historiker im Nationalsozialismus* (Frankfurt/Main, 1999); the only recent attempt to provide at least a partial apology for the German historical profession under National Socialism is Ursula Wolf, *Litteris et Patriae: Das Janusgesicht der Historie* (Stuttgart, 1996). Wolf's book has its origins in a Ph.D. thesis supervised by Muhlack. For a critique of Wolf see Berger, 'Nationalism and Historiography' (as in note 1).

## Debate

Yet Muhlack claims that Ritter is doubly misrepresented: on Ritter's *Staatskunst und Kriegshandwerk* (1954-68) I find myself correctly quoted. I do indeed claim that it was a 'monumental effort to refute the critics of Prussian militarism'. Muhlack disagrees and quotes Ritter at me. It is, of course, easy to find quotes from such a voluminous work which indicate that Ritter himself was critical of militarism. The point is that Muhlack decontextualizes Ritter: the whole debate surrounding Ritter's *opus* was, after all, centred on the question of how militarism should be defined, as a societal phenomenon or as a narrowly political phenomenon, the latter being the definition preferred by Ritter. As he defined militarism in such a narrow way, he found it easier to refute the critics of Prussian militarism, and to preserve his notion of a positive national continuity. Hitler had to be a *Betriebsunfall* in German history; otherwise the whole *Geschichtsbild* for which Ritter stood would fall. This also explains the vehemence with which he and others responded to Fritz Fischer. And, incidentally, Ritter's book was, of course, also a justification of German rearmament which was so hotly debated in the mid-1950s.

On all accounts then, I really cannot see how I misrepresent the historiographical intention of Ranke and Ritter. However, *The Search for Normality* is neither a book on Ranke and Ritter nor on 'the age-old theme [of] the impact of politics on history' (Muhlack, p. 36). It might be helpful briefly to outline the main arguments of my book. Following a brief survey chapter on the long-term relationship between nationalism and historiography in Germany (pp. 21-55), the impact of the Fischer controversy is assessed (pp. 56-76). In the 1960s, a more critical perspective on modern German history was indeed developed and often went hand in hand with a pluralization of methodological and theoretical approaches. However, as I argue in the following chapter (pp. 77-108), the significance of this important change has often been overemphasized. In German historiographical discourse, the 1970s and 1980s were not decades in which the concepts of postnationalism and constitutional patriotism ruled supreme. For a start, the more critical national historiography which developed was still a form of history-writing orientated towards the history of the nation. More importantly, representatives of a more conservative national tradition continued to occupy important positions within the West German historical profession and, especially following the 'geistig-moralische Wende' of 1982, were not slow to go on the counter-attack. The *Histori-*

*kerstreit* was the most visible sign of the continued contested nature of the national paradigm throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

The main bulk of my book (pp. 111-229) is then concerned with the impact of the unexpected reunification of Germany on questions of historical consciousness and national identity. First, I discuss the signs of a more positive re-evaluation of the Bismarckian Reich in German historiography after 1990 (pp. 111-23). Secondly, I analyse attempts to (ab)use Martin Broszat's call for a historization of National Socialism in order to present various revisionist accounts of Germany's darkest years (pp. 124-48). Notions of a 'European civil war', 'value-free modernization', a 'preventive war' against the Soviet Union, the Germans as victims of the Second World War, and the centrality of the national opposition to Hitler all have their place within the attempts of a self-declared New Right to re-write the history of National Socialism in such a way as to allow for the renationalization of German historical consciousness. Thirdly, I argue that some, albeit by no means all, historians use the boom in GDR history to revive a version of totalitarianism theory which makes it increasingly difficult to differentiate the 'red' from the 'brown' dictatorship. I analyse the widespread vilification of GDR history and of the GDR's historical profession. Even those West German historians who had championed a far more positive view of Marxist-Leninist historiography before 1989 tended to be dismissive thereafter (pp. 149-175). Fourthly, if the renationalization of German historical consciousness has proceeded over the dead body of the GDR and of GDR historiography, it also progressed by portraying the history of the Federal Republic as the new *Sonderweg*. From being a success story, the history of the Federal Republic is now sometimes written as though it has become a mere *divertimento* in German national history. It is charged with having been overburdened by an excessive *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, and the thorough Westernization of its political culture is being questioned at the same time as one witnesses a revival of *Mittellage* ideology and calls on the reunified Germany to act self-confidently as a new major power in Europe and the world (pp. 176-97). Finally, I analyse the discourse of 'normality' and the search for new national symbols in the 'Berlin republic' (pp. 198-229). Throughout the book I stress the great diversity of opinions among German historians and I explicitly state that 'I do not wish to dramatise the situation which is still characterised fundamentally by a plu-

## Debate

rality of viewpoints and methods' (pp. 111 f.). In my view, there has been no dramatic reorientation of German historiography after 1990, but 'a whole number of corrections to research paradigms, methodologies, and, more generally, to historical views on Germany, and these have, overall, strengthened tendencies towards a renationalisation of German historical consciousness' (p. 220). In the final substantive chapter of the book I analyse the reactions of British and American historians to reunification (pp. 230-50). Despite the impression created by Margaret Thatcher's famous Chequers meeting of historians, the overall perception was remarkably positive. The vast majority of Anglo-American historians held the view that the Federal Republic had successfully buried the demons of the past. At the same time, however, many were justly critical of tendencies to achieve a renationalization of German historical consciousness.

None of this, however, is mentioned because in Muhlack's view 'this book has political intentions which fall outside the scope of scholarly criticism' (Muhlack, p. 37). Instead of tackling the real arguments of the book, he prefers to be concerned about my approach to historiography which 'places the scholarly claims of this work into question' (Muhlack, p. 39). This leads me to the two crucial differences of opinion between Muhlack and myself. The first, more important one, concerns a methodological disagreement about the relationship between politics and history-writing. The second disagreement is genuinely political (in the narrower sense of the word to which Muhlack has reduced it). Let me start with the first: where Muhlack argues that my conceptual premisses are inadequate, I tend to be more modest: his are different. In the following remarks I will concentrate on some of his misrepresentations and distortions of the general approach of my book, and then proceed to outline the consequences of his variant of exclusive historicism<sup>5</sup> Muhlack accuses me of being prejudiced, because I state categorically that I do not believe in

<sup>5</sup> I deliberately use the term 'historism' (and 'historist') rather than 'historicism' (and 'historicist'). Whereas 'historism' (in German, *Historismus*), as represented by Leopold von Ranke, can be seen as an evolutionary, reformist concept which understands all political order as historically developed and grown, 'historicism' (*Historizismus*), as defined and rejected by Karl Popper, is based on the notion that history develops according to predetermined laws towards a particular end. The English language, by using only one term for those different concepts, tends to conflate the two. Hence I suggest using two

the autonomy of history as an academic subject from politics. However, if Muhlack then claims in the next sentence that I 'thus [sic!] subordinate history to politics, declaring that one is the function of the other' (Muhlack, p. 40) he performs a rather cheap trick. His two sentences are not connected logically: they state quite different things. To doubt the autonomy of history as a subject from politics, as I indeed do, is clearly not the same as to say that history is subordinate to, or a mere function of, politics. It is perfectly possible, and I certainly claim to do this in my book, to write an interpretation of historical events which follows the established practices of historical scholarship, for example, the practices of source-criticism, of logical argument, and of allowing for the possibility of checking, criticizing, and revising its truth-claims. Method provides the intersubjective epistemological criteria for coherence and correctness, yet such 'objectivity' is restricted to respecting the rules of the game.

Muhlack's position claims something quite different. For him the strict division between historical scholarship and politics is 'the immutable [sic!] basic law of modern historiography' (Muhlack, p. 42). In his view, historians have political convictions which are based on values and norms, and they are allowed to state them publicly and campaign for them, if that is what they want to do. But what they must not do is to bring them into their scholarly work, which has to be detached from political intentions. Here I beg to differ. The political dimensions of historiography can be acknowledged without reducing history to politics by accepting the perspectival nature of all knowledge: all truth claims are interpretative, partial, and revisable within the boundaries of rational, scientific discourse. A fact is only ever a fact within a specific framework of description. This not only allows for a plurality of true statements, it also means that the realm of facts cannot neatly be separated from the realm of values and politics. Factual statements already presuppose normative choices. They can be hidden (as is usually the case with historians), or they can be brought out in the open. Whichever is the case, knowledge is only possible within particular political-normative-ideological 'horizons of expectation'.<sup>6</sup>

separate terms in analogy to the German language. The ambiguities inherent in the concept of historicism are explored by Annette Wittkau, *Historismus: Zur Geschichte des Begriffs und des Problems* (2nd edn; Göttingen, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> There is not enough space here to explicate the complex relationship

## Debate

While my book does not offer 'political argument dressed up as history of historiography' (Muhlack, p. 37), it does offer a historical argument which openly declares its social, cultural, and political investments and implications. My argument makes explicit its underlying cognitive interests (*Erkenntnisinteressen*), as far as that is possible for any author. *The Search for Normality* has no pretensions to being a neutral reading of the sources. Its arguments depend on moral norms and political dispositions which should not be kept artificially before the gates of historical enquiries. Otherwise, historical scientific method, as represented by Muhlack, becomes the embodiment of scientific rationality. Yet in his version of historicism cognitive interests remain invisible. The links between knowledge and power disappear behind the wall neatly separating factual from normative judgements and scientific from political statements. The juxtaposition of 'pure science' and 'personal opinion' frames the problem in such a way as to allow only for inadequate answers. After all, what matters is how the personal is inscribed on all levels of historical work: the questions that historians ask, their choice of topics, their methodologies, units of investigation, measure of comparison, use of master narratives, institutional pressures, considerations of one's own career, and generational constellations. Hence all history-writing takes place within a social system of power relationships which is always also deeply political (in the broad meaning of the word which Muhlack does not seem to know). The idea of a neat separation between politics and scholarliness remains at best wishful thinking. It was not, as Muhlack asserts, the case that 'the political world itself needed an autonomous historiography' (Muhlack, p. 40); rather, it needed the illusion of autonomy which was indeed duly provided by historicism.

between facts/science and values/politics. For a recent, up-to-date, and succinct introduction to these issues see Chris Lorenz, *Konstruktion der Vergangenheit: Eine Einführung in die Geschichtstheorie* (Cologne, 1997), esp. pp. 400-14, 422-36; id., 'The View from Anywhere (or: On Facts, Fiction, Football and an Indian). Some Reflections on the (Im)Possibility of the Writing of History', in Jan Denolf and Barbara Simons (eds), *(Re)Constructing the Past* (Brussels, 2000), pp. 411-41; id., 'Historical Knowledge and Historical Reality: A Plea for "Internal Realism"', *History and Theory*, 33 (1994), pp. 297-327. An English-language translation of Lorenz's seminal book is urgently needed.

Once the boundaries of scientific historical research were defined in late eighteenth-century Germany, they spread like wildfire throughout Europe and were adopted in various forms and to different extents everywhere.<sup>7</sup> Those who did not conform were written out of scientific history. Nineteenth-century German historians, for example, often criticised the methodological standards of British scholars such as Edward Gibbon. Political criticism was presented in the form of a methodological critique, as in the case of Adam Ferguson.<sup>8</sup> In Germany itself a long list of scholars was excommunicated because their scholarship did not fit the politics of German historians, but the official reason for excommunication was almost always methodological. After all, history was a science (*Wissenschaft*)! Muhlack's critique follows that well-trodden path: the worst he can say about my book is that it does not represent any 'progress in knowledge' and therefore 'does not fulfil the historian's main task' (Muhlack, pp. 42 f.). In fact, as far as he is concerned it is not *Wissenschaft*. It should, however, be understood that he can make this claim only on the very narrow basis of a historicist definition of *Wissenschaft* which has served its purpose of excluding other types of history from academic history writing for a long time now – in fact, for far too long.

This leads me to the second disagreement: Muhlack and I clearly have different concerns in the present. It is to his credit that Muhlack admits this up front, but it is worthwhile dwelling for a moment on the way this difference is expressed: 'I have always affirmed the national dimension of the Federal Republic's political system, and I experienced the reunification of Germany as the fulfilment of a yearning that sometimes seemed unsatisfiable. I see the nation-state recently re-established on a democratic foundation as the basic framework for present and future German politics, and thus take for

<sup>7</sup> Bonnie G. Smith, 'Gender and the Practices of Scientific History: the Seminar and Archival Research in the Nineteenth Century', *American Historical Review*, 100 (1995), pp. 1150-76.

<sup>8</sup> On German historians' critique of British historiography see the relevant chapters in Benedikt Stuchtey and Peter Wende (eds), *British and German Historiography 1750-1950: Traditions, Perceptions, and Transfers* (Oxford, 2000), and Stefan Berger, Peter Lambert, and Peter Schumann (eds), *Dialog zwischen Schwerhörigen: Geschichte, Mythos und Gedächtnis im deutsch-britischen kulturellen Austausch 1750-2000* (Göttingen, forthcoming 2001).

## Debate

granted concepts such as national self-determination, national self-assertion, and national interest' (Muhlack, p. 37). Are we not faced with a renationalization of German identity if national unity has produced such responses? After all, it does seem to me worthwhile to ask what specific interests lie behind the claims of national self-determination and national interest. Is it not baffling to see Muhlack's use of the collective 'we'? '[O]ur own will ... must not bow to any foreign will' (Muhlack, p. 37 f.). Who is speaking here? Should the reader take for granted a national collective will? Ironically, Muhlack's review thus becomes a *de facto* endorsement of the major argument of *The Search for Normality*, that is, the renewed vigour with which the national paradigm is upheld among the liberal-conservative mainstream of German historiography after 1990.

I hope I have succeeded in pointing out that Ulrich Muhlack and I find ourselves on different archipelagos as far as our conceptual understanding and our politics of history are concerned. In his review Muhlack shows himself a good pupil of Schopenhauer. The latter was the author of a sharp little book in which he describes thirty-eight ways in which to win the upper hand in a scholarly controversy.<sup>9</sup> Muhlack employs a fair number of these tactics, but ultimately, all is rhetoric and, to quote Muhlack one more time, 'nothing convinces me' (Muhlack, p. 40).

<sup>9</sup>Arthur Schopenhauer, *The Art of Controversy and Other Posthumous Papers* (London, 1896).

STEFAN BERGER is Professor of Modern History at the University of Glamorgan, Wales. He has recently published *Social Democracy and the Working-Class in Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Germany* (2000); 'In the Fangs of Social Patriotism: The Construction of Nation and Class in Autobiographies of British and German Social Democrats in the Inter-War Period', *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*, 40 (2000), pp. 259-87; and 'William Harbutt Dawson: The Career and Politics of an Historian of Germany', *English Historical Review*, 116 (2001), pp. 76-113. He has also edited (with Kevin Passmore and Mark Donovan) *Writing National Histories: Western Europe since 1800* (1999), as well as (with Angel Smith) *Nationalism, Labour and Ethnicity, 1870-1939* (1999), and he is series editor (with Heiko Feldner and Kevin Passmore) of a series of books on historiography and historical theory published by Edward Arnold under the title *Writing History*. He is currently working on the relations between the British left and the GDR between 1949 and 1973.