

*Future of European Foreign Policy Seminar**Biographical sketch***MICHAEL STÜRMER 1938 –**

Michael Stürmer was born on September 29, 1938, in Kassel, a city situated along the Fulda River in northern Hessen, Germany. Stürmer received degrees in History, Philosophy and Philology successively at the University of Marburg, Free University of Berlin and London School of Economics. He worked as a professor at the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg for thirty years; from 1973 up until 2003. During this period, he had also been a guest lecturer at prominent institutions such as Harvard University, the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton and the Sorbonne numerous times. Stürmer worked as West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl's advisor in the 1980s, being an occasional speechwriter for the Chancellor as well. He was considered a well-known figure of the neo-conservative right wing of the West German historical guild (*Zunft*), and is still one of Germany's leading modern historians. He is currently the chief correspondent for *Die Welt*, a German national daily newspaper; and a lecturer of Contemporary German Politics at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies (The Bologna Center), Johns Hopkins University .

Stürmer's work is related to his place as a leading figure in the post-Fischer history of the German Empire (the *Kaiserreich*). His first major work was *Koalition und Opposition in der Weimarer Republik, 1924-1928* which he wrote in 1967. Then he started editing the central essay collection; *Das kaiserliche Deutschland: Politik und Gesellschaft, 1870-1918* (Düsseldorf, 1970), and a key documentary reader, *Bismarck und die preussisch-deutsche Politik, 1871-1890* (Munich, 1970). Four years after these two major works in 1970, he published yet another volume on Bismarck and his policies after German Unification - *Regierung und Reichstag im Bismarckstaat, 1871-1880: Casarismus und Parlametarismus* (Düsseldorf, 1974). After the publication of this monograph, he started to produce much less than before. He took on the role of the public intellectual. He dedicated his energy to the *Sinnstiftung*, the pursuit of meaning. *Das ruhelose Reich: Deutschland, 1866-1918*, the textbook that he published in 1983, is the third of a six-volume general history of conservative character, *Die Deutsche und ihre Nation*. Among his more recent works is *Allies Divided: Transatlantic Policies for the Greater Middle East* which he co-edited with Robert D. Blackwill

in 1997, *The German Century* which he edited as a coffee-table piece on German history in 1999, and *The German Empire, 1870-1918* that he published in 2000. Today, his recent political pieces and articles can be found as a collection in *Dissonanzen*.

His early career was shaped in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the light of the broad generational grouping that identified itself with the idea that the appearance and the course of the Nazi ideology have its structural roots in the deeper German past. He belongs to the last generation to find senior jobs in West Germany before the dramatic shrinkage of the late 1970s onwards. Stürmer represents one of the leading voices in contradicting with the generational leadership of the liberal-cum-social-democratic grouping in Germany which seemed like the continuation of fifteen years ago; the groupings associated with the journal *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* in 1975. All this makes Stürmer a key figure of certain influence, especially in the political agenda of the CDU and CSU, now that his views correspond to that of CDU and CSU. His major contributions in the interpretation of Germany's history helped move central debates in West Germany forward; and a step by step analysis of his work is necessary to demonstrate the nature of these debates.

Michael Stürmer came to be famous for his interpretation of German history with reference to the country's geographical situation in Central Europe. He has been advocating the idea that German history has been vastly influenced by Germany's physical place in Europe which rendered it exposed to a great deal of instability throughout history. Stürmer argues that being in the midst of such an important conflict zone could easily lead Germany to be vulnerable and/or powerless in the region. However, Stürmer adds, Germany's historical struggle had been about turning this situation to an advantage. Especially after the collapse of the German Reich in 1945, the Cold War attracted all the attention in Germany as it was divided into two poles. This division was central in Chancellor Kohl's policies. Stürmer, being the advisor to Kohl, stressed the significance of the geography thesis: "Partner of the American sea alliance in the West, part of the Soviet land empire in the East, loyal to irreconcilable systems of values and government, the uneasy heirs to German history are threatened as well as supported through this antagonism, whether they like it or not."^[1] His emphasis on 'geopolitik' is an essential part of the literature on Stürmer. In addition to this, a striking and controversial part of his theory is that successive German rulers were left with no other choice but to engage in authoritarian governments to be able to deal with this delicate matter. This part of the thesis deserves attention in a wider context, which came to be known as the *Historikerstreit* in Germany in the last half of the 1980s.

Michael Stürmer played a crucial role in the *Historikerstreit*, which can be translated as 'The Historians' Quarrel'. It was a historical debate that took place in West Germany during 1986-1989 and focused on the way that the Nazi rule should be analyzed in the course of German history. The left and the right had different interpretations of the Holocaust and of Nazi Germany. The intense debates, which attracted much attention because the sides were writing co-op articles in newspapers, became the most interesting item on Germany's political agenda. The discussion was generally around whether the Nazi rule was an inevitable consequence of German historical development, and whether German people should take responsibility for what took place half a century ago. The initial debate was flared by the social left-wing critic

Jürgen Habermas. He argued that a new tendency among the conservative historians in Germany was blossoming which is a more nationalist way to interpret Germany's past political experience, especially the Nazi period. Habermas complained that these conservative views were brought up as a substitute for the more pluralistic historiography of the 1960s. He specifically accused certain historians of trying to underrate the severity of the political scene during the Nazi rule so that the German public could have a past that they could be more proud of and that they could identify themselves with.

Stürmer was one of the historians the left-wing historians targeted. He was widely criticized for his essay, *Land ohne geschichte (Land without History)* that was published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in 1986. In this essay, Stürmer's main argument is that Germany did not have a history to be proud of, and only a new interpretation of German history can help build a different and a positive evaluation of the past so that German people can find meaning in their past. He states; "In a land without history, the future is won by those who are able to harness memory, coin concepts and interpret the past."^[2] This positive understanding of national pride in Germany, according to Stürmer, could only be put forward with the common attempt of the government, the historians and the media. "The search for our lost history is not an abstract desire for education: it is morally legitimate and politically necessary. It is a question of the inner continuity of the German republic and its calculability in foreign affairs. In a country without memory everything is possible."^[3] After he published the essay, Stürmer was accused of attempting to white-wash the Nazi past to create a more convenient past for the German people. One important factor to note here is that at that time Stürmer was serving as an advisor and speechwriter to Helmut Kohl. This automatically overheated the debate and created a different basis for suspicion towards the government by left-wing intellectuals who were already displeased with what they saw as the more nationalistic tone of the Kohl administration. Although Stürmer declared that the statements in the essay were his personal ideas and that he was not using his position as Kohl's advisor, most left-wing intellectuals still thought that Stürmer's essay also expressed the views of the Chancellor.

To evaluate Stürmer's argument, one has to keep in mind his openly conservative agenda. According to him, for Germany to embrace its past, any patriotic drive has to abjure older nationalist aspirations. It means that the division of Germany at the time of the discussions should be accepted as the new factor in determining Germany's future. He simply argues; "If German identity cannot exist without the nation, it can no longer be based on the nation-state." In other words, Stürmer's new understanding of nationalism observes the post-war moratorium on projects of German reunification: such could only proceed via some form of neutralism, and that would mean Germany's separation from the Atlantic community. This would also involve a return to Stürmer's geopolitical view of German history, in which Germany's location at the centre of Europe becomes a determining factor for the German past, and Central European fragmentation functional for the balance of power.^[4]

In the end, the quarrel of historians raised an important question: What should be done about Germany's Nazi past and how should Nazism be interpreted? This was mainly what everyone was trying to answer. From what we know about Stürmer's political stance, it would not be wrong to argue that he deliberately avoids the past experience of German nationalism. He

thinks that Germany urgently needs a new basis for national pride and identity, and this would only be achieved by abstaining from Nazism for it only serves as an obstacle in constructing a healthier conception of 'German-ness'. The "guilt-obsession" that comes with trying to understand and analyze Nazism leaves Germany at a standstill. In his own words: "Germany needs a history that promises signposts to identity, moorings in the rapids of progress. History worth the name is neither nostalgic dream nor millennial myth, nor an imperative of the German way [Wesen], whether Germany is sinner or saint. History holds for the Germans in Europe the chance to find themselves again. Today the issue is the salvation of our intellectual personality, the identity of the Germans in the middle of Europe, the calculability of our policy, the inner good sense of our political culture, and, last of all, the continuity of our fatally threatened constitution of freedom."^[5] Later on, he re-emphasizes his disapproval for the political movements of 1960s and the importance that he gives to education to reverse that process. "The cultural politics of the sixties sowed the storm, and today we are reaping the whirlwind. If we fail to agree on an elementary cultural curriculum, which can prepare the way for continuity and consensus in our country, and which can provide once again the measure and mode of patriotism, then the Federal Republic of Germany may well find that the best part of its history is behind it."^[6]

The *Historikerstreit* is an integral part in understanding Michael Stürmer, and it is still a relevant debate if not as heated as it used to be during the 80s. It is a well-constructed summary of his political agenda in one of the most fragile eras of German history (when the discussion on *Ostpolitik* was at its peak) about another critical era, the Nazi rule. One important note would be that there is no point in claiming that he was trying to white-wash the Nazi past. After doing a thorough reading of his work, one can easily see that he is trying to make a different point. However, it is hard to agree with Stürmer on the point that he is making. The analysis of Nazism is a healthy discussion as long as it does not include avoidance. Ignoring one of the most significant periods of German (and world) history only means limiting the political and moral perspective. The ability to discuss is an opportunity to overcome one's past mistakes, it should not be perceived as a moral burden as Stürmer argues. To call for an artificial positive consensus on Germany's past experience is a corruption of German national memory because it disregards the facts, and it is not compatible with Germany's claims of pluralism as the determining factor in German political culture. At the end of the day, history will *still* matter no matter how differently one wants to present it. It is a wrong strategy to try to escape history regardless of which country and which trauma is being discussed.

Stürmer's more recent work focuses again on his conservative agenda and his Atlanticist stance. Making yet another reference to his own theory of the significance of geography in deciding Germany's future, he argues that Germany cannot disregard its location and role in Central Europe. As a result of this, the present power politics in the international context makes it inevitable and critical to align Germany with NATO. Stürmer's critic Jürgen Habermas was also an Atlanticist. Habermas mentioned that the opening of the Federal Republic to Western political traditions was definitely one of the political achievements of post-war Germany of which his generation should be proud. However, Habermas disagreed with Stürmer on a fundamental issue. He thought that Stürmer was trying to revive the old nationalist arguments about Germany's role in Central Europe in trying to explain his

adherence in transatlantic ties. Habermas thought that this would only underestimate the importance of the real achievement; that is Germany's attachment to Western political culture. Still, it is crucial to note that Habermas and Stürmer were in more agreement than met the eye. They both supported NATO and they did not believe that neutralism is a compatible policy for Germany in the wider context of international relations. Stürmer specifically emphasized that Germany was still attempting to find its strategic niche in both Europe and in the transatlantic system. When talking about the current situation of transatlantic ties, he had an advice to give to upcoming governments. He wanted them to stop trying to please France, the UK and the US at the same time. Instead of this strategy Germany should work on cultivating the Atlantic alliance now that it is the most important player as the regulator in Central Europe. This explains his support for and approval of the current Merkel government and Germany's closer relations with the United States as well as its central role and say in the process of European integration.

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[Back to homepage](#)

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Notes

[1] Rempel, G. Kohl and German Identity

[2] Stürmer, *Geschichte in geschichtslosem Land* in *Historikerstreit*, 36

[3] *Ibid*, p.38.

[4] Eley, *Nazism, Politics and the Image of the Past: Thoughts on the West German Historikerstreit 1986-1987*

[5] Stürmer, *Dissonanzen*, p. 276.

[6] *Ibid*.