

# Het nerveuze tijdperk en zijn historici : de opkomst van de mentaliteitsgeschiedenis in Duitsland, 1889-1915

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summary

## The 'age of nervousness' and its historians. The rise of the history of mentalities in Germany, 1889-1915\*

This dissertation sets out to demonstrate that in the German *Kaiserreich* of the 1890s a new, academic form of cultural history developed, which was characterized by an interest in the history of collective psychological dispositions: perceptions, feelings, passions and sensibilities. Living at a time which they described as an 'age of nervousness', the new cultural historians promoted a kind of 'history of mentalities' (as similar historical research became known after World War II), or - in their own words - a form of 'historical psychology', *Menschengeschichte* or *Seelengeschichte*. The dissertation answers the questions how and why this variant of cultural history emerged in *fin-de-siècle* German academic historiography.

The main characters of the dissertation are five German historians who, in the period 1889-1915, fervently committed themselves to changing academic historiography from a predominantly political orientation to an all-encompassing cultural perspective. In order of appearance these historians are: Eberhard Gothein (1853-1923, professor in Karlsruhe, Bonn and Heidelberg), Karl Lamprecht (1856-1915, professor in Bonn, Marburg and Leipzig), Georg Steinhausen (1866-1933, academic librarian in Jena and Kassel, and professor in Heidelberg), Kurt Breysig (1866-1940, professor in Berlin), and Walter Goetz (1867-1958, professor in Tübingen, Strasburg and Leipzig). The analysis of their intellectual development and careers, their historical work and political ideals forms the substance of this study in intellectual history.

It is argued in the dissertation that there are good reasons to view these five cultural historians as belonging to the same historiographical discourse, despite the fact that they never acted as a group and despite the many differences of opinion between them. First of all, the analysis of their work shows that they were fundamentally in agreement regarding the contents and the necessity of cultural history, and the need for a form of 'historical psychology'. Furthermore, the dissertation demonstrates that the five cultural historians shared both supporters and opponents, and exhibited many commonalities in social background, intellectual development, and political outlook.

Thus, although their differences of opinion are carefully researched in the dissertation, its aim is to show that the new cultural historians were more than just five separate individual intellectuals. Apart from stressing the connections *between* the new cultural historians, the dissertation also highlights their connections with mainstream historiography in Germany. The usual qualification of 'disciplinary *Außenseiter*' for the new cultural historians evokes a one-sided image, both of the historical discipline in Germany and of their position within it. The dissertation argues that the new cultural historians were well-rooted in the historical discipline. They received important ideas and incentives from their academic history teachers, and they played an important role in the institutional innovations that characterized the German historical discipline in the 1890s and after. In sum, this dissertation interprets the

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\* I would like to thank Geert Somsen and Joke Spruyt for their efforts to correct my English.

history of the new cultural history not as the history of a few isolated and idiosyncratic individuals, but as a broader and as more substantial phenomenon in the history of (German) historiography.

The reasons why this perspective is not predominant in the existing research on the new cultural historians, and why both cultural and psychological aspects of their work have received less attention than they deserve, are explained in Chapter 1. It is argued that until the 1990s the study of the new cultural historians was dominated by Marxist historians and 'critical' historians. Both groups of historians tended to look upon the new history of the 1890s first and foremost as a 'symptom' of broader social and political developments. And both groups of historians interpreted the new history predominantly as representing *social and economic* history.

Marxist historians viewed the appearance of the new history as the symptom of an inevitable 'crisis' of the existing elitist way of looking at history, that was unable to 'cope' with the industrial mass society at the end of the nineteenth century. From their perspective, the new history was a half-baked, bourgeois effort to come to terms with the new social and economic reality. Following Georg Iggers' lead, 'critical' historians emphasized the German *Sonderweg* in this historiographical respect, as they did in others as well. They tended to play down the importance of the 'modernizing' elements in German historiography in the *Kaiserreich*. From their perspective the new historians were a failure in Germany, both because the opposition against their work was too strong and because they themselves were only halfway progressive, both politically and methodically. Both Marxist and critical historiographers paid most attention to the social and economic contents of the new history. To them, these aspects represented a step forward from the older political and idealist historiography, whereas they gave little attention to the cultural and social-psychological aspects of the new history which they considered as a fall-back into reactionary or specifically German 'irrational' patterns of thought.

Arguing against these views, Chapter 2 of the dissertation suggests that the new history had a strong start in the 1890s and was weakened but not stopped by the opposition against it, while Chapter 3 extensively demonstrates the fundamentally *cultural* character of the new history and analyzes its social-psychological aspects. While the new cultural historians indeed did pay a lot of attention to economic and social phenomena in the past, their perspective was fundamentally broader than that. It can be called 'panoramic': they aimed to bring into view *all* aspects of human life, including law, religion, art and politics - on a regional and national, as well as on a global scale. They were convinced that to achieve this aim historians could not stick to the individualistic and singularistic approach that characterized mainstream political history, concentrating on single persons and the chain of events. Instead, (cultural) historians needed to distinguish and elaborate collective 'types' of behavior and more general patterns of development.

Furthermore, the cultural historians believed that the only possible way to connect and explain all different aspects of human history was to develop a social-psychological perspective, in which episodes or aspects of history were analyzed as indications and expressions of (changing) collective psychological characteristics. Their concept of 'culture' was all-embracing and at the same time fundamentally psychological. It was also profoundly *dynamic* in character, emphasizing change and progress. They highlighted the 'psychological distance' between different periods of history, they warned historians of the hidden trap of psychological anachronisms, and many of them showed an interest in (or were influenced by) phase-theories of human development.

The quintessence of this ‘historical psychology’ was *not* to apply universal psychological laws to different periods and aspects of history, but instead to elaborate a historical view of the psychological development of groups of people in different circumstances and through different periods of time. Two different but seldom explicitly distinguished theories were fundamental to this historical view of psychology and mankind.

On the one hand ‘culture’ as a collective psychological disposition was, in a sociological fashion, considered to be a product of ‘human socialization’, depending on the organization and different means of human interaction, which in themselves depended very much on technological and economical developments. The new cultural historians’ most interesting work, from our point of view, was produced when they took this proposition seriously, analyzing connections between works of art or personal documents and economical, technical or social changes.

The differences of opinion among them had much to do with the more or less absolute value they attached to this sociological proposition, i.e. the measure in which they considered individuals to be determined by collective forces. Although *all* cultural historians recognized the power of collective forces in forming men’s psychological dispositions, most of them considered it important to reserve a special place for (outstanding) individuals that were *less* affected by collective forces and even could be said to *lead* the masses in some respects. Lamprecht stood out from the other cultural historians in that he was the most radical supporter of the ‘collectivist’ sociological assumption, consistently stressing the very limited freedom of individual development.

On the other hand, the new cultural historians’ idea of changing mental abilities of men was based upon a far more implicit assumption, distinct from the sociological assumption, and not always in agreement with it. As is evident from their acceptance of phase-theories of human development, according to which man progressed from lower to higher *Kulturstufen*, they were prone to view the development of culture in a quasi-biological fashion as a more or less autogenous process of growth, refinement and differentiation. World history appeared to them as ‘the collective effort of the human species towards perfection’ (Eberhard Gothein).

The second half of the dissertation (Chapters 4-7) is devoted to explaining how and why the new cultural historians of the 1890s came to their conceptions of historical psychology and history as cultural history. Successively, their social background, education and early careers, the intellectual influences from within and without the historical discipline, and the contemporary social, cultural and political context of their work is analyzed.

In Chapter 4 the social background, education and early careers of the five cultural historians are compared with those of other professional historians of their generation in general (using Wolfgang Weber’s data), and with those of their most direct opponents specifically. One of the conclusions is that, unlike several of their opponents, the cultural historians all had a social background that did *not* distinguish them from the majority of historical professors of their generation. They were all Protestants, mostly from Prussia, most of them grew up in cities, some were educated at elite-schools, and all had academically educated fathers who - as gymnasium-teachers, clergymen or physicians - belonged to the social and cultural elite of *Bildungsbürger* in the *Kaiserreich*. Furthermore, compared to other students who later became professors of history, their educational and (early) professional careers were rather successful: supported in their early careers by their history professors, most of them became teachers and professors at the university at a relatively early age. Even

after the opposition against their ideas had manifested itself, they were able to maintain important activities within the historical discipline. One important thing made the cultural historians different from most of their colleagues: four out of five of them also studied economics, whereas only 16% of all historical professors between 1851 and 1900 did the same. Significantly, apart from their history teachers, their economy teachers also gave them substantial support in their careers.

In Chapters 5 and 6 the cultural historians' early intellectual influences are analyzed. Chapter 5 evaluates the influences from within the historical discipline. It is shown that the influential criticisms of their historical opponents, who stressed the 'un-historical' and 'un-disciplinary' character of their work, were exaggerated. In important respects the work of the five was not different from mainstream historiography. Besides, even those aspects that appeared to be 'new' or 'different' can be found in the works of some of their history teachers or elsewhere in the field of history. Especially the historian Ernst Bernheim, teacher of both Steinhausen and Lamprecht, stands out as an important influence for their way of looking at history.

There were, of course, real differences of opinion with their historical opponents, but these concerned issues of conviction and ideology rather than historical craftsmanship. The main dividing point was the different conception of the relationship between individuals and the groups they belong to. The cultural historians acknowledged the socially determined, collective and passive nature of many 'individual' characteristics, whereas their opponents highlighted the fundamental freedom of choice and the creative incomprehensibility of personalities. Accordingly, the cultural historians espoused the enlightened, psychological conception of culture as 'changing collective abilities and faculties' of men, whereas their opponents conceived of culture in a more restricted way as the 'valuable' and willful products of the human *Geist*.

How the cultural historians came to their 'enlightened' conceptions of the individual, of culture and of cultural history, is shown in Chapter 6. Four lines of influence and reception are discussed: the earlier specimen of academic cultural history in Germany from the middle of the nineteenth century (especially Burckhardt, Freytag and Riehl); Western European Positivism; the Herbartian tradition in psychology and its critics (especially the *Völkerpsychologie* and Dilthey); and the Historical School of economics. Especially the last group of scholars should be considered as a crucial force in determining and confirming the intellectual outlook of the cultural historians (including the idea of a 'historical psychology') at an early stage.

Finally, Chapter 7 examines the contemporary political and cultural significance of the new cultural historiography. The cultural historians themselves presented their conception of history explicitly as a necessary and inevitable part of the development of modern times. They intensively studied their own age, which they characterized as an 'age of nervousness', and remarked that their own focus upon the psychological aspects of life was a typical expression of this 'nervousness', which could also be found in contemporary art, literature and science. They did not consider this 'nervousness' to be a symptom of cultural decadence or degeneration, but saw it as a sign of the psychological refinement and improvement of the modern individual, i.e. as the necessary psychological adaptation to a fundamentally new age.

In this sense their view of the present was an expression of their perception of the past – and vice versa. At the same time both views were strongly connected to their political beliefs, of which the dissertation shows the proximity to variants of (social/left) liberalism. It was typical of their political and historical views, that they

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considered the modern, ‘nervously’ refined individual as the apex of historical development. As the leading social-liberal of the time, Friedrich Naumann, remarked in 1911, the new cultural historiography emerged as part of a ‘new system of being man’: it could serve as the intellectual ‘dress’ for the contemporary man, surrounding him with insights about the historical and social differentiation of the human soul. This ‘dress’ were not politically neutral, however. It was the expression of an ideology, which can be traced back to a (left)liberal confrontation with modernity and which in many ways was rooted in Enlightenment ideas about man and history. As in so many other cases, this historical psychology was connected to the progressive idea of the perfectibility of man.

