

The Historian as Provocateur:

George Mosse's Accomplishment and Legacy

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George Mosse was one of the most creative, imaginative, and protean historians of his era. While others dug deeper into archives or offered more detailed accounts of particular periods, none explored a wider range of issues or dared to raise as many new themes as questions to be pursued by young and mid-career colleagues. At a time of generational conflict, Mosse was one of the mandarins of the discipline; his work and person bridged generational gaps and thus preserved and renewed scholarly traditions at the same time.

In his posthumously published memoir, *Confronting History*, he relates a story of childhood mischief. The Soviet ambassador to Germany, G.V. Chicherin, arrived at the Mosse estate in Berlin for dinner wearing a tuxedo. Mosse, then twelve years old, asked why the representative of a revolutionary workers' state agreed to dress in the style of such bourgeois respectability.¹ As the childhood mischief-maker became a historian, he offered one provocation after another to the conventions of the discipline, often, like his challenge to Ambassador Chicherin, with a blend of directness and humor that charmed his critics and endeared him to his allies. As he would say to promising students, a historian must both learn how to work with care and accuracy and be certain to pose issues that are morally significant and intellectually interesting. One must never be boring or pose issues of little significance.

Part of his accomplishment and legacy was to show that it was possible to challenge conventional wisdom in ways that preserved good will within the community of scholars and that even entertained students and colleagues. A life-long liberal, he did not hesitate to criticize the new left in the 1960s, when he thought it transgressed or even attacked the norms of the academy. As anyone who heard him lecture or knew him personally saw, a bit of the childish mischief-maker remained a part of the mature, great man. Haunted

¹George L. Mosse, *Confronting History: A Memoir* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000).

his whole adult life by the Holocaust, yet too secular to be enticed by the consolations of religion and sobered by his good luck at having escaped Nazism's clutches, Mosse nevertheless knew how to enjoy life and how to make those around him enjoy it as well.

Mosse's legacy lies first and foremost in his books and essays, but it also lies in the invisible college he created through decades of brilliant lecturing, probing seminars, attentive conversation, and voluminous correspondence with several generations of students and fellow historians in the United States, Israel, Europe, and everywhere where professional historians worked on modern European intellectual and cultural history. One expression of the esteem and affection in which he was held came in May 1999, only five months after his death, when the Executive Committee of the American Historical Association established an annual George L. Mosse book prize in European intellectual and cultural history since the Renaissance. It is the first named book prize to recognize work in modern European intellectual and cultural history.

Themes Mosse did so much to advance concerning the cultural history of fascism and Nazism, racism and antisemitism, nationalism, respectability, and sexuality now occupy a prominent place in the historical scholarship of modern Europe. He lived long enough to see that cultural history again aroused the interest of most historians, including even some social historians who had turned away from it.

He wrote European intellectual and cultural history in a way that recast its meaning. Since he did so without a specific theoretical program, the extent of his accomplishment in this regard at times went unnoticed. He was a member of that remarkable generation of European refugee historians who, together, formed the core of the American study of European culture and ideas in the postwar era. For his contemporaries, such as H. Stuart Hughes, Peter Gay, Leonard Krieger, Carl Schorske, and Fritz Stern, writing European intellectual history meant two things. First, it was a salvage operation; an effort to recall and preserve the traditions of humanism and liberalism destroyed by fascism and Nazism. Second, and related to that task, it entailed writing about

other intellectuals – philosophers, social theorists, and novelists and artists of the first rank – who represented the best that had been thought in Europe.

While Mosse was sympathetic to these efforts – indeed his *The Culture of Western Europe*² was part of them – he took a slightly different path. The primary concern of his work since the 1960s was to explain how and why fascism and Nazism came about and what relationship they had to European culture. This was a task that could not be accomplished if one's evidence was restricted only to Europe's best, elite traditions – though Mosse also wrote about the attractions of fascism and Nazism to some of Europe's best-known intellectuals in the inter-war era. A comprehensive cultural pre-history of fascism and Nazism required attention to the links between elite and masses, cultural creation and its diffusion to mass publics. Mosse was the first of the German refugee historians in the United States to focus on these links. He brought fascism and Nazism from the fringes to the center of European cultural history and inspired a cultural history that linked past concerns with elites to examination of popular mentalities and the works of second- and third-rate thinkers. This was a bold move, but one for which Mosse's early training in the liturgy and rituals of Christianity gave him a sound foundation.

“Why did millions of people respond to the Volkish call?”³ This question, in the last paragraph of Mosse's 1964 classic, *The Crisis of German Ideology*, was central to much of his work. In 1964, this was not a question that European intellectual historians addressed. Works such as H. Stuart Hughes' *Consciousness and Society*, Leonard Krieger's *The German Idea of Freedom*, and Peter Gay's and Carl Schorske's works on Eduard Bernstein and the crisis of Social Democracy in World War I, respectively, focused more on recalling lost causes, the defeats of liberalism, or the radical democratic left than addressing the intellectual and cultural pedigree of the right. While his peers agreed that the impact of ideas on politics was clear in the history of liberalism and the left, Mosse, like his distinguished contemporary Fritz Stern, addressed the troubling fact that fascism and Nazism had intellectual and

²Idem, *The Culture of Western Europe: The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988).

³Idem, *The Crisis of German Ideology* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1964), p. 317.

cultural pedigrees as well. To explain fascism and Nazism, a redefinition of cultural and intellectual history was required.

Not so long ago, the discipline of history, now so famous for its heterogeneity, was no less famous for its assertion of a hierarchy among political, intellectual, and cultural history. Political historians dealt with serious matters of state, while intellectual historians wrote about certified great thinkers of high culture. Cultural historians came third – perhaps ahead of the social historians – with the task of working on the conventionally understood artifacts of culture, such as painting, literature, and philosophy. In *The Crisis of German Ideology*, Mosse implicitly challenged this hierarchy by asserting – by example rather than theory – that cultural and intellectual history were indispensable for explaining the political narrative. Indeed, the reader of *Crisis* could conclude that leaving culture out amounted to a lack of realism.

In order for cultural and intellectual historians to explain what large numbers of people believed, Mosse argued that they should pay attention to thinkers and texts that the discipline of the history of ideas had ignored both because of their lack of intellectual distinction and their politically unpalatable nature. He described the intellectual landscape as follows:

All have wondered whether men of intelligence and education could really have believed the ideas put forward during the Nazi period. To many, the ideological bases of National Socialism were the product of a handful of unbalanced minds. To others, the Nazi ideology was a mere propaganda tactic, designed to win the support of the masses but by no means the world view of the leaders themselves. Still others have found these ideas so nebulous and incomprehensible that they have dismissed them as unimportant.

...[I]t is a fact of history that they [these ideas] were embraced by many normal men... the Nazis found their greatest support among respectable, educated people.... Historians have... regarded this [Nazi] ideology as a species of subintellectual rather than intellectual history. It has generally been regarded as a facade used to conceal a naked and intense struggle for power, and therefore the historian should be concerned with other and presumably more important attitudes toward life. Such, however, was not the case. It was

precisely that complex of particularly German values and ideas which conveyed the great issues of the times to important segments of the population.⁴

A great deal of Mosse's work over the next three decades can be understood as an effort to give these "subintellectual" ideas a place in the writing of intellectual and cultural history of fascism and Nazism. He did not recast the field with dogmatic, idealist assertions to replace earlier materialist dogmas; rather, he demonstrated that such ideas existed, that they found institutional support, were diffused to wider publics, and shaped decision-making when the fascists and Nazis took power. In *The Crisis of German Ideology*, he blurred the boundaries between political, intellectual/cultural, and social history by offering the first postwar narrative of Nazism's cultural pre-history. In Mosse's view, the subject of history should focus on the impact of culture on politics, because it played a key role in his object of study – fascism and Nazism.⁵

The Crisis of German Ideology was important because it made clear that widely-read, institutionally well-placed, and culturally respected intellectuals in Germany offered a blend of nationalism, hostility to modernity, and antisemitism that comprised a tradition, mood, and *Zeitgeist* called *Völkisch* ideology. Hitler had emerged from a broader world of hatreds and resentments. *Crisis* was also important methodologically: it focused on issues of diffusion, impact, and publics in its material on how *Völkisch* ideas came to matter through their institutionalization and diffusion in schools, the youth movement, universities, and, finally, in the right-wing movements and political parties in the last years of the Weimar Republic.

In *Crisis* Mosse asserted that Germany was differentiated from other nations by "a peculiar view of man and society which seems alien and demonic to the Western intellect."⁶ In his view, the *Sonderweg* not only distinguished Germany from Britain and France but also accounted for the distinctiveness of Nazism from the other forms of fascism in Europe. As he put

⁴Ibid., pp. 1-2.

⁵Ibid., p. 2.

⁶Ibid., p. 1.

it, “the divergence of German fascism from the other fascisms reflects the difference between German thought and that of the other western European nations” where the rationalism of the Enlightenment and the social radicalism of the French Revolution had greater impact.⁷ He argued that the importance of *Völkisch* ideology within German nationalism helped explain why antisemitism was more important for fascism in Germany than it was elsewhere in Europe. While his interest in comparative cultural history endured, his views on German distinctiveness underwent some change.

The fascist promise of a cultural revolution that left the existing class and property relations intact needed to be taken seriously by historians seeking to understand the phenomenon. Hitler’s success, Mosse wrote, lay in his ability to “transform the revolutionary longing and grievances of a large sector of the populace into an anti-Jewish revolution.” *Völkisch* ideology was not a transient phenomenon. “Hitler only promised to fulfill a concept of life which had permeated much of the nation before he ever entered the scene.” Hitler carried out “his German revolution” by finding in “the Jew” the symbol of all that *Völkisch* ideologists despised about the modern world. He could do so because antisemitism had come to “permeate all national questions.”⁸ These last points underscore another aspect of the lasting significance of *The Crisis of German Ideology*: it brought historical analysis of antisemitism and “the Jewish question” from the margins to the center of German and European intellectual and cultural history.

Two years later, with the publication of his path-breaking *Nazi Culture*, Mosse produced the first English translation of documents illuminating aspects of the Nazi era that had received short shrift in the predominantly political histories published in the 1950s and 1960s.⁹ It appeared at a time when social history was beginning to displace political history. Cultural and intellectual history were about to be placed on the defensive for neglecting the way the spirit of the age infused whole societies, yet some still thought Nazi ideology and culture such gross contradictions in terms as to be unworthy of

⁷Ibid., p. 315.

⁸Quotations from *ibid.*, p. 301.

⁹George L. Mosse, *Nazi Culture* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1966).

scholarly examination. Remarkably, thirty-six years later, *Nazi Culture* remains a unique English-language documentary collection; no book has appeared since that draws on the current greater understanding of the Nazi era and easier availability of archival materials dealing with cultural matters.¹⁰ Among the aspects of Nazi culture the book documented were: the diffusion of Nazi ideology to a broad public; the self-representation of Nazism as a revolution; ideals of womanhood and of manly heroism; racism and antisemitism; control of art, literature, film, and radio; the impact on science and medicine; the stance toward Christianity; education from primary grades to the universities; Nazi racial and citizenship legislation; the views and situations of German workers and the middle classes in the 1930s; and accounts of the Nazi assumption of power. In a sense, the vast library of scholarship dealing with these issues that has appeared since the 1960s develops themes and fills in gaps left by this pioneering collection.

With the publication of *The Nationalization of the Masses* (1975), Mosse's focus had shifted from Germany to shared European phenomena. He wrote that "the creation of 'mass man' was a necessary consequence of the industrialization of Europe, and that the world of myth and symbol within which such mass politics moved provided a most effective instrument of dehumanization."¹¹ He turned his attention from the texts and specific ideologies he had examined in *Crisis* to public festivals, national monuments, political cults, myths and symbols, and a wonderful chapter on "Hitler's taste." *The Nationalization of the Masses*, like *Nazi Culture*, sought to understand how Nazism, at least for a while, was wildly popular. He sought the answer in the way in which its movements and mass meetings addressed needs for community and belonging to an integrated life.

In *Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism*, Mosse began the effort to situate antisemitism with racism in the heart, not on the

¹⁰Fittingly, a student and a colleague of Mosse are preparing a much expanded documentary collection. Sandor Gilman and Anson Rabinbach, *The Nazi Culture Sourcebook* (forthcoming, University of California Press, 2002).

¹¹George L. Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich* (New York: New American Library, 1975), p. vii.

margins, of the history of European culture and as contributing to a causal explanation of the Holocaust. *Toward the Final Solution*, despite the multitude of references to now-familiar figures of German racist and antisemitic traditions, was a much less German-centered book than *Crisis*. Mosse did not claim that all of European culture was infused with racism. Rather, racism annexed every important idea and movement in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and promised to protect each against all adversaries. Scientific accomplishment, a Puritan attitude toward life – the triumphant middle class morality, Christian religion, the ideal of beauty as symbolic of a better and healthier world were all integral aspects of racism. Racism defended utopia against its enemies. Such noble ideals as freedom, equality, and tolerance would become reality only if the race were preserved and its enemies defeated.¹²

Mosse stressed what European racists had in common, such as an ideal of beauty or metaphysical profundity, which inferior races, such as Jews and blacks, supposedly lacked. Through a proliferation of myths, symbols, and stereotypes, “racism gave everyone a designated place in the world, defining him as a person and through a clear distinction between ‘good’ and ‘evil’ races, explaining the puzzling modern world in which he lived. Who could ask for more?”¹³

That question – “who could ask for more?” – was the kind of question he would repeat for emphasis in his lectures. In often successful efforts to provoke, stimulate, and entertain his audience, he would say something like, “you all think these ideas are so preposterous. Well, don’t you know that preposterous ideas are very important. Or are you so naive as to think that history is made only by nice, logical Kantian ethics?” In other words, he, the cultural historian of racism, was the realist, while political historians and political scientists who focused on presumably self-evident “interests” – as well as students who were too cynical to believe that anyone else could take these notions seriously – were those who were truly naive.

¹²Idem, *Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1978), p. xii.

¹³Ibid., p. xiii.

Toward the Final Solution also displays Mosse's increasingly dark view of both German and European history. He came to argue that the Holocaust was not as distinct from European modernity as he had implied in *Crisis*. The history of European racism, he wrote in 1975, was "not a pleasant story to tell and that is perhaps why it has been told so rarely in the fullness it deserves: not as the history of an aberration of European thought or as scattered moments of madness, but an integral part of the European experience."¹⁴ Most textbooks had paid "scarce attention" to it, "perhaps because it is too painful for historians to concede that here myth became reality in the face of those supposedly provable facts which are still the staple of the historical profession. The Holocaust, after all, gets short shrift even in respectable accounts of Nazi rule."¹⁵

In response to the revival of interest in the Frankfurt School's critical theory among the new left in the University of Wisconsin at Madison in the 1960s, Mosse applied the arguments of Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to his cultural history. He no longer juxtaposed enlightenment and counter-enlightenment but, instead, implicated the new sciences of the Enlightenment, such as anthropology, as contributors to a new science of race. To be sure, the familiar scoundrels, Houston Stewart Chamberlain or Arthur de Gobineau, make their appearance in the text. Yet in contrast to the juxtaposition of the good enlightenment and the bad counter-enlightenment of *The Crisis of German Ideology*, Mosse drew attention to Dutch and French anatomists who measured facial angles and gave conventional standards of beauty the seal of scientific approval. Johann Lavater's *Essai sur la Physiognomie* of 1781 established a "pseudo-science" that, its author's liberal views notwithstanding, "proved a powerful weapon against those people who were different."¹⁶ No text was too absurd, no assertions about the link between external appearance and inner qualities too preposterous for Mosse to take seriously. The measure of foreheads, noses, ears, and the like could

¹⁴Ibid., pp. xiv-xv.

¹⁵Ibid., p. xv. See also his highly regarded article, "Racism," in Yisrael Gutman, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 1206-1217.

¹⁶*Toward the Final Solution*, p. 24.

make for hilarious lectures. His marvelous sense of humor comes through in his detailed accounts of eighteenth-century descriptions of the Jewish nose. For Mosse, the cultural historian, however, their ridiculousness did not detract from their causal significance or their place as a chapter in his history of antisemitism.

In discussions of Gobineau and analyses of the heretofore obscure Vacher de Lapouge's *The Aryan and his Social Role* (1899) and *Social Choices* (1896), he drew attention to the French contribution to Aryan racial myths and antisemitism. England, he wrote, "had its own Gobineau" in Robert Knox, a famous Scottish anatomist, for whom the Saxons were the superior race. Mosse's paraphrasing of Knox's race thinking captures the blend of seriousness, irony, and ridicule with which he approached the subject. "Here Knox's thought was both original and unique," he wrote on his distinctions between ugly but rational and musically talented Slavs, or the Aryan, and the Jewish, hence cunning and scheming, bourgeoisie.¹⁷ He also noted England's distinctive contribution to modern race thinking—eugenics.¹⁸ The familiar faces of antisemitic invective he had discussed in *Crisis* reappear in *Toward the Final Solution*, with the Germans as one among several streams of European racist thinking.

Ironically, before the First World War, it was France rather than Germany or Austria that seemed likely to become the home of a successful racist and National Socialist movement. Germany had no Dreyfus Affair or Panama scandal and no Third Republic. Antisemitism without racism was common enough, but racism itself still seemed to find its home mainly in academic discussions, cultural circles (like the Wagner circle), eugenics movements, or in some popularizations of Darwin.¹⁹

The closing pages of *Toward the Final Solution* pointed toward a theme that would assume growing importance in his work of the late 1970s and 1980s – the decisive caesura that World War I and its aftermath constituted in

¹⁷Ibid., p. 68.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 67.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 168.

European history. In many essays and especially in *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars*, he returned to the theme of the “Great War” and wrote one of the first studies focused on history and memory.²⁰ Mosse knew that writing the pre-history of the Holocaust opened him up to criticisms of writing teleological history; that is, writing European history as the pre-history of the Holocaust. None of his work, however, implies that Nazism or the Holocaust were the inevitable outcome of Europe’s history. The emphasis he placed on World War I introduced an element of contingency that does not fit with a deterministic account. Still, Mosse’s work offers abundant evidence regarding those currents of European culture that did contribute some necessary preconditions for the Holocaust.

In his later books on nationalism, respectability, and sexuality, as well as in a 1989 essay on “Fascism and the French Revolution,” Mosse continued to move away from a focus on Germany’s *Sonderweg* and toward a more pessimistic, darker, and more all-encompassing inclusion of Europe’s traditions. He took issue with those who restricted the concept of revolution to its Communist variant and chided historians who refused to acknowledge the revolutionary, mass-mobilizing dynamics of fascism and Nazism. While aware, that “the overt attitude of National Socialists toward the French Revolution was one of hatred,”²¹ he questioned the traditional view that Germany produced Nazism in part because it had been untouched by the ideals of the French Revolution and missed the influence of the Enlightenment. Instead he argued that :

nationalism provided the link between the French Revolution and fascism: the nationalization of the masses was a common bond between the French and fascist revolutions... the instruments of self-representation and the need for popular representation were common to both. Moreover, all fascisms shared the utopianism which was said to have inspired the masses during the French Revolution: the longing to create a new man or a new nation.²²

²⁰George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the Two World Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

²¹Idem, “Fascism and the French Revolution,” in idem, *The Fascist Revolution: Toward a General Theory of Fascism* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1999), p. 75.

²²Ibid., p. 72.

The democratic nationalism that emerged from the French Revolution “which fought against the *ancien régime* for a more meaningful national unity was perhaps the most important single link between the French Revolution and fascism.”²³ Mosse saw origins, links, and parallels in revolutionary festivals and fascist mass meetings, messianic political faiths, the people worshipping themselves from the concept of the general will and the racial *Volksgemeinschaft* gathered at Nazi Party rallies, uncompromising either/or distinctions between enemy and friend, a shared focus on political liturgy and the aesthetic of politics, and preoccupations with death, sacrifice, martyrdom, and youth. As he put it:

the most important influence exercised by the [French] Revolution upon fascism was its inauguration of a new kind of politics designed to mobilize the masses and to integrate them into a political system – through rites and ceremonies in which they could participate, and through an aesthetic of politics which appealed to the longing for community and comradeship in an industrial age.²⁴

Such views put him at odds with liberal and leftist historians who stressed that fascism and Nazism were imposed on a suffering public in the interests of capitalist elites and as part of a counter-revolution against the liberal and leftist legacies rooted in the French Revolution. As Mosse made clear in his autobiography, though he was permanently affected by the left-liberal anti-fascism of the 1930s, he did not accept the popular front’s optimism about mass democracy. Rather, like other chastened liberal observers of the Nazi era, such as Hannah Arendt and Jacob Talmon, he drew attention to the extent to which irrationalist appeals succeeded in building mass movements for fascism and Nazism.

Mosse argued that understanding antisemitism was inseparable from understanding racism in general. As he concluded in *Toward the Final Solution*,

²³Ibid., p. 73.

²⁴Ibid., p. 92.

The Holocaust has passed. The history of racism which we have told has helped to explain the final solution. But racism itself has survived. As many people as before think in racial categories. There is nothing provisional about the lasting world of stereotypes. That is the legacy of racism everywhere. And if, under the shock of the Holocaust, the postwar world proclaimed a temporary moratorium on Antisemitism, the black[s] on the whole remained locked into a racial posture which never varied much from the eighteenth century to our time. Practically all blacks had been outside Hitler's reach; consequently, there was no rude awakening from the racial dream in this regard. Moreover, nations which had fought against National Socialism continued to accept black racial inferiority for many years after the end of the war, and did not seem to realize that all racism, whether aimed at blacks or Jews, was cut of the same cloth.²⁵

In his 1979 essay, "Toward a General Theory of Fascism," Mosse condensed the work in *The Crisis of Germany Ideology, The Nationalization of the Masses* and *Toward the Final Solution* down to its now-familiar essential arguments:²⁶ Fascism was revolutionary in its antagonism to parliamentary and pluralist traditions; abolition of the distinction between public and private life; appeals to mass mobilization; and, above all, as the promise of a utopia of a third way beyond "materialistic Marxism" and "finance capitalism." Placing fascism solely in the camp of reaction mistakenly obscured fascism's links to Jacobin political style as well as its modernizing aspects. "It was the strength of fascism everywhere that it appeared to transcend" concerns about social and economic interests while leaving existing property and class relations intact. It was able to transfer "a religious enthusiasm to secular government." Those historians whose prime goal was to demystify and debunk fascist appeals had become bearers of "a new positivism that has captured the historical imagination" and, not surprisingly, failed to grasp fascism's revolutionary appeal and sources of its popular support resting on "a deep

²⁵Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution*, pp. 235-236.

²⁶George L. Mosse, "Toward a General Theory of Fascism," *Masses and Man: Nationalist and Fascist Perceptions of Reality* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1980), pp. 159-196 (reprinted in idem, *The Fascist Revolution*, pp. 1-44).

bedrock of popular piety.”²⁷ The intellectual and cultural historian of fascism and Nazism had a difficult but persistent task. In the face of the rationalist bias of conventional political history and the positivistic social sciences he/she should turn our attention to the continuing impact of non-rational myths and symbolism in politics.

Mosse published *The Nationalization of the Masses* when he was fifty-six. Had he published nothing more, his reputation and legacy as one of the world’s leading historians of European intellectual and cultural history, especially of the era of fascism, would have been firmly secured. He also did much to integrate Jewish history into German and European history in general. With Walter Laqueur he co-edited *The Journal of Contemporary History*, which became a key address for discussing European intellectual and cultural history. Yet as he made clear in his strikingly frank autobiography, his personal acceptance of his own homosexuality reflected itself in a remarkable burst of scholarly creativity and productivity.

At an age when many, even prolific and productive scholars refine familiar themes from earlier work, Mosse, from his mid-sixties to late seventies, published three books that displayed a distinctly different focus in which he integrated an interest in gender and sexuality with longstanding concerns about nationalism and antisemitism. As noted above, *Fallen Soldiers* (1990) was one of the first contributions to what became a torrent of work on history and memory after the world wars. In that work, and even more so in *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* (1985), and, finally, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (1996), Mosse wove together histories of nationalism and associated stereotypes of respectability and manliness as well as of significant “others” of modern Europe, Jews, and homosexuals.²⁸ As he put it in *Confronting History*:

²⁷Ibid., p. 167.

²⁸George L. Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* (New York: New American Library, 1985); *Fallen Soldiers*; and *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996)

my preoccupation with the history of respectability, which I had already addressed in various articles, was driven by a sense of discovering respectability as an all-important historical factor which historians had somehow taken for granted. It had not been considered respectable to be a Jew in the past, and certainly homosexuality is on the edge of respectability (always ready to fall off) even today.²⁹

These later works, though they represented examination of much new territory, also displayed continuity with Mosse's concern over the way in which nationalism had defined itself by juxtaposition to outsiders, especially – but not only – the Jews. He came to believe:

that the existence of outsiderdom was built into modern society as a prerequisite for its continued existence and the self-esteem of its insiders. The insider and outsider are linked; one cannot exist without the other, just as there can be no ideal type without its antitype. The image of the Jew or the homosexual cannot be properly understood without the image of the all-American boy or the blond Nordic man.³⁰

In a period in which the history of assorted outsiders – Jews, women, gays – became in some of its expressions a self-enclosed endeavor, Mosse worked to link the previous master narratives of fascism and Nazism and of European culture in general to the more recent concerns with the history of Europe's outsiders.

George Mosse did not rewrite European history into a politically correct caricature composed only of virulent nationalism, racism, sexism, and antisemitism. He understood European history, as his admirer and friend Thomas Nipperdey would put it, in all of its “multiple continuities.” He did not believe that Auschwitz was inevitable, but neither was it an accident without roots in the European and German past. Fascism, Nazism, and the Holocaust were not, in Mosse's narratives, the inevitable outcome of European history and culture. Yet he did argue that the connections between culture and catastrophe, European normality and fascist and Nazi barbarism were closer than that implied by accounts that presented the latter as a complete rejection

²⁹Idem, *Confronting History*, p. 180.

³⁰Ibid, p. 181.

of Europe's heritage.³¹ He believed that those with historical perspective had a duty to remain appalled but no right to be shocked that the fascists and Nazis turned Europe into a charnel house. These scavengers were not the only or even the main current of European culture. But they were not an aberration. Hence, the history of fascism and Nazism belonged in the master narratives of European cultural history.³²

George Mosse was a man who enjoyed life and his work immensely. He gave generously of his time to several generations of students and colleagues in the United States, Israel, and Europe. Yet alongside the warmth and humor came a deeply serious intellectual and scholar. As he wrote in concluding his memoir:

The Holocaust was never very far from my mind; I could easily have perished with my fellow Jews. I suppose that I am a member of the Holocaust generation and have constantly tried to understand an event too monstrous to contemplate. All my studies in the history of racism and volkish thought, and also those dealing with outsiderdom and stereotypes, though sometimes not directly related to the Holocaust, have tried to find the answer to how it could have happened; finding an explanation has been vital not only for the understanding of modern history, but also for my own peace of mind. This is a question my generation had to face, and eventually I felt I had come closer to an understanding of the Holocaust as a historical phenomenon.³³

Over the years, Mosse developed a close, intimate relationship with Israel and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where he taught for many years alongside his teaching in Madison. Though a firm supporter and frequent resident of Israel, his historical work on the Holocaust reinforced rather than

³¹On the theme of culture and catastrophe, see Steven Aschheim, *Culture and Catastrophe: German and Jewish Confrontations with National Socialism and Other Crises* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

³²For his overview of Europe, see Mosse, *The Culture of Western Europe*.

³³Idem, *Confronting History*, p. 219.

diminished his support for a cosmopolitan Israel.³⁴ From his first visit to Israel in 1951, to his growing involvement with the university from 1961 onward, he enjoyed the “intellectual excitement” he found there.³⁵ Several of his works were translated into Hebrew, and he very generously endowed the George L. Mosse Fellowship Program for student and faculty exchanges and cooperative research ventures between the two universities that were his home.

The question of how Nazism, fascism and the Holocaust could happen is one that George Mosse and his generation had to face simply for peace of mind. Now, thanks in part to his effort, these issues stand at the center of the international historical discipline's work on Europe's twentieth century. He probed the impact of the irrational and mythic without abandoning the no-less European belief that reason, as expressed in the discipline of history, could and should seek to serve as an antidote to these dangers. Mosse, a historian of nationalism, voiced his concern about its impact in Israel's politics. Yet he remained a passionate supporter of the Jewish state. In his life and work, Mosse separated the meaning of courage, fearlessness, boldness, and daring from the gendered stereotypes of manliness that have been entwined in modern Western history. In the middle and last third of his long and productive career, as a result of his very personal quest for peace of mind and self-acceptance, first in his Jewishness and later in his homosexuality, Mosse became that rare scholar who made sparks fly from the beginning to the end of an entire academic career. From the mischief-making twelve-year-old who scolded the Soviet ambassador for wearing a tuxedo to the world famous historian who poked holes in the respectable world's historical consequential stereotypes of outsiders, George Mosse provoked his students and fellow historians with a wealth of insight. How fortunate are coming generations who can stand on his shoulders and see still farther.

³⁴Mosse did not express himself in writing extensively on the subject of Israel and the Arabs, though his views were generally in support of the efforts to reach a compromise peace with the Palestinians.

³⁵Mosse, *Confronting History*, p. 192.

Source: *Yad Vashem Studies*, Vol. 29, 2001, pp.7-27.