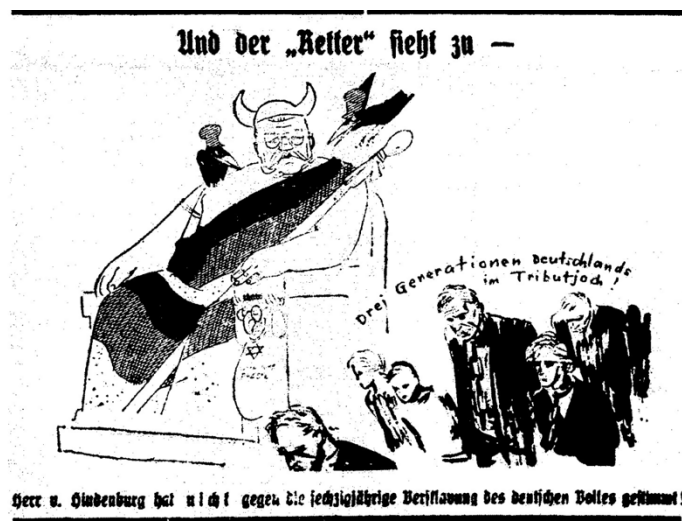


“Mythical afterimages”

Theodor Lessing on the nature of historical reputations

Early in 1930, the then president of Germany, Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg (1847-1934) took the extraordinary step of instituting legal procedures against Dr. Joseph Goebbels (1897-1945). At the time, Goebbels was Member of the *Reichstag* for the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (NSDAP), *Gauleiter* (district leader) of the NSDAP for the Berlin region and, besides, as *Reichspropagandaleiter* nationwide responsible for the party’s propaganda. The stumbling block for Hindenburg was a cartoon published on December 29th, 1929, on the front page of *Der Angriff*, a national-socialist bi-weekly for the Berlin region; Goebbels was both its founder and editor responsible. The cartoon was drawn by Mjölneur, pen-name of Hans Schweitzer (1901-1980), a self-declared supporter of the NSDAP who was very active in its propaganda department, not only as cartoonist but as designer of propaganda posters as well. The cartoon in *Der Angriff* suggested that by accepting the Young Plan, Hindenburg allowed for three generations of Germans to be led into slavery as it was meant to regulate the outstanding reparations Germany still had to pay after the First World War, in accordance with the Versailles Peace Treaty (the Young Plan was agreed upon in August 1929). As the cartoon alluded to Hindenburg’s carefully constructed and painstakingly guarded reputation of “saviour of the nation” during the First World War, the President was extremely furious and eventually even decided to sue Goebbels – not Mjölneur! – for defamation of character.



The cartoon by Mjölneur in *Der Angriff*: “and the ‘Savior’ watches.” Note the characteristic antisemitism in the cartoon.

Dr. Goebbels was more than happy with this lawsuit: he felt a golden opportunity to agitate for the NSDAP was simply thrown into his lap, whatever the outcome of the trial would be.¹ Hence, he uninhibitedly used the charges brought against him for the promotion of the views of his party. Apart from this, he pursued the matter in speeches during several mass-meetings, one of his main lines of defence being that several others had published far more malicious attacks on president Hindenburg without, however, being prosecuted. In this context, in an address in Leipzig, Goebbels argued that “[d]er jüdische Geschichtspräsident Lessing hat den Herrn Reichspräsidenten in ausländischen Blättern mit dem Massenmörder Haarmann verglichen, wofür ihn die nationale Studentenschaft züchtigte, aber das marxistische Ministerium mit einem Forschungsauftrag belohnte.”²

In a short retort in the weekly *Das Tagebuch*, Theodor Lessing (1872-1933) – for he was the author mentioned by Goebbels – pointed out that this single sentence by the *Reichspropagandaleiter* contained no less than seven (!) factual errors . . . For instance, Lessing indicated, he was not a professor of history, but a philosopher; he did not publish an essay on president Hindenburg, but had argued, on the eve of the presidential elections of 1925 that the latter, as a military man, was not used to making political decisions and thus not at all qualified to become president; and although he did indeed publish both a series of rather controversial newspaper articles and a book on the trial against the notorious Hanover serial-killer Fritz Haarmann (1879-1925) in which he revealed that the local authorities tried to conceal that they used Haarmann for a couple of years as an informer in criminal circles and consequentially failed to arrest him far earlier, which might have saved the lives of at least a number of his 24 (if not more) victims, he never ever did compare president Hindenburg with Haarmann.³

Historical scepticism

In historiography, Lessing adds in his *Tagebuch* response, the reputation of an historical figure quite often rests upon one or a few sentences on him or her that are handed down, mentioning the examples of Socrates and of Lucius Sergius Catalina, asking subsequently and rhetorically: “Wenn nun alles, was

¹ See Richard Scully, ‘Hindenburg: The Cartoon Titan of the Weimar Republic’, in: *German Studies Review* 35 (2012) 541-565; and Martin Broszat, *Die Machtergreifung. Der Aufstieg der NSDAP und die Zerstörung der Weimarer Republik* (München 1990³) 47.

² Quoted from Theodor Lessing, ‘Über einen Ausspruch von Doktor Goebbels’, in: *Das Tagebuch* 11 (1930), reprinted in Theodor Lessing, *Ich warf eine Flaschenpost ins Eismeer der Geschichte. Essays und Feuilletons*, ed. by Rainer Marwedel (Darmstadt and Neuwied 1986) 73-74, quotation at 73.

³ *Idem*, 74. For Lessing’s essay on Hindenburg, arguably his most famous text, see Theodor Lessing, ‘Hindenburg’, in: *Prager Tagblatt*, April 25th 1925, reprinted in: Lessing, o.c., 65-69; and for his writings on the Haarmann-trial, see Theodor Lessing, *Haarmann. Die Geschichte eines Werwolfs und andere Gerichtsreportagen*, ed. by Rainer Marwedel (Frankfurt a.M. 1989).

von mir übrigbleibt, der Satz aus der Rede des Doktor Goebbels wäre, so wie vom Catalina nichts übrigblieb als die Rede des Cicero?“⁴

According to Lessing, this example from his personal experience is not at all exceptional – on the contrary, it is characteristic of all historiography: the evidence historians have at their disposal always is both fragmentary and biased. What spontaneously remains of the past, and what not, is almost entirely coincidental; and in case archives are consciously created, the interests of the creator of the archive determine what will be included, and what not. In other words, historical evidence never is, nor can be representative for the past. And if the historical evidence is not at all representative for the past, how can one possibly claim to know what the past was like? For Lessing, this is one of several reasons to advocate a radical historical scepticism: he claims that it is impossible for the historian (or for anyone else, for that matter) to know the past as it really happened. It is simply an illusion, even a delusion, to think that the stories that historians tell about the past do reflect or describe the past as it actually happened. – Of course, Lessing alludes to Leopold von Ranke’s famous words: “wie es eigentlich gewesen..”⁵ – Thus, Lessing concludes:

Aber Geschichte ist eben keine Wirklichkeit! Sie ist *Befreiung* von Wirklichkeit. Sie ist Traum, Mythos, meinethalb: tröstend Lüge. Alles: nur nicht Wirklichkeit!..⁶

Or, as he summarizes his ideas on historiography in his posthumously published autobiography *Einmal und Nie Wieder* (1935):

Was der Mensch seine Weltgeschichte nennt, ist Dichtung und Erklitterung. Sie hat gar nichts zu schaffen mit Sinn, mit Recht, mit Logik, mit Ethik. [...] Der größte Unsinn, das abscheulichste Verbrechen, wenn es nur Erfolg hat, erhält die Billigung der Massen, erlangt Verklärung und Rechtfertigung von Nachhinein. Die adligste Tat aber, wenn sie mißglückt, wird in den Büchern der Geschichte zum Verbrechen.⁷

⁴ Lessing, ‘Über einen Ausspruch’, idem.

⁵ Cfr. L. von Ranke, *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1514* (Dritte Auflage, Leipzig 1885) vii. Ranke contested the traditional idea that history has an exemplary function – *historia magistra vitae*. He denied this, adding that history only tries to establish what happened. So his phrase is not meant as an epistemological claim, although is usually read as such – by Lessing as well.

⁶ Theodor Lessing, *Geschichte als Sinngebung des Sinnlosen oder die Geburt der Geschichte aus dem Mythos* (fourth edition, Leipzig 1927) 192. The italics are Lessing’s.

⁷ Theodor Lessing, *Einmal und nie wieder. Lebenserinnerungen* (Gütersloh 1969 [first edition Prag 1935]) 207.

Lessing published his views on historiography mainly in two books, both entitled *Geschichte als Sinnggebung des Sinnlosen*, the second one formally being the fourth edition of the first one, but in actual fact almost another book under the same title.⁸ The first one, by and large written during the First World War but due to censoring during the war only published in 1919, addresses the public at large; it is an, at times, rather emotional outburst against efforts to justify the German position in the Great War historically, and in particular against the idea that history would prove objectively that Germany was fighting a just war. In the autumn of 1914, this very idea was defended by an overwhelming majority of German intellectuals, including well-known literary authors like Thomas Mann (1875-1955), Gerhard Hauptmann (1862-1946), and Ernst Jünger (1895-1998); historians like Friedrich Meinecke (1862-1954) and Hans Delbrück (1848-1929); and philosophers like Rudolf Eucken (1846-1926), Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923), and Hermann Cohen (1842-1918).⁹ Lessing was one of the very few indeed – others included the literary authors Karl Kraus (1874-1936) and Heinrich Mann (1871-1950), Thomas Mann's elder brother; the philosopher Ernst Bloch (1885-1977); and the scientist Albert Einstein (1879-1955) – who rejected this idea from the very beginning of the war in August 1914 and persevered in this opposition throughout the war. This made him suspect in the eyes of nationalist right-wing Germans during the war, and even more so after Germany's defeat in the war in 1918. And their hate would haunt Lessing for the rest of his life with his accusers alleging that his position and that of his few allies infringed the national unity in wartime and therefore undermined Germany's military strength. This enduring argument was embraced by the German right and grew into the *Dolchstoßlegende* (*Stab-in-the-back legend*) that stated the German army did not lose the war on the battlefield but because of failing support from the home front.

In the second book, published in 1927, Lessing addresses a public of peers, his argument accordingly being of a more academic nature as compared to the first edition, though he does allow himself the occasional emotional outburst. For Lessing himself, the first and fourth editions of the book were complementary, and he did not consider the first edition to be superseded by the fourth one. (The second and third editions of the book were unchanged reprints of the first edition.) In fact, he hoped both versions of the book would stay in print simultaneously, as he thought that they were mutually supplementary. The drift of the argument in both versions of *Geschichte als Sinnggebung des Sinnlosen* is by and large identical, even if it is differently phrased: Lessing persistently opposes the claim

⁸ Theodor Lessing, *Geschichte als Sinnggebung des Sinnlosen* (Munich 1919); and *Geschichte als Sinnggebung des Sinnlosen oder die Geburt der Geschichte aus dem Mythos* (fourth edition, Leipzig 1927). Cfr. Herman Simissen, *Theodor Lessing's Philosophy of History in its Time* (Boston / Leiden 2021) *passim*.

⁹ Cfr. Jeffrey Verhey, *The Spirit of 1914: Militarism, Myth, and Mobilization in Germany* (Cambridge 2000) *passim*.

that historians can have knowledge of the past as it actually happened, or the claim that historiography simply describes, mirrors, or even equals past reality. He substantiates this claim with a number of philosophical arguments and gives a variety of examples in support of these arguments. But it should be noted that he hardly analyses any historiographical studies: *Geschichte als Sinngebung des Sinnlosen* is not a study of the practice of historiography, but a reflection on how history appears to man – which shows the influence early phenomenology had on Lessing, who studied with the philosophers Theodor Lipps (1851-1914) in Munich and Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) in Göttingen, both significant in the development of early phenomenology.¹⁰ He would distance himself from the phenomenological movement, however, one of the reasons being that according to Lessing it failed to condemn the Great War and improperly remained aloof, thus abdicating its societal responsibility when it really mattered.

Even if Lessing's phrasing of his general argument is very outspoken, as such the claim that historians cannot know the past as it actually happened is not at all exceptional. Major philosophers of history like the Italian Benedetto Croce (1866-1952) and the Englishmen R.G. Collingwood (1889-1943) and Michael Oakeshott (1901-1990), some writing before Lessing, some after, also advocate the idea that it is impossible for the historian to know the past as it actually happened. In fact, their ideas of history share the presupposition that there are very convincing, indeed irrefutable arguments in favour of historical scepticism if one supposes that knowledge of the past as it actually happened is possible.¹¹ After all, the past is over, and cannot be known directly.

But the past did leave all kinds of traces that can be used to answer questions about it. Thus, by answering questions about the past, it is possible to construct an image of what the past may have been like. But as the past as such is gone, it is impossible to compare this constructed image of the past with the past itself. For this very reason, both Collingwood and Oakeshott use the very same phrase: "history is what the evidence obliges us to believe."¹² Hence, history is by definition inferential – or, for those who prefer the terminology of the American philosopher C.S. Peirce (1839-1914): *abductive*;¹³ the image of the past being eventually based on questions about the past that are inferentially answered from present evidence. For this very reason, the past is ideal: it is something that is thought, something that only exists in and through thinking, and not in any (other) sense real.

¹⁰ Cfr. Lawrence Baron, 'Discipleship and Dissent: Theodor Lessing and Edmund Husserl', in: *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 127 (1983), no. 1, 32-49.

¹¹ Cfr. Jack W. Meiland, *Scepticism and Historical Knowledge* (New York 1965) *passim*.

¹² Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and its modes* (Cambridge 1933) 108; R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, revised edition, edited with an introduction by Jan van der Dussen (Oxford etc. 1993) 438. Collingwood used the phrase in a manuscript of 1928 that was only published posthumously, so Oakeshott and Collingwood used it independently.

¹³ Cfr. W.J. van der Dussen, 'The historian and his evidence', in: W.J. van der Dussen and Lionel Rubinoff (eds.), *Objectivity, Method and Point of View. Essays in the Philosophy of History* (Leiden/Boston 1991) 154-169, especially 157-159.

This conclusion has further and important implications, for example regarding the idea of truth in historiography. Obviously, it is impossible to define truth in historiography as a relation between a statement or a narrative on the one hand and a past state of affairs on the other, as the past state of affairs no longer exists – as Lessing time and again emphasizes; he claims it is even a category-mistake to apply the idea of truth to historiography. But truth can be defined as a relation between a statement or a narrative and the available evidence, as both Collingwood and Oakeshott also claim, thus saving the very idea of truth in historiography. Yet another implication is that a strict distinction between object and subject is impossible in historiography, as the “object” the historian studies is created by the historian him or herself in his or her thinking. Thus, historians cannot strive for objectivity in their work, whereas they can – and do! – strive for *intersubjectivity*: that is, the situation in which the community of historians by and large agrees that the disposable evidence leads to conclusions they can all share, at least to a certain extent. In fact, disputes amongst historians often concern the very question whether certain conclusions can or cannot be read from the disposable evidence. New tendencies in historiography not seldom emanate either from new ways of questioning or reading evidence, or from the discovery of new, and new kinds of evidence. This implies that historical knowledge is by definition tentative: the possibility that new conclusions can be inferred from the disposable evidence by interpreting it differently, or that new evidence is discovered which sheds new light on a question, is always open.

All this does not, however, in any way imply that the conclusions drawn by historians are arbitrary, far from it: there is a large community of historians raised in the tradition of the discipline that judges whether conclusions are acceptable or not. And historians who make claims that are not convincingly supported by evidence will be immediately reminded that their claims are not well-founded and go beyond what is admissible in historiography. Hence, for instance, the denial of the Holocaust is rejected by the community of historians in the strongest possible terms; a huge majority of historians rightly claims that there is an overwhelming amount of evidence that makes any denial of the Holocaust completely indefensible.

In conclusion, Lessing’s historical scepticism is directed against the naive realism that he claims is characteristic of thinking about history by all too many historians, with Ranke, or at least Ranke as usually read, being a prime example. Lessing opposed this realism because all kinds of realist interpretations of history were used to justify the German position in the 1914-1918 war. His outlook should not, however, be simply reduced to his rejection of these justifications of the war. Lessing

argues that his idea of history is valid as such, regardless of the context of its origin – which is what he tried to show in the 1927-edition of *Geschichte als Sinnggebung des Sinnlosen*. Moreover, the rejection of realist interpretations of history is an idea that can be found in the work of major philosophers of history like Croce, Collingwood, and Oakeshott as well. Even today, this rejection of realist interpretations of history is not at all superfluous, as both in public debates as well as in professional ideas about history, realist notions of history still do emerge every now and then, even if they often are more sophisticated than the ideas Lessing fought in his time. An example may be found in the work of the Dutch philosopher of history F.R. Ankersmit, who in his *Narrative Logic* claims that singular statements about the past refer to the real past, whereas the narratives historians construct out of singular statements do not.¹⁴ A statement like “Caesar crossed the Rubicon” therefore allegedly refers to the real past, but the narrative the historian tells using this and similar singular statements does not, according to Ankersmit. However, a singular statement is as much derived from evidence as a narrative, it is as much an imaginative construction inferred from evidence as a narrative – both a singular statement and a narrative exist only in being thought. Thus, Ankersmit’s position implies an ambiguity if he claims that the past as referred to in a singular statement is somehow real, but the past as referred to in a narrative is not. But this ambiguity as regards the ontological status of the past is untenable: the past is either real or it is ideal – it is not possible to reconcile these contradictory positions and thus have it both ways, as Ankersmit’s position seems to imply. And if the idea is accepted that the past is not real but ideal – a conclusion that seems inevitable –, Lessing’s rejection of realist notions of history still has topical value.

The use of history

Theodor Lessing does not confine himself to just advocating for radical historical scepticism. Especially in the first edition of *Geschichte als Sinnggebung des Sinnlosen*, he tries to explain why historiography nevertheless is exceptionally important within a community. That is, his radical scepticism with regard to history as knowledge of the real past does not imply the conclusion that history is not important, as one probably might expect. On the contrary, he claims that history is of the utmost importance – as long as one realises what its true nature is. History is not about describing or reflecting the past as it actually happened, it is important because of its religious function, Lessing

¹⁴ F. R. Ankersmit, *Narrative logic. A Semantic Analysis of the Historian’s Language* (The Hague 1983) 54-55, 102-103.

argues. He uses the Latin verb “*religare*” in its original sense: to tie together. Hence, historians tell stories that knit together or unify the communities in which these stories are told; they tell stories that establish or affirm the identity of the community in question – be it nations, regions, cities, religious or political groups, even sports clubs or other communities that traditionally and deliberately share stories about their past. A favourite example of Lessing’s is the story told in Switzerland about Wilhelm Tell. This story is important for Swiss national identity, and it serves to unify the Swiss nation. The question whether Wilhelm Tell did in actual fact exist is not at all relevant, Lessing argues, but the religious function of the story is. Now this holds for all history, Lessing maintains: what matters is its religious function. All this implies, at least according to Lessing, that the stories that historians tell are impelled by present needs and wants. Historians eventually tell stories that help a community to come to terms with its present, with its present problems, by establishing or confirming its identity. That is, history may be about the past, but eventually it is an answer to present needs and wants. After all, historians do not live in a timeless vacuum, but in a specific age, location, and society, and they cannot elude their influences. The questions historians ask, and the answers they give, are inseparably linked to that age, location, and society. One contemporary example that seems to confirm this idea is the rise of historical climate studies. Until ca. 2000 AD, historical climate studies were a minor subdiscipline, but in relation to the growing awareness of the climatological problems humanity faces today, the number of historical climate studies did increase considerably.

Again, Lessing tends to phrase his ideas radically, but they are not exceptional. Lessing’s position resembles that of the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce who, in his *Teoria e storia della storiografia* (1916), argues that the questions historians ask about the past by definition are questions that arise in the present. In this sense, Croce famously argues, “all veritable history is contemporary history.”¹⁵ This is the fundamental difference between history proper and chronicles, Croce claims: chronicles are ordered in accordance with chronological sequence, whereas history proper is arranged according to questions as they arise in the present. Thus, both Lessing and Croce claim that the writing of history is a function of the present.

Hence, what according to Lessing is needed is a new historiography: an idea of history that does not vainly try to describe the past as it really was – which is after all impossible, he claims – but that consciously and proudly tries to answer present needs and wants. This implies that the present needs and wants of a society need to be identified, and that the historian subsequently tells stories that

¹⁵ “Ogni vera storia e storia contemporanea”; Benedetto Croce, *Teoria e storia della storiografia* (“Theory and history of historiography”; quoted from the second revised edition, Bari 1920) 4.

may inspire people to answer these needs and wants in their present lives. Humans need history, not because of the knowledge of the past it claims to offer, but because they need to be inspired in order to act properly. This approach to history shows the influence Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) had on Lessing, as it bears a clear resemblance to what Nietzsche wrote in his *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben*:

wir brauchen [die Historie] zum Leben und zur Tat, nicht zur bequemen Abkehr vom Leben und von der Tat, oder gar zur Beschönigung des selbstsüchtigen Lebens und der feigen und schlechten Tat. Nur soweit die Historie dem Leben dient, wollen wir ihr dienen [...]¹⁶

All this means that according to Lessing, historiography eventually is an instrument: an instrument in the pursuit of a better world.

This is in line with Lessing's general idea of philosophy; in his words: "unzweifelhaft wissen wir, daß das Leben uns nicht als Gelegenheit zu schönen Gefühlen oder zum Herumraten an müssigen Rösselprüngen gegeben ist, sondern als schwere Aufgabe einer täglichen Arbeit."¹⁷ Hence, "inmitten des allgemeinen Menschenelends und der größten Bedürftigkeit des breiten Volkes [kann] es direkt zum Verbrechen werden [...], wenn der Einzelne sich rein beschaulicher und passiver Lebensbehaltung verschreibt."¹⁸ Thus, the philosopher should not confine himself or herself to elaborating all kinds of stilted theories about the world, he or she should make a difference in the world, and bring about change for the better. This demands that the philosopher continuously tries to identify where there is need in the world, and what can be done – and more specifically, what he himself or she herself can and should do – to lessen this need. Thus, Lessing's philosophy ultimately comes down to an all-embracing ethical ideal of diminishing the need in the world: "Mindere die Not!" is the most condensed summary of his thinking, and not surprisingly he called the philosophical system of his own "die Philosophie der Not." He never elaborated this system of his own, claiming in his autobiographical essay "*Gerichtstag über mich selbst*" (1925) that the outbreak of the war in 1914 stopped him from doing so;¹⁹ but it can be reconstructed from his writings,²⁰ and this system doubtlessly

¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben', in: Friedrich Nietzsche, *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen* (Frankfurt a.M. 1981 [first edition: 1874]) 95-186, quote on 95.

¹⁷ Theodor Lessing, 'Philosophie als Tat', in: *Archiv für systematische Philosophie, Neue Folge*, 15 (1909), 23-39; reprinted in: Theodor Lessing, *Philosophie als Tat* (Göttingen 1914) 1-29, quote there on 17.

¹⁸ Idem.

¹⁹ Theodor Lessing, 'Gerichtstag über mich selbst', reprinted in: Theodor Lessing, *Einmal und nie wieder* (ed. 1969), 391-411, quote there on 404.

²⁰ I tried to do this in chapter two of my book on Lessing's idea of history: see note 7.

underlies his best-known post-war publications like *Geschichte als Sinngebung des Sinnlosen* and *Europa und Asien*. Moreover, he tried to practice his idea of philosophy, engaging in all kinds of societal activities – ranging from the improvement of education for both children and adults and especially the working classes, the fight against the unnecessary noise that he considered typical for the industrial societies of his day and age, the emancipation of women including suffrage and the fight against prostitution, pacifism, the fight against western colonialism and imperialism, and the conservation of nature to, specifically in Weimar Germany, the fight against the emergent NSDAP and the increasing discrimination against Jews – from his late twenties until he was assassinated in August 1933, at the age of 61.²¹

Whereas the philosopher is the one who has the task, or even the moral obligation to identify where there is need in the world, the historian is the one who has to tell stories that motivate and strengthen groups of people in their struggle against need, in their struggle for a better world – in Lessing’s view, historiography thus eventually is an instrument in this struggle for a better world. Hence, Lessing most likely would have welcomed the rise of approaches like working class history, black history, women’s history, and queer history, that indeed use historiography as an instrument in an emancipatory struggle. To criticisms that in these approaches the distinction between historiography and propaganda gets blurred, Lessing would have replied that this distinction always has been blurred. But whereas history traditionally, and usually even unknowingly, advocated the position of the winner – “Immer schreiben Sieger die Geschichte von Besiegten, Lebensgebliebenen die von Toten,”²² Lessing famously observed: historians, at least in his time, predominantly described, say, the colonial conquests of the Americas, Asia, and Africa, or the Russian Revolution, not the fate of colonized peoples or the downfall of the Romanovs²³ – and thus the political and societal status quo, Lessing advocates a historiography that deliberately supports efforts for change, for improvement of the situation of all those who suffer.

Reputations in history

Now these general observations on historiography hold for historical reputations as well. In fact,

²¹ See below, Epilogue.

²² Lessing, *Geschichte als Sinngebung des Sinnlosen* (1919) 63.

²³ An exception is the fall of the Roman Empire, that was of old studied by historians; this was because European civilization saw itself ever since the Renaissance more as the inheritor of classical civilization than of the Germanic peoples that took control. So, indirectly this confirms Lessing’s thesis after all.

Lessing uses an analysis of historical reputations as one more argument to underpin his general argument that history cannot yield knowledge of the past as it actually happened. What does this analysis of historical reputations imply? Lessing claims that the reputation of an historical figure does not in any way inform us about the person that actually lived. After all, Lessing observes, “scheußliche Bestien wie Iwan IV. und Heinrich VIII. sind bei ihrem Tode von ihren Völkern ehrlicher betrauert worden als Jesus und Buddha . . .”²⁴ Thus, the reputation a person has in history gives no indication at all of his or her importance or value as a human being: “Geschichte sagt nichts über den Wert von Menschen, sondern verzeichnet ihre historische Wirkung.”²⁵ But historical efficacy is a category of its own, which needs careful analysis. This holds true for history in general and history in its particulars, such as the history of art or the history of thought. Eventually, an investigation into why a certain person is considered important, while another one is not, is a dead-end road. Ultimately, nothing much can be said about this question. Of course, there are some conditions that influence the reputation a person has: power and wealth strengthen the chance that someone will be remembered in history: “Denn das unbedeutendste Wort, vom Kirchturm herabgesprochen, ist für Geschichte wichtiger und bedeutungswerter als tiefsinnigste Rede, die auf einsamer Heide verhallt.”²⁶ Hence, “Historischer Erfolg ist somit nichts als bloße Tatsache und steht als solche jenseits von Sinn, Recht und Gerechtigkeit.”²⁷ But once someone has a historical reputation, it will not easily disappear, Lessing claims. On the one hand, the masses tend to follow success out of a human herd instinct; and on the other hand, out of envy a historical reputation will sometimes be contested – but the very fact that it is contested will keep it in the public eye.

Historical reputations do not, however, often show continuity: they can change, occasionally even overnight. And “Ebenso sind die Gestalten Alexanders, Napoleons, Cäsars, Friedrichs, an denen im Kern nichts als der große Erfolg bewundert wird, in verschiedenen Epochen die Träger verschiedener, ja einander entgegengesetzten Werte gewesen.”²⁸ Reputations in the history of art or the history of thought often change as unpredictably as reputations in general history: examples are the contemporary reviews of works by Shakespeare, Descartes, and Gauguin – contemporary critics scorned their works, whereas currently they are ranked among the very best in their discipline, a judgement, however, that might well be entirely different again in fifty or hundred years’ time.

²⁴ Theodor Lessing, *Geschichte als Sinngebung des Sinnlosen oder die Geburt der Geschichte aus dem Mythos* (fourth edition, Leipzig 1927) 185.

²⁵ Theodor Lessing, *Geschichte als Sinngebung des Sinnlosen* (Munich 1919) 104.

²⁶ Idem, 107.

²⁷ Idem, 109.

²⁸ Idem.

Moreover, Lessing maintains, quite often it is completely accidental that some work of art, literature, or philosophy came down to us from the past, while others did not. And some thinkers even live on in history *because* their ideas were totally misunderstood, he claims.

In fact, this analysis of historical reputations even holds for present reputations, Lessing argues. After all, if by chance we personally know a public personality, we inevitably realise how much the private person differs from the public personality. Actually, the private person in a sense stands in the way of the public personality – in the sense that meeting the private person might induce a collapse of the public personality, as he or she might prove to be completely different from what he or she seemed to be. Hence, only when the private person is dead, the public personality can fully develop. This is exactly what happened in the process of deification of Roman emperors, Lessing maintains. Roman emperors were posthumously made into gods by emphasizing one or two traits of character and ignoring all the rest – posthumously because meeting the private person was no longer possible and thus could no longer infringe the public personality.

His analysis of historical reputations explains why we see for example a succession of different Napoleons in historiography. Every age has its own needs and wants, so every age writes its own historiography. Likewise, every age has its own Napoleon. One age needed the image of Napoleon as a military genius; another one the image of Napoleon as a tyrant; yet another age the image of Napoleon as an Enlightened lawgiver; and yet another the image of Napoleon as the emperor who brought *grandeur éternelle* to *la France*. Of course, these different images of Napoleon can co-exist simultaneously. What eventually matters, Lessing maintains, is that each one is, one way or another, an answer to present needs. Thus, all these different Napoleons are very telling – but not so much about Napoleon himself as about the age or society in which the specific image of Napoleon was developed. Lessing calls the historical reputation of a person his or her “*fabelhaftes Nachbild in der Geschichte..*”²⁹ But Lessing does not consider the existence of these mythical afterimages a problem. Why would it be a problem to call, say, Immanuel Kant helplessly middle-class as a person, whereas the historical Kant is rightly considered a philosophical genius? But historians for one reason or another cannot accept this dichotomy; they just want to discuss the historical Kant. But the historical Kant eventually is nothing but an invention that answers to present needs and wants.

If Lessing’s idea of the religious function of historiography is accepted, it implies that historians, apart from writing general histories of all kinds of phenomena, would do equally well to tell

²⁹ Idem, 119.

inspiring stories about men and women who played important roles in the struggle to diminish the need in the world. For example, working class history, black history, women's history, and queer history would do well to write biographies of individuals whose life can serve as an example for those who are currently involved in the same, or in similar struggles. Of course, this is already happening – but Lessing emphasizes it should be done self-consciously and proudly. Historical reputations should be created intentionally, because of the purpose they serve within a community or society: they should eventually inspire actions for the benefit of a better world, that is, a world with less need. This function is what eventually matters – not the ideal of telling the story of what actually happened, which after all is impossible.

In conclusion, historical reputations are revealing, not so much about particular persons, but about the age or society or culture in which these reputations are formed. They are revealing about the needs and wants of this particular time, society, or culture. Hence, the study of the historical or cultural reputations of an age, society or culture is a kind of detour – but a most interesting kind of detour! – to understanding this particular age, society, or culture. To vary on a French proverb: 'tell me who your heroes are, and I will tell you who you are.'³⁰ Understanding the true nature of historical reputations opens up the possibility to intentionally create them, as an instrument in the struggle to diminish the need in the world – which according to Lessing eventually is what all historiography should be about.

Epilogue

In his retort to Goebbels' remark on his alleged insults of president Hindenburg, Lessing expressed the fear that he would live on in history only through this single remark of the notorious *Reichspropagandaleiter*. This did not at all come true. In fact, Theodor Lessing lives on as the very first German victim of German National Socialism outside the German borders. In the late evening of August 30, 1933, in Marienbad, Czechoslovakia, where he lived in exile – having fled the Third Reich in March 1933, as he understandably felt threatened by the new authorities that came into power on January 31st of that year, being a well-known and very outspoken Jewish intellectual who for many years publicly supported socialism and pacifism – an attempt on his life was made by two hitmen

³⁰ 'Dis-moi ce que tu lis, je te dirai qui tu es' – 'tell me what you read and I will tell you who you are'.

prompted by the SA. They shot him in the head twice; his wife Ada, elsewhere in the house and alarmed by the noise, found him, heavily bleeding. Lessing was rushed to the local hospital, but succumbed to his wounds during the night. His murder was reported and discussed in newspapers all over Europe and the United States in the next couple of days, as he was after all an internationally well-known author in the Interbellum. Hence, Lessing is first and foremost remembered as a courageous and combative adversary of National Socialism, who from the very start opposed the rising NSDAP and its virulent antisemitism both in his writings and in public lectures he gave all over Germany – activities that he continued in his exile in Czechoslovakia, even though he was fully aware it endangered his very life.³¹ Because of these activities, the German National Socialists threatened Lessing in his exile as well: after all, his articles were read not only in Germany, but in several other European countries too. In June 1933, several German language journals in Czechoslovakia published the story that a price of 80,000 Reichsmark³² was put on his head. Thus, Lessing knew only too well that his life was in danger and he did indeed take the threat seriously, asking for and being granted police protection. But this realisation did not stop him, nor did appeals by his wife and daughters to back down in the interest of his own safety. He continued doing what he thought was necessary under the circumstances, whatever the consequences might be.

Moreover, especially in Germany, Theodor Lessing is hailed as an early “green” philosopher – someone who already in the first decades of the twentieth century criticised western civilization for its devastating use of nature, an issue that for many is so very important today. In his book *Europa und Asien*³³ and in his booklet *Die verfluchte Kultur*,³⁴ an expanded edition of a public lecture, Lessing warned against the threatening depletion of natural resources and a further decline of biodiversity that was already proving disastrous, claiming that the earth will eventually go down if (western) man does not change its way of living. Interestingly, he saw a possible solution for this problem not in abolishing technological achievements, but in their continued refinement, thus decreasing their impact on natural resources and man’s natural environment. Eventually, western man should try to live in balance with nature, without infringing nature – like peoples in Asian countries did of old, at least in Lessing’s eyes. Hence, contrary to what is sometimes thought, Lessing is not predicting the impending demise of the

³¹ A number of his writings on the subject is collected in: Theodor Lessing, *Wir machen nicht mit! Schriften gegen den Nationalismus und zur Judenfrage*, ed. by Jörg Wollenberg (*Ausgewählte Schriften*, vol. 2, Bremen 1997); and the lecture Lessing repeatedly gave during the last months of his life was published as: Theodor Lessing, *Deutschland und seine Juden* (Prag - Karlin 1933).

³² Currently (2024), approximately a countervalue of € 350 000.

³³ Theodor Lessing, *Europa und Asien* (Berlin 1918), with four new editions in the 1920’s, every new edition expands on the previous one.

³⁴ Theodor Lessing, *Die verfluchte Kultur* (Munich 1921).

earth, even if his wording sometimes is a bit ambiguous, but he is warning what is going to happen if changes are not immediately implemented. This warning has lost nothing of its relevance since Lessing's days.

In Germany Lessing is also remembered for his tireless efforts to promote education in particular for the working classes as a means to improve their situation and, especially, their employability. He firmly believed in then fashionable social-democratic ideal of *Bildung* for the working classes. Already in 1904, he taught courses for the workers of Dresden in a room in the Dresden train station. He was fully aware of the fact that quite a number of the attendees only came to spend a couple of hours in a heated space, and were not at all paying attention to his lectures (even if they were not sleeping).³⁵ In 1920, together with his wife Ada, he founded the *Volkshochschule Hannover*. Until the NSDAP had her sacked in the spring of 1933 as part of the *Gleichschaltung* of education all over the country,³⁶ Ada Lessing was its managing director, whereas Theodor Lessing was for many years one of its principal teachers, lecturing on a variety of subjects, and, moreover, the mind behind the broad outlines of the teaching programme. He waived compensation for these activities, as he had a paid job as a professor in the philosophy of the natural sciences at the *Technische Hochschule* in Hanover (until he was sacked over his essay on Hindenburg); for Ada however, the work at the *Volkshochschule* was a paid job.³⁷ In fully deserved recognition of their efforts, since 2006 the still existent *Volkshochschule* bears their name: the *Ada und Theodor Lessing Volkshochschule Hannover*.

But Lessing should be remembered as a philosopher of history as well. Although the indeed fascinating title of his *Geschichte als Sinngebung des Sinnlosen* is quite regularly referred to, the philosophical ideas expressed in the book(s) are seldom if ever discussed. This is inextricably linked with the fact that *Geschichte als Sinngebung des Sinnlosen* was never translated in English, whereas after the Second World War the focus of debates in philosophy of history definitely shifted to the Anglophone world: the agenda of philosophy of history was more or less determined in the USA and in England, ironically partly by philosophers who had fled Germany and Austria because of the rise of National Socialism. Moreover, Lessing's writings on philosophy of history are not easy to access, as some knowledge of his philosophical ideas, expressed in his earlier writings, is presupposed in these writings. Nevertheless,

³⁵ A number of these lectures, the ones on philosophy, he collected in his book *Schopenhauer - Wagner - Nietzsche. Einführung in moderne deutsche Philosophie* (Munich 1906). He lectured on other subjects as well.

³⁶ After the Second World War, she vainly tried to get her job back; see Jörg Wollenberg, 'Ada und Theodor Lessing: Rückkehr unerwünscht', in: *Sozial. Geschichte* 21 (2006) 52-66.

³⁷ Cfr. Jörg Wollenberg, 'Schönheit durch Bildung – Theodor Lessing als Bildungsreformer und Volkshochschulgründer', in: Theodor Lessing, *Bildung ist Schönheit. Autobiographische Zeugnisse und Schriften zur Bildungsreform*, red. Jörg Wollenberg (*Ausgewählte Schriften*, vol. 1, Bremen 1995) 10-50.

Lessing's reflections on the limits of historical knowledge and in particular on the societal function of historiography, including his idea of historical reputations, still have topical value – his ideas do still deserve examination and reflection.

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