

Dunkhase, Jan Eike, *Werner Conze: Ein deutscher Historiker im 20. Jahrhundert*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010. 378 pages.

The history of German historiography has raised a number of issues revolving around the generation of historians spearheading the move to continue this speciality after the collapse of the Third Reich. Doubts have been expressed, on the one hand, by those that defend the moral, scientific and political integrity of their masters and, on the other, by a new generation of researchers whose aim it is to conduct their own critical review of history. Ever since 1998 when *Historikertag*, an important biennial congress on German historiography, was used to air such controversies through interventions by Hans-Ulrich Wehler and Jürgen Kocka in favour of their masters, Theodor Schieder (1908-1984) and Werner Conze (1910-1986), there have been a spate of biographies, written either individually or collectively, offering a critical analysis of these people as well as other celebrities. Well-known works such as those of Jan Eckel on Hans Rothfels (1891-1976) and also that of Thomas Etzemüller, which examines Werner Conze's circle of acquaintances, not only attempt to look at the difficult, controversial issue by delving into the past of these historians with respect to the National Socialist system. At the same time, they also incorporate innovative methodologies based either on radical constructivism (Eckel) or on the theories of "style of thought" (*Denkstil*) of Ludwik Fleck (Etzemüller)'s sociology of science).¹

Unlike the work done by Eckel and Etzemüller, Jan Eike Dunkhase takes a closer look of Werner Conze in a biography that adopts a more conventional approach with regard to methodology. This said, such work does not neglect an exemplary contextualisation of the intellectual, academic and political career of one of the most important German historians from the 1950s to the 1970s and also one of the most controversial due to his active participation in the *Volksgeschichte* favouring National Socialism prior to 1945. To this end, Dunkhase has enjoyed a considerable documentary advantage over Etzemüller's study, as he has had almost full access to Conze's personal legacy, including his private letters. Hence, Dunkhase has been able to write a biography that is close to the period under review and, thanks to his evident knowledge of how matters stood during Conze's time and circumstances, he manages to fulfil the main aim of German biographical research, a fact that is also found in Eckel and Etzemüller. This is to write a "symptomatic" biography that transcends the single history of a specific person and is largely read as a history of Germany in the 20th century. In the words of Dunkhase: "The specific issues involved in writing a biography about Werner Conze revolve around the fact that German history in the 20th century is disjunctive in nature, and for this reason Conze's academic background is largely symptomatic." (p. 9).

In order to articulate this "symptomatic" biography on Conze, Dunkhase organises his study into nine chapters using a combination of chronological and thematic approaches. The author focuses his attention on the years after 1945, devoting seventy-five per cent of the work to this period. The book begins in chronological order, describing Conze's early socialisation within the context of a German *Bildungsbürgertum* in decline, traditionally marked by a spirit of "intellectual work as a duty", even as a "service" (p. 15) to society and to the state. In this respect, the young Conze took part in a right-wing, anti-Semitic transformation typical of the youth movement of the period between the two world wars

¹ Jan Eckel, *Hans Rothfels: Eine intellektuelle Biographie im 20. Jahrhundert*, Göttingen: Wallstein, 2005, and Thomas Etzemüller, *Sozialgeschichte als politische Geschichte: Die Neuorientierung der westdeutschen Geschichtswissenschaft nach 1945*, Munich: Oldenbourg, 2001.

known as the “*Bündische Jugend*”, which he joined when he was 19 years old. His early career took him to the University of Königsberg in 1931, following a short period in Leipzig. It is here, during the “crystallisation point of the *völkisch* academic medium” (p. 27), that Conze enters the SA in 1933, absorbing the key influences that would continue to have an effect on his scientific work even after 1945, namely, the interdisciplinarity arising from *völkisch* sociology and orientation towards German history in Eastern Europe.² Under the supervision of the conservative historian Hans Rothfels, of Jewish origin, Conze received his doctorate in 1934 in a “perfect example of *Volksgeschichte*” (p. 33) with his thesis on German-speaking minorities in Eastern Europe. If we track the young historian’s career from his doctoral thesis to his work entitled *Habilitation* in 1940 (this being a large-scale study that enabled the historian to acquire a professorship), Dunkhase demonstrates the historiographic continuity of Conze and of the *Ostforschung*, or *East Research*, as a whole, going beyond Hitler’s rise to power in 1933. In his diagnosis, Dunkhase supports the thesis espoused by Dan Diner, according to which German historians went through a “sedimentation process as far as the National Socialist *Weltanschauung* (*world view*) was concerned” (p. 54), eventually incorporating anti-Semitic terminology, in the case of Conze, from the rhetoric used by the regime as *Entjudung* (dejewification) or thought categories relating to the policy of *Lebensraum* (living space).³

Before his organisation of the chapters according to subject, Dunkhase provides an outline of Conze’s academic transition after the Second World War. According to the author, this biographical transition to the German Federal Republic is also symptomatic as, despite the difficulties of the post-war years and the denazification process, his biography is marked simultaneously by academic continuity and scientific adaptation and also by a cultural and political orientation towards “the West”, all of which were characteristic in scientific spheres of that period. After a pilgrimage through the universities of Göttingen and Mainz, Conze became Professor of History in Heidelberg in 1957, a post he would keep until his retirement and where he would experience his moments of greatest scientific splendour, along with academic and social prestige. At the *Institut für Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte*, he sponsors the formation of a structuralist type of German social and economic history. He also develops the influential *Begriffsgeschichte* (history of concepts) together with Reinhart Koselleck, and publishes his reference work, including his 1963 work entitled *Die Deutsche Nation*.⁴ As Dunkhase demonstrates, Conze’s academic renown and even his political prestige are almost immediate. He obtains numerous offers of important professorships in Germany, presiding over the prestigious *Verband der Historiker Deutschlands* (Association of Historians of Germany) in 1972, and receives the *Bundesverdienstkreuz* (*Federal Cross of Merit*), a national prize awarded by the President of the German Federal Republic.

Despite praising Conze’s achievements, at no time does Dunkhase turn his biography into one extolling the virtues of his subject. The contrasted, and distinct, vision offered by the author is made clear in his brief foray into the initial controversy surrounding Conze’s past during the late 1960s. Hence, the student revolts of 1968 erupt in what Dunkhase, to coin Nicholas Berg’s term, calls the “heroism of silence”⁵ (p. 248) of German historiography. The

² Dunkhase quotes from Ingo Haar’s proposal, *Historiker im Nationalsozialismus: Deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft und der Volkstumskampf im Osten* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), 71.

³ See Dan Diner’s study on ‘sedimentation’ entitled “Rationalisierung und Methode. Zu einem neuen Erklärungsversuch der ‘Endlösung’,” *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 40 (1992): 359-382.

⁴ Werner Conze, *Die deutsche Nation: Ergebnis der Geschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963).

⁵ Nicholas Berg, *Der Holocaust und die westdeutschen Historiker: Erforschung und Erinnerung* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2003), 269.

author takes up the case of the attacks of a radicalised student left that were mounted against Conze, (who at that time was a candidate to become rector of the University of Heidelberg), demonstrating how, from their anti-fascist position, they retrieve the most incriminating texts on the past of this historian-turned-conservative democrat.

In organising his topics, Dunkhase moves closer to the five key aspects of Conze's intellectual biography: *Sozialgeschichte* (Chapter 5); his commitment to the unity and continuity of the German nation (Chapter 6); primarily in the context of the division of states in Germany and the Cold War (Chapter 7); his view of the role of the German people as being victimised during the Third Reich (Chapter 8); and finally, his personal and collective exoneration with respect to the Holocaust through his relativisation and propensity for silence (Chapter 9).

Although this order has the advantage of establishing thematic connections that go beyond the purely chronological, they also lead to necessary but repeated redundancies. The same thing happens with the student uprisings of 1968 and the rivalry between the historiography of Eastern and Western Germany, which are analysed in most of the chapters. It is owing to such thoroughness, however, that Dunkhase is able to gradually draw the reader closer to what the author believes to be the centre of gravity and at the same time the blind spot of Conze's work: namely, the Third Reich, the problem of the German people's involvement in it, and primarily, the guilt of the German nation in the extermination of the Jews in Europe. It is precisely on this point that Dunkhase brings his biography of Conze to its culmination. According to the author, Conze always sought to safeguard the moral and political integrity of the German nation, hand in hand with his own, motivated by an "urge for personal justification" (p. 260), at the expense of "discursive marginalisation" (p. 235) and the relativisation of the Holocaust. The Germans appear in his work, and by way of example in his book *Die Deutsche Nation*, as victims of a *Führer* who was, first and foremost, a seducer and then an oppressor, while the biggest victim is the German population expelled from the territories of the East after World War Two.

The main challenge posed by Dunkhase with respect to Conze's relationship with the Holocaust is that of the need to analyse it despite the fact that his work ranges from "limited theme selection" to a "considerable lack of themes" concerning the greatest crime in German history. In a "deconstructive impulse" (p. 236), Dunkhase analyses Conze's silence along with his own scant mention of this subject, which is always on the defensive, and relativistic. He draws the conclusion that his "historiographic fixation on the 'German catastrophe' virtually blinded him to the Jewish catastrophe, with the former really predetermining the sidelining of the latter" (p. 256). Although Dunkhase fails to recognise anti-Semitic tendencies in the Conze of the Federal Republic of Germany, at one point even mentioning his "social democratisation" (p. 124), he also makes a note of certain constants in his historical assessment of Jewish minorities in Eastern Europe, which both before and after 1945, appear as "outsiders" (p. 242) in a foreign land.

More controversial, on the other hand, is his conclusion about the relationship between his structuralist style of German social history and the aforementioned "blind spot" of the Jewish tragedy. In this respect, Dunkhase interprets Conze's structuralist approach to social and economic history almost as one more symptom of his incapacity to conceive of any personal room for manoeuvre and, hence, any individual or collective responsibility. According to the author, Conze's historiography had "the tendency in itself to postpone individual responsibility as determined by the structures" (p. 258), even performing a somewhat exculpatory role for German society. This thought-provoking interpretation, in keeping with

other research work,⁶ derives from the premise formulated by Dunkhase at the beginning of Chapter 9. If the Holocaust is taken to be as the greatest “hiatus from the civilised world” in German history, any history of Germany since 1945 should be a “post-Auschwitz history” (p. 235). This forces us to consider each aspect, including Conze’s biography, from the perspective of “commemoration” of the extermination, or rather its conspicuous absence. Dunkhase thus accepts a major challenge, present in many debates, even though the difficulties involved in its implementation are evident in that his interpretation of structuralist history is still only hypothetical.

In short, Jan Eike Dunkhase presents a biography of Werner Conze marked by continuity across the historical divides. The familiar characterisation of the trajectory of the German historian formulated by Reinhart Koselleck in terms of “tradition and innovation” is thus joined by a highly differential study.⁷ Despite the fact that occasionally the author seems to want to defend his subject from the onslaught of his opponents (as, for instance, in his analysis of the controversies surrounding the 1968 uprising), doubts about the limits of the study’s critical capacity, based on a thesis supervised by one of Conze’s students, Jürgen Kocka, are dissipated in the introduction. Dunkhase is successful in meeting the demand, set out at the beginning of his study, of writing a “symptomatic” biography that transcends the mere history of a historian, even though his analysis of the contexts is based on existing research and does not add significantly to the text. Thus, in line with his “symptomatic” approach, the author finishes with a generalisation that sounds, albeit somewhat pretentiously, like a warning against oblivion and distortion:

This blind spot, whose existence has successfully been demonstrated here in a key historian, casts a long shadow over the image of West German society and its thinkers. Revisiting it over and over again and making it visible is all the more imperative when - seen through 21st-century eyes - the republic of Bonn is perceived to be shining under too bright a light (p. 261).

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⁶ For example, see Berg, *Der Holocaust und die westdeutschen Historiker*.

⁷ Reinhart Koselleck, “Werner Conze: Tradition und Innovation,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 245 (1987): 529-543.