



HIGHER EDUCATION

Right's historical wrongs

BEHIND an international scandal that erupted last month over Holocaust revisionism in Germany lies a tectonic shift in German historical culture.

As the Christian Democratic Union is in deep crisis over a corruption scandal and has been out of power federally for the first time since 1982, conservatives are searching for new sources of political support.

Observers in Germany and abroad are worried that they may follow the lead of Austria and enter into coalition with parties on the extreme Right.

So they were incensed when the nationalist Germany Foundation awarded its Konrad Adenauer Prize to contentious Berlin historian Ernst Nolte. He has been a pariah since the infamous historians' dispute of the mid-80s when he tried to relativise the uniqueness of the Holocaust.

However, what has really upset professional historians and journalists is that the main speech at the award ceremony was given by Horst Möller, director of the renowned Institute for Contemporary History in Munich.

Since its establishment in 1949, the institute has been at the forefront of research and public education on the Nazi regime. It has always supported critical scholarship against nationalist apologetics, which seeks to divert attention away from the shame of the Holocaust to other mass crimes of the 20th century, especially those of the Soviet Union.

Historians in Germany and abroad have been dismayed that Möller used his directorship to promote ideas antithetical to the institute's traditional mission.

However, this should come as no surprise. He has close links to the ruling conservative Christian Social Union in Bavaria and rumours abound that he received the directorship in 1992 at the behest of Helmut Kohl, the former chancellor, who thought that left-wing historians focused on the Holocaust at the expense of other, less disturbing aspects of the German past.

Since then Möller has targeted critical historiography, for example in his attack on a travelling exhibition on the war crimes of the German army on the eastern front in World War II. The harrowing photographs of German soldiers executing Jewish civilians and partisans explodes the popular myth that only SS units participated in the Holocaust.

When the exhibition visited Munich in 1997, CSU politicians denounced it for traducing the hon-

Revisionism is shifting Germany's attitude towards the Holocaust, writes Dirk Moses



Against forgetfulness: sculptor and artist Andrew Rogers with his *Pillars of Witness*, which is part of the Hadasa and Szymon Rosenbaum Holocaust Research Centre at Elsternwick in Melbourne

our of German soldiers and promoting the alleged perpetual hairshirt of national inferiority.

Last year Möller edited a book with the provocative title *The Red Holocaust and the Germans*, an angle with a basis in his and Nolte's personal experience.

Both of them fought against left-

wing radicals at the Free University in Berlin in the 70s, and the united front against the Left has continued despite the end of the Cold War 10 years ago.

Nolte repeated his notorious arguments in his acceptance speech by complaining of the negative Germany-centric interpretation of

the Holocaust that he says smacks of collective guilt. However, he is no crank Holocaust denier (or revisionist, as they prefer to call themselves) like David Irving, who this year lost his libel case in London against the US academic Deborah Lipstadt, or Frederick Toben, the Australian who recently spent time in a German jail for breaking the law on questioning the historical reality of the genocide of European Jewry.

A sophisticated historian who first came to prominence in 1963 with a landmark book on fascism, Nolte now indulges in speculative philosophy of history by situating Nazism and the Holocaust in a world historical context in which blame for the Holocaust miraculously appears at the feet of the Soviet Union rather than Germany.

The Holocaust was a pre-emptive strike against the Bolsheviks' feared plans for class murder, he insists. In effect, the Nazis were merely copying the extermination policies of the Bolsheviks.

In a notorious interview in 1994, he maintained that Hitler's response to Germany's predicament in 1933 possesses a rational core and historical justification, because at the time no political force other than Nazism was in a position to effectively oppose communism.

The danger today, Nolte proclaims, is the anti-national effect of multiculturalism and globalisation because, like communism, they lead to a homogeneous world civilisation.

No wonder Nolte has become a popular author for right-wing newspapers such as *Young Freedom*.

The readiness of establishment figures and organisations to entertain Nolte's apologetic arguments shows that sections of the conservative establishment are prepared to look to German nationalist and right-wing milieus to build a common front against the immigration and cultural policies of the ruling Social Democrats and Greens.

What is more, the moves are being made in Munich, where earlier this year the CSU greeted the success of the right-wing Austrian politician Jörg Haider, whose populist party now rules Austria in co-operation with the traditional conservatives. It is precisely the prospect of such a coalition in Germany that worries German and foreign observers.

The memory of the Holocaust as a German problem remains as politically volatile as ever.

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