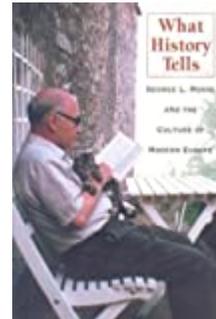


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Stanley G. Payne, David J. Sorkin, John S. Tortorice, eds. *What History Tells: George L. Mosse and the Culture of Modern Europe*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004. xii + 292 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-299-19414-7; \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-299-19410-9.



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This is a wonderful book. It provides a nice introduction to George L. Mosse's work, a testament to his extensive influence, and a glowing statement about the personality of a remarkable historian. The editors argue that "no other Europeanist historian of the second half of the twentieth century left greater imprint on the course of historical scholarship, and none worked in a greater number of thematic areas" (p. xiii). Indeed, Mosse's students seem to be everywhere, and the breadth of his scholarship is remarkable. As Steven E. Aschheim notes, Mosse wrote on "the politics and theology of the early modern period; the Reformation and Christian casuistry; Jewish history and anti-Semitism; fascism, Nazism, and the Holocaust; monuments and mass politics; war and commemoration; intellectuals, liberalism and 'irrationalism'; racism, stereotypes and visual culture; respectability, sexuality, and nationalism" (p. 1). The contributors to this book, however, do not simply survey and evaluate Mosse's work in these disparate areas. Most also praise the ways in which he pursued his studies: he engaged his divergent interests with methodological innovation, commitment to his enlightenment ideals, and a striking élan. In this sense, this book is as much about the character of the historian as the breadth of his *oeuvre*. Both are inspirational.

The book begins with a brief preface by the editors, a

forward by Walter Laqueur, and an insightful introduction by Aschheim. It ends with a comprehensive bibliography of Mosse's work compiled by John S. Tortorice. The body of the book, however, is divided into four thematic sections: Mosse's work on early modern Europe; his contributions to studies of fascism; his groundbreaking efforts in comparative history, nationalism and memory; and his place in Jewish history. Mosse's interventions in each of these areas are remarkable, and people interested in only one can easily focus their reading. However, many subscribers to this list may find the first and fourth sections particularly interesting, since they cover areas outside the scope of German history and remind us that Mosse had a many-sided career. Moreover, this thematic division could also mislead the causal reader, because in some ways Mosse's significance for today's historians is better captured by the contributors' repeated testaments to his methodological innovations and his convictions about the importance of doing history than by his many contributions to historiographic debates. Indeed, this book reminds us that "what history tells" depends on what and how the historian asks. Mosse was a model of productive inquiry.

What emerges from these essays is an intellectual biography of a man who did not set out to be a historian of something; rather, he drew eagerly on innova-

tive methodologies from multiple fields while pursuing his many interests with vigor. This intellectual openness and flexibility proved to be a tremendous advantage. It took him, for example, outside the field of history to areas such as anthropology, long before anthropological theory became fashionable among historians. That move, in turn, reinforced his already great willingness to empathize with his subjects, which further allowed him, as David Sabeian notes, “to investigate the ways in which ideologies like fascism appealed as much to emotional structures as to rational and cognitive ones” (p. 16). From this position, he was able to show the complex ways in which ideas could be used as weapons and thus reassert the importance of ideology in German as well as other areas of history. As Johann Sommerville put it in his discussion of Mosse’s work on the early modern period, he was, even before he turned to anthropology, “a historian of ideology who refrained from using his writings as a mere vehicle for promoting his own ideological agenda.” Instead, “he brought detachment and even sympathy to his analysis of even such unpopular theories as royal absolutism” allowing us to better understand their appeal (p. 35).

Mosse recognized the importance of theory; but he also realized that, as Sabeian remarks, “theory cut loose from its concrete contexts becomes a mere game, an amusement of no particular relevance” (p. 17). For Mosse, explaining the past required creating narratives driven by critical inquiry and empirical analysis that were well grounded in the perceptions of historical subjects. His willingness to step back from theoretical debates and his interest in focusing on the ways in which people made sense of their world worked to his advantage. According to Emilio Gentile, “Mosse had a remarkable intuition for identifying in historical phenomena basic problems, aspects, and connections that other historians were neglecting” (p. 46). Mosse also made a point of intervening in his colleagues’ debates with bold statements and calculated provocations meant to break down the parameters that constrained their analyses. This was a pointed tactic. As Sabeian notes, “in trying to get his audience to react, to see that there is no easy judgment to be made about historical actors, or even to see that the wrong people do the right thing or the right people do the wrong things, Mosse was always concerned to make his audience understand” (p. 22). That understanding often required embracing a human complexity many historians tended to forget or ignore, but which Mosse found integral to appreciating how people perceived their worlds and thus fundamental to doing history.

The most poignant example is his work on fascism. Gentile, in fact, writes of a “Mosse revolution” in the study of fascism, which consisted “first of all in the novelty of his method of analysis, which in turn was a consequence of a way of envisaging history and the historian’s task” (p. 43). Mosse was engaged in explaining how the individual could be caught up in the exciting rhythm of mass movements, and he made a point of taking the leaders of these movements seriously. He regarded Hitler, for example, as intellectually committed, not simply a talented manipulator of the German people. Mosse argued that fascism was a bourgeois revolution, a modern response to people’s desire for order, driven by the mystique of modernity and the aesthetics of politics, revolutionary dynamics, and a desire to break out of the fetters of industrial society and recapture the whole man. He maintained that fascism was a new faith, a surrogate religion, as well as a new, successful style of politics. Furthermore, while he acknowledged that fascism was anti-parliamentary, he argued that it was not anti-democratic. Indeed, it was successful because it responded to the aspirations and dreams of common people. All of these insights have had incredible influence in the study of fascism; but they have also proven important for scholars working in other areas as well. As Roger Griffin reminds us, Mosse’s work was never just about fascism. It was about the dynamics of mass movements in the modern era (p. 110).

Mosse often focused on specific phenomena such as National Socialism to help him work through more general historical problems. That method has opened up a lot of fruitful ground for a range of scholars outside of German history. Emmanuel Sivan, for instance provides a moving testament of such influence while recalling how reading Mosse’s *Fallen Soldiers* made him completely re-think some aspects of Israeli politics of national memory (p. 240). Similarly, Laqueur notes how the same book taught him much about his current interests in terrorism and the Arab world (p. ix). Both learned from Mosse that the cult of the fallen soldier is quite old, and both quickly recognized that his insights had applications in non-European as well as European contexts. Indeed, many scholars have been able to build on the work Mosse began, pursuing leads he identified but never had the time to explore in depth. In one of the many examples in this book, Robert A. Nye notes, for instance, that “Mosse himself dwelled only briefly on how the shaping of men for nationalist tasks was equally useful for imperial ventures, but important aspects of his work on nationalism and sexuality were later adapted to explanations of sexu-

ality in colonial domains” (p. 193). Indeed, Mosse helped to open up a point of inquiry that became of great significance in colonial studies.

Another valuable lesson underscored in this book is that the importance of Mosse’s insights did not always correlate directly to his influence. In some cases it took decades for historians to recognize their value. But this did not deter his work. *The Crisis of German Ideology*, for example, was not initially well-received in Germany, where Mosse’s cultural approach was essentially rejected by the leaders in the field. Aschheim argues that this was due to the fact that within the German historical tradition, “the analysis of ‘society’ was regarded as critical and ‘progressive,’ while the study of ideas was taken to be somehow reactionary and conservative.” Moreover, Mosse’s methodology struck a painful cord. In many ways, his version of history was too personal for traditionalists. Aschheim states that “it may well be that these painful issues of personal agency and belief, the need to account for and come to terms with the Nazi past without laying blame directly on the generation of their ‘fathers,’ prompted the German social historians to go in this ‘structural,’ impersonal direction” (p. 8). Thus they preferred to steer clear of the kind of history Mosse (and a later generation of German historians) found so appealing.

That (if we accept Aschheim’s account) was an active choice by one generation of German scholars to not follow Mosse’s lead. But Mosse’s influence was circum-

scribed more frequently by the fact that his readership was not initially as broad as we might assume. Language barriers sometimes played a role. Jay Winter, for example, stresses how long it took for Mosse’s books to be translated into French, inhibiting the impact of his work in that country (p. 152). Language alone, however, was only a part of the problem. Many scholars simply did not know about his work until years after it was written. Much of Mosse’s work on fascism, for instance, was not immediately recognized, leading even people like the well-read Tim Mason to call for the kind of work Mosse had done on fascism long after it was completed (pp. 118-119). Similarly, Rudy Koshar stresses how much Mosse’s work anticipated many of the tactics in current studies of perception, display, visual culture, and tourism; yet few of the people who engage in these studies began with readings of Mosse. More seem to have recognized his relevance after the fact, and many seem rather astounded that they did not know of his work earlier. Mosse’s efforts continue to impress.

There are only a few limitations to this volume. It is easy to become weary of the contributors’ repeated descriptions of Mosse’s leading works, the essay by Gentile is rather long and repetitive, and the contributors are not as critical as they might have been. But these are trivial details that detract very little from a volume that reminds us about a fabulous historian who, as Winter writes, “explored the limits of cultural history and pushed them about as far as they could go” (p. 161). It is sure to be inspirational reading for many.

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