Exile, Science, and Bildung
Studies in European Culture and History
edited by
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University of Minnesota

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of communism, the very meaning of Europe has been opened up and is in the process of being redefined. European states and societies are wrestling with the expansion of NATO and the European Union and with new streams of immigration, while a renewed and reinvigorated cultural engagement has emerged between East and West. But the fast-paced transformations of the last fifteen years also have deeper historical roots. The reconfiguring of contemporary Europe is entwined with the cataclysmic events of the twentieth century, two world wars and the Holocaust, and with the processes of modernity that, since the eighteenth century, have shaped Europe and its engagement with the rest of the world.

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Exile, Science, and Bildung
The Contested Legacies of German Emigre Intellectuals

EDITED BY
DAVID KETTLER
AND
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PREFACE

The chapters in this volume originated in an ongoing project on intellectual exile at Bard College, directed by David Ketter, Research Professor. They grew out of papers presented at a conference held at that college on August 13 to 15, 2002: "Contested Legacies: The German-Speaking Intellectual and Cultural Emigration to the United States and the United Kingdom, 1933–45." This conference in turn was prepared at the "No Happy End" workshop on February 13 to 15, 2001. The editors are accordingly indebted not only to the institution and donors whose contributions made these meetings possible, but also to the many colleagues who participated in them. Since there were twenty presenters at the workshop and fifty at the conference, it was obviously impossible to include all the high quality contributions in the present volume. Yet the project was seen from the outset to be a cumulative and collaborative effort. Accordingly, we would like to thank all the paper givers at both sessions who are not otherwise represented here: Peter Baehr,** Reinhard Blomert, Jonathan Bordo,* Peter Breiner,** Catherine Epstein, Christian Fleck,* Lawrence J. Friedman,* Judith Gerson, Lydia Goehr,* John Gunnell,** Wolfgang Heuer, Daniel Herwitz,* Claudia Honegger,* Martin Jay, Mario Kessler, Claus-Dieter Krohn,* Richard Leppert, Peter Ludes, John McCormick,* Neil McLaughlin, Berndt Nikolai, Margaret Olin, Hanna Papanek,* Paul Roazen, James Schmidt, Joanna Scott,* John Spalek, Michael P. Steinberg, Matthias Stoffregen, Edoardo Tortarolo, Roy Tao, Mihaly Vajda, Suzanne Vromen,** Wren Wetchler, and Janet Wolff.3

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Notes


Chapter One

The "Other Germany" and the Question of Bildung: Weimar to Bonn

David Kettler and Gerhard Lauer

The recognition of a difference between the scientific dimension of institutionalized knowledge in society and the rhetorical, didactic one, as well as the potential for conflict between them, is by no means unique to modern German culture. For centuries, English universities put the formation of clergymen and gentlemen ahead of the advancement of knowledge, and American colleges vied with each other in adapting both instruction and inquiry to the building of piety or moral character or civic virtue, not to speak of the utilitarian didactic achievements of inculcating commercial initiative or housewifely guile. Francis Bacon and Adam Smith denounced Oxford and Cambridge early in the modern era, and their spiritual heirs later created the London School of Economics, while the protests of Charles Beard and Thorstein Veblen against the higher education in America helped to bring into being the New School that was eventually to harbor an important contingent of the German émigrés of 1933.

Yet neither in England nor the United States did questions arising out of the contrasting aims of organized knowledge penetrate so deeply into competing designs of such knowledge, lay claim to such comprehensive ethical significance, resonate so profoundly in public discourses remote from debates about education in the narrower sense, or have such ambitions on the allocation of authority and power in society. Some of these themes doubtless arose among essayists elsewhere, as with Matthew Arnold or T. S. Eliot in Britain, or Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Thoreau in the United States, but the comprehensiveness, centrality, and pervasiveness of the problem constellation was distinctively German, as was its extension to spheres of discourse remote from the essayistic. The conception of Germany as uniquely a Kultur nation and of cultural policy consequently as the subject matter of prime political decisions was admittedly undermined by the defeat in World War I, which had been marked by this ideological motif, but in the world of the literary intelligentsia the conception revived in diverse forms during the Weimar years.

In the various discourses centered in the university faculties of philosophy, especially within the humanities and social studies, intellectual work in Germany was
Chapter Five

The Empire’s Watermark: Erich Kahler and Exile

Gerhard Lauer

The “long nineteenth century” came to an end in 1914, and with it the validity of its concepts of Wissen and Bildung. For the intellectuals of the time, such an ending appeared fated, since it was a standard gesture of cultural criticism in the empire to predict the inevitable collapse of the unprecedented heaping up of knowledge. Nietzsche was neither the first nor was he alone in his belief that Bildung and culture were in a state of crisis. In the second part of his Thoughts out of Season he passes in review, to great effect, the prevalent critique of the accumulations of merely antiquarian knowledge, remote from life. Others would follow. In 1911, for instance, Georg Simmel made out a “tragedy of culture,” contending that the nineteenth century had piled up a “stock of spiritual objectifications that reached to the sky,” and that such stocks could no longer be restored to living subjectivity. Bildung had lost all meaning. What had once been the purpose of Bildung, deepening an understanding of oneself and one’s own culture, had simply ceased to exist. The diagnosis included all areas of Wissenschaft and art, even society itself. Society had produced a knowledge that was of no use to any Bildung, and that had become quite alien to it.

The younger generation born of the empire was not satisfied with a mere critique. Movements were called into being, with the “overcoming of the nineteenth century” as program. The Yearbook of the Spiritual Movement was one such programmatic manifestation. Its authors were close to the circle surrounding the charismatic poet Stefan George, many of them his disciples.

One of those whose voice was heard in those years was Erich Kahler, not a member of the inner circle around George, but in his sphere of influence. He appeared in the Yearbook of the Spiritual Movement of 1912, with a critique of the theater. The state of the theater, he maintained, mirrored the spirit of the age, which possessed more Bildung than any earlier time. Yet this Bildung was mere amusement. [. . . ] The state of affairs in the theater is no different than that in the Wissenschaften, or—as Kahler calls it—the “Wissenschaft hothouse.”2 The crisis embraces everything. Only a few, like the circles around Stefan George, are exempt. They must be the “leaders” out of the crisis.
family. There was no question that Erich Kahler would study philosophy and history, as well as the histories of art and literature, that he would be in a position to become a writer, or that his best-beloved cousin, Eugen von Kahler, who died young, would become a painter in the Blauer Reiter circle. Convinced of their own cultural mission, they had all the evidence on their side.

Kahler's "own ways" from which "life" was to be learned, which he invoked in a juvenile poem, were symbolically staged through a breach with his father. If Erich Kahler's father was a man of industry, representative of the insurance and financial enterprises that had only come into being in the nineteenth century, his son was a poet. His father's world was that of the Habsburg Monarchy. Kahler had no love for it; he had longed for the fall of the multinational state. That it was this world, which had raised him up and which had shaped his humanity, more completely than any programmatic proclamations not and could not be a subject of discussion. All this belonged to the expressionist revolt, which wanted to reinvent mankind as if it had never had a history. In 1919, Kahler's book on the Habsburg Kindred had appeared and caused a great stir, capturing the mood of such different authors as Egon Friedell and Hugo von Hofmannsthal. History had moved beyond the world of the fathers, he wrote. The liberal bourgeoisie, no less than the "thoroughly thoughtless and irresponsible House of Habsburg," had splintered into the war, which had made their loss of legitimacy manifest. Because the old world possessed neither life nor youth, it was "irretrievably dead and gone." It consisted of historical reminiscences and neo-baroque longing, according to Kahler, but these were now nothing but façades of Bildung and they have ceased to be life-forming energy. In Kahler's cultural—philosophical overview of the old Kaisertum, Hofmannsthal had found "certain of his own reflections on the Austrian mentality [...] tellingly expressed here," and it was not coincidental that he compared Kahler's book, The Habsburg Kindred, to Oswald Spengler's The Decline of the West. For both, European civilization had outlived itself. Both promulgated a tragic vision of its downfall, and foretold an "Age of a New Man."

For Kahler there was a locale for this world-historical decision, and that was Germany. The second volume of the Hapsburg book, never actually written, was supposed to demonstrate "the compelling necessity, for the renewal of German Austria, of an intensive injection of the refreshing popular (völkisch) spirit of the German Reich," as it was portentously put in the publisher's prospectus. With some show, Kahler put his aristocratic title and moved to Germany. "Quite early urged by some need for more bracing air and a less casual attitude to life, he came to the Reich," Thomas Mann writes, looking back on Kahler's decision. In his Doktor Faustus-Novella, Thomas Mann later created a memorial of his friend, Kahler, in the figure of Konrad Deutschlin. As so often in Mann's work, the name "Deutschlin" speaks for itself. It testifies to Kahler's high-minded belief in Germany, although Mann did not deny himself a certain distanced irony in his depiction of his Deutschlin character. For Kahler's pathos when the talk was of Germany, in exile no less than before, put off even Thomas Mann. In a diary entry of 28 September, 1935, Mann claims that Kahler, "goes dangerously far in his objective acknowledgment of the positive elements in what is happening (not being done) in Germany."

At the distance of a quarter of a century, Thomas Mann took note of that radical turn amongst intellectuals around the time of World War I, but he also recorded their
attempts to find a way out of such extremism. Totalistic terms like "life" merely reinforced these emphases. They gave no indication, however, as to what this new, more humane life should consist of. Kahler was certain of only one thing: that a break-through was imminent and that it would be equivalent to a revolution. "Revolution is here, whether we want it or not," Kahler asserted between the wars. "The thing is to want it. The thing is to let the order come into being and not to obstruct it by 'putting affairs in the old order.' Only when there is an end to the call for order, when the call is for the life that is coming, only then will there be order."15 Such paradoxi-cal figures of thought, which combined corporatist ideas of an order of estates with revolution, have been called "conservative revolution."16 "So the new is essentially also the arch-human,"17 was a saying of a leading figures of the popular university movement, which he sent to Kahler with a friendly dedication. The emerging new humanism consisted of formulas, each outbidding the other. Its demand was to replace the differentiated resources of Bildung with a unity of life orientation. For Kahler, as for Kriek and other intellectuals of the time, this presupposed that the accumulations of knowledge could be compounded and transmuted into a power to revolutionize life as a whole. This was the new task of Bildung, which was thought no longer able to rely on the inherited institutions of transmitting knowledge, or to require objects of Bildung. In dispute were not the contents of this new Bildung, but rather the ways—or "the leader"—toward the goal.

From the standpoint of nineteenth-century historicism, it would have been impossible to compound knowledge into a force for Bildung. Modern society was already at that time generating a body of knowledge of which it could not say which parts might at some time become relevant. The new Wissenschaft, in contrast, which sought to revolutionize life overnight, had to conceive of knowledge as directly functional, which was incompatible with the "nonpurposive," anti-teleological modern forms of knowledge. For its new departure, then, the younger generation was left with nothing except a return to the philosophy of history from the German idealistic tradition. First they transmitted modern accumulations of knowledge into a Bildung reaped, and not only by Kahler. For anyone who argues from philosophy of history has the world spirit on his side. He knows that the world of the fathers "inevitably" has Bildung in the sense of a bourgeois form of life oriented to art, history, and the suspended and superceded. The antibourgeois circle around George, the popular man, beyond the established institutions. This new Bildung no longer required subject matter, but only a state of mind. Bildung is elevated to an ethos—but one empty of contents.

What this means can also be well followed in what was doubtless the most widely discussed of the writings of Kahler, The Vocation of the Sciences. The title already dis-Weber had postulated that only heroic persistence in an irretrievably modern and be pursued was "value-free," which meant that its findings were not unmediated capable of providing orientation to life. Everything is different in Kahler's writing. It promised an escape from the entombment of modernity. Wissenschaft would lead to a "supra-rationality." The discrete domains of knowledge were to be joined together and to turn into a teaching for life. This conjunction was to be the task of the "leader and teacher." "The leader and teacher we have in mind, who is above all a human being in the highest sense and who only attains to his knowledge and practice through and out of the human being, this leader and teacher must prove himself wherever he goes or stands: in the tone of his voice and in the look in his eyes, as in the form of his works and the example of his conduct."18 Here, Bildung had become an ethos wholly without subject matter. The distinctive disciplines with their respective subject matters are only of secondary interest. What mattered was the magnification of the acquisitions of Bildung into a meta-science. The German idealist tradition calls this "Wissenschaftslehre" (doctrine), while Kahler calls it Beruf (vocation); but how it was supposed to take place remained unclear. All that was clear was that it had to happen, and that the task had been given unto only a few. The calling, not the Wissenschaft, was of prime interest. The new Wissenschaft would necessarily follow:

The succession of ever more dense because ever more detailed causal nets, the ever more numerous array of causal chains, the ever more diversified disordering of empirical reality through countless numbers of conceptual rays—all this has helped to initiate a new fluidity and cyclicity (!), an organic, irrational, wholly internal closure in all dimension, which manifests itself with ever greater density and clarity the more the conceptual and mechanically causal distinctions strain to keep up.19

Ernst Troeltsch's judgement of Kahler and of the many similar writings of the years around World War I was that they were "basically revolutionary books against the revolution."20 They are revolutionary because of their promise of a new man, and thereby also of an exit from the "demystified world." They are counterrevolutionary, because their struggle is against what Kahler calls the "old Wissenschaft," hallmarked by "concept," "abstraction," the "Kantian deed," "mechanism," "specialization," "intellectualization"—all of them things that the new Wissenschaft will no longer require. This Wissenschaft had no method, and needed none. In a modern sense, it was no longer Wissenschaft. What Kahler and many of his contemporaries in Germany and Austria had in view was the end of modernity, with which they could never develop an easy relationship. From its end, they promised themselves a new Humanism; and Germany was to be the land of this restoration.

What came in 1933 was quite different than expected, and took a long time to accept. Kahler was not prepared for the ferocity that persecuted him in 1933 and searched his house in Wolfenbüttel near Munich. Intellectuals like Ernst Bertram or Ernst Kriek, who Kahler had thought shared his convictions, changed sides to the new powers. Kahler's books and essays lost their readership overnight. Thanks to his wife, Josefine, and to his family's good relations with President Benschi, Kahler was able to escape, by way of Vienna, Prague and Zurich, and finally, in 1938—at the urgings of Thomas Mann and his family—to Princeton. Kahler was forty-eight years of age when he had to abandon Germany, the land of destiny. He had more than half his life behind him. The coming of the new man seemed more remote than ever.
It has been argued, especially in exile studies—spurred by the emigrants themselves—that exile contributed to a depolarizing of the German tradition of thought, as Paul Tillich had already maintained.21 I do not believe that this applies to Kahler, first, because the internationalization of the sciences had already begun before 1933, and, second because the world of ideas of a Kahler suddenly found itself without resonance, which is how it would remain. The playing field of thought became smaller. A new direction became more difficult. America had for too long appeared to incarnate everything about modernity that one had rejected.

Even from an external point of view, Kahler was unable to secure lasting employment, to say nothing of a permanent professorship. Grants from the Van Leer Foundation, temporary teaching at the New School (1939/40) and at Black Mountain College in North Carolina (1946/47), as well as a number of visiting professorships at Cornell University (1947–1953), Ohio State University (1954 and 1959), and Princeton (1960) and other universities provided his academic daily bread, and his audiences consisted mostly of undergraduates. It was not until shortly before his death that he was recognized with an honorary doctorate by Princeton University. Where could a thinker like Kahler build a link in United States? There were of course first of all the emigrants themselves. His fraternal friend Hermann Broch lived for several years at Number One, Evelyn Place, Kahler’s house in Princeton, and Kantorowicz, Einstein, and Wolfgang Pauli were not far away. But they served rather to reinforce one another in their own intellectual aristocracy, which still waited for a radically new departure in the world. In this expectation, they kept too much to themselves. Wolfgang Pauli writes, in a letter to Kahler in 1952, of the “vacuum” in which they lived there.22

There was no shortage of attempts to let the solemn commitment to the new man make a difference in the world. In 1948, Kahler, together with an array of intellectuals, addressed the public to introduce a draft constitution of a future world government. Robert Hutchins, for many years president of the University of Chicago, had assembled this “Committee to Frame a World Constitution,” and he stated the alternatives. Here too, the tone is apocalyptic in mood: “one is world suicide; another is agreement among sovereign states to abstain from using the bomb.”23 Kahler took this “Committee to Frame a World Constitution,” is still expressed decades later in a letter to Else Jaffe in 1965:

At the moment, I am involved in two utopias—feasible utopias inasmuch as they would both be desperately needed if it were to be still possible to save this world, that is, to keep it human. One concerns world organisation, and I am just on the way to California, where I will fly to consult with a group convened by the former president of the University of Chicago, Robert Hutchins. The other kind of Utopia is the old one I have been pursuing since The Vocation of Science, the integration of the sciences.24

The two were connected, for Kahler and the members of the committee saw themselves as a “nonpartisan advisory, pedagogical, and supervisory elite,” which hoped to subject the world to the formative process of Bildung. “This elite,” Kahler writes in an essay on “The Fate of Democracy,” “would have the task, in our ever more technicized and functionalized world, to keep alive the spiritual as the genuinely human, the common sense of the experience of a people and of peoples.” The mark of this humanistic elite is an “essential purity and superiority, which goes beyond [their] practical accomplishment, a sense and a care for the universal, for that which is common to the peoples and to humanity.”25 That is the barely altered metropolis of the postponed Bildung of the human race, no less grandiose in its aims after years of exile. At the end of the 1950s he still speaks of “a total ethics,” and he summarizes its maxims in the claim that “anything that leads to wholeness is good, anything that leads to split is bad.”26 But what exactly this Bildung of the new man was supposed to represent in terms of objects, books, canons or institutions was still uncertain, even after decades of exile.

It was not only in letters that Kahler himself repeatedly proclaimed the unity of his work, across the caesura of exile. He introduced his essay collection of 1952, Responsibility of the Mind, by confessing that the volume’s essays form “a single unity, and that they are selected with this in mind. They all deal, directly or indirectly, with the great crisis of our time.”27 Clearly, Kahler did not formulate a fundamentally different self-understanding in exile. Rather, he was attempting, under the increasingly difficult conditions of exile, to uphold his high demands on himself, against all resistance, including his own attacks of depression and loneliness. For a short while, he may have had some expectations arising out of his relations with admirers at Ohio State University who were attempting to found an Institute of Humanism, where there might have been a place for him.28 This would have been compatible with Kahler’s own ambition to be more than just a college teacher. But the plans fell through. Perhaps such an opportunity would have provided him with a different situation in the United States, and with it a more accepting relationship with America and Modernity. As it was, he remained on the margin of American society, in his heart always closer to Germany. It was not necessary for him to learn the stylized outsider’s role; that had already been taught him by the antibourgeois movements at the time of World War I.

To be sure, there was no lack of attempts at reorientation in exile. He tried repeatedly to move beyond the merely academic field of influence. With Albert Einstein, Kahler published a book in 1944 on The Arch in Palestine, which supported older ideas of a binational state, already formulated by Kahler before 1933,25 but which was timely and controversial in 1944 because of the imminent founding of the state of Israel. It goes without saying that Kahler took part, at an advanced age, in the anti-Vietnam Demonstrations. “It would be tolerable,” Kahler writes to Thomas Mann in 1941, if the times were different. But as it is, there is nothing available against the deep sadness that overcomes one from the “wave of the future,” against which we obviously can do so little. And although we know perfectly well that this cannot be the future of humankind, it may be ours, if something fundamental does not change here very soon, of which I regretfully see no sign. Things are very bad in this land—a most bitter "I-told-you-so." But enough of this.29

Kahler was relegated in exile to the role of undergraduate teacher. Apart from scattered lectures, the only chance of a wider impact came from the writing of books. Man the Measure, his principal American work, has had countless editions and translations since 1943. It is nothing less than an essay at a world history of humankind,
a "total view." In the tradition of the "figuration view" [Gestalttheorie] as practiced by the George Circle, Kahler attempts to reveal the secret order of meaning in history. No catastrophe, but it bears the new man. The course of historical events is thus contingent upon the "supra-temporal characterology," which is Kahler's aim. The unity of history tends to dissolve the subject matter of history. The demonstration through the philosophy of history of the essential Bildung of man passed over details only for the sake of illustration. In such moments, Bildung has objects, as with the development of the city. But they were functions of the superordinate figuration of history as a whole.

It is easy to show that even in this frequently reprinted book none of the extrapolated lines of historical development are new. Kahler had already described them in what was perhaps his best book, German Character in the History of Europe. This book rested on years of preliminary work between the wars and, because of Hitler's seizure of power, could be published first in Kahler's Zurich exile in 1937. Perhaps an earlier success of this book would have led Kahler back to work on history, and the expressionist pathos of Bildung might have been channeled into institutional and disciplinary paths. In exile, however, it was hardly possible for it to attract any readers. Its main thesis—that Germany, the unfinished nation, was the place where the world-historical contradictions would collide more directly than elsewhere—reappears scarcely weakened in the American adaptation of the book. The National Socialist seizure of power was bound to confirm this in his belief.

Before 1933, but also afterward, Kahler had tried to escape the aporia of extremist interwar philosophy of culture, and to put the case for a humanism turned toward life-orientated humanity. His work was supposed to be heir to the "old" Wissenschaft and to identify the "new" knowledge essential to the "kingdom of man." This ambition could not be achieved in this way because Kahler's ambition implied, as Arthur Salz had already observed in 1921, the postulation of a "teaching of wisdom" that demanded the "utopian" overturn of the entire tradition of science. For this reason, Max Scheler catalogued Kahler's revolution in science among the movements "harmful to the presence of genuine philosophy and Wissenschaft in Germany," because it presumed "to attempt to make over, in its foundations as well as its methods, a cumulative achievement of two thousand years of occidental history—namely, rational, inductive or formally deductive disciplinary Wissenschaft, free of presuppositions of worldview." Prior to 1933, this was utopian, and, all the more, hardly communicable in the United States, outside emigrant circles. Under the conditions of exile, which Kahler entered as a man of almost fifty years, and which would grant him nothing more than a supporting role in contemporary intellectual debate, exile supported a self-immunization of his own thinking rather than leading it out of the German provinces of meaning.

Was this development inevitable? In my opinion, yes and no. Yes, because Kahler remained more strongly devoted to the expressionist generation and its life-reforming uprising than he himself realized, even in exile. At fifty years of age, Kahler was simply too old to consider the world anew. And exile only rendered the possibility of a reconciliation with bourgeois modernity more difficult. No, because it was not society, especially in the United States. And no, because Kahler, for all his radicalism, had never spoken on behalf of hatred or resentment. Indicative of this is the distance with which Kahler remained disengaged from the fascinating George. He knew himself at once with Friedrich Gundolf about the "beautiful and simultaneously threatening feeling" of having "a closed view of the world," in Gundolf's formulation of 1915. No, moreover, because Kahler's work before exile and especially in his principal work on the "German character" builds crossings more than once to the modern social sciences and histories of mentality. In exile, these crossings were neglected. Kahler's apocalyptic philosophy of history was, accordingly, not inevitable. In the isolation of exile, however, it lay close to hand.

Along this way, the dream of a humanistic revolution of the old Bildung and its renewal could hardly have learned to identify the objects, methods and institutions of Bildung. Kahler was aware that precisely these items had to be identified, and even fought for it. At this point, however, his work remains silent, and it never learned in exile what it was to constitute the new man. It is true that Kahler, if only for reasons of sheer survival, had written more in exile than in all the years before. But what was supposed to make up the new Bildung, what ways might have transmuted the endlessly growing knowledge into a key orientation, he could not say. Even in exile, Bildung remained an ethos of absolute dedication to the human. What was to comprise this humanism, no one could say. In exile, Kahler dug himself far more deeply into the trenches of his almost mystic belief in the new man of empire than seems necessary, when viewed from outside. Germany alone and no place in exile remained the battleground where this world-historical moment of the new man was to achieve its breakthrough. With the years, this faith became a matter of necessity for him, in order to see for himself at least the watermark of the coming Reich shimmering through. That is where salvation lay, at least for Kahler himself.

Notes


2. Ibid., 94.


7. Ibid., 110.

10. Ibid., 7.
12. Publisher’s prospectus, *Der Neue Merkur* 3 (1919).
17. Ernst Krieck, "Vom Sinn der Wissenschaft" (The Sense of Sciences), *Der neue Merkur* 5, 7 (1921): 510–514, 511.
19. Ibid., 21–22.