

George Lachmann Mosse
1918-1999

One of the most influential historians of his generation, George L. Mosse's work encompassed the fields of European history, and ranged from English Constitutional Law, Lutheran theology, to the history of fascism, Jewish history, and the history of masculinity. Perhaps best known for his books and articles that redefined the discussion and interpretation of fascism, the world renowned historian died in Madison on January 22, 1999 in Madison after a brief illness. He was John C. Bascom Professor of European History Emeritus and Weinstein-Bascom of Jewish Studies Emeritus and the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he taught for more than 30 years. Professor Mosse was also Koebner Professor of History Emeritus at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and taught at Iowa, Cornell, Cambridge, Amsterdam, and Tel Aviv universities. In 1966 he and Walter Laqueur founded and co-edited *The Journal of Contemporary History*. His many awards include the American Historical Association's award for Scholarly Distinction, the Leo Baeck Medal, the Goethe Medal, the Prezzolini Prize, and honorary degrees from the Hebrew University, Hebrew Union College, Lakeland College, and the University of Seigen.

Born in Berlin, Germany in September, 1918, his maternal grandfather, Rudolf Mosse, was the founder of German's preeminent newspaper concern and publisher of Berlin's most important liberal newspaper, the *Berliner Tageblatt*. His father, Hans Lachmann Mosse, commissioned the architect Erich Mendelsohn to design the famous Mosse-Haus where the *Tageblatt* was housed until the Nazis, who vilified the Mosses, closed it and forced the family to emigrate. Leaving Germany in 1933, George Mosse attended the Bootham School and Cambridge University in England. In 1939 he came to America where he graduated from Haverford College and received a Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1946.

The author of more than 25 books, George Mosse began his career as a historian of religion in early modern Europe, publishing his influential study of *The Reformation* in 1950. His *The Culture of Western Europe: the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. An Introduction* (1961) gave new definition and dynamism to the field of cultural history. Turning to modern German history in 1964, Mosse challenged conventional interpretations of Nazism and fascism in a series of innovative books including *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (1964), *Nazi Culture* (1966), *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars Through the Third Reich* (1975), and *Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism* (1977). In these works, Mosse argued that fascism was not merely brutal, oppressive, and devoid of ideas, but a European-wide mass movement capable of mobilizing large numbers of people. The success of Nazism, he contended, could not be explained by abstract concepts then in vogue such as "totalitarianism", nor by simplifications that traced Hitler's ideas to the precepts of Luther or Hegel. Instead, he traced its origins to what he called "volkisch" ideology, a semi-mystical and obscure nineteenth century organicist worldview which gained influence through the Nazi movement's potent rhetoric, powerful symbols, and mass rituals. By fusing pseudo-scientific with mystical notions of German soul and nature, the

Nazis made volkisch ideology accessible to a broadly literate public. Mosse's originality lay in his ability to connect political movements to deeply held popular and cultural stereotypes, and approach that he fruitfully applied to the history of European antisemitism. He demonstrated that antisemitism was based on an amalgam of stereotypes that depicted the Jew as the enemy of the German Volk, the embodiment of the urban, materialistic, scientific, and modern culture responsible for the corruption of the German spirit. Just as the Nazis tapped a deep vein of volkisch thought, other fascist movements drew on the "new politics" of nationalism to create the secular religions that dominated post World War I Europe. Fascism, Mosse argued, successfully mediated between people and leaders, expressing itself through rituals, ceremonies, festivals, and striking images. Not manipulation or terror, but the ability to provide millions of people with an active and meaningful sense of belonging to a community along with the ability to compromise and achieve tangible economic success, accounted for why fascist regimes, in Germany even more than in Italy, could ultimately rule by consensus rather than force.

For Mosse, culture was never simply the literary and artistic achievements of the elites. Defining culture as "a state or habit of mind which is apt to become a way of life", Mosse pioneered the study of mentalities or popular attitudes which were often inconsistent and contradictory ways of coping with reality. In recent years, he turned to the broader implications of European culture for the cataclysmic events of the twentieth century, especially World War I and the Holocaust. His 1977 study of European racism, *Toward the Final Solution*, showed that racial stereotypes were deeply rooted in the European tendency to regard humanity from an aesthetic point of view and to classify human beings according to their closeness or distance from Greek ideals of beauty. *Nationalism and Sexuality: Middle-Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe* (1985) extended these insight to encompass the broader history of the excluded and persecuted – Jews, homosexuals, Gypsies, and the insane – in European history. Nineteenth century gave academic and scholarly license to popular cultural stereotypes, defining human beings as "healthy" and "degenerate", "normal" and "abnormal", "insiders" and "outsiders". In his ground-breaking study, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (1996), Mosse traced the ways that the model of middle-class male respectability, beauty, solidity, and self-control established in the eighteenth century constantly evoked "countertypes" – images of men whose weakness, nervousness, effeminacy, degeneracy, or sexual ambiguity threatened to undermine the ideal of manhood. Much of Mosse's writing and teaching was about the complex legacy of German Jewry for post-Holocaust Jews in America and elsewhere. As he once recalled, "I remember well the shock I received when, shortly after emigration to the United States in 1939, my family was told that we could not go to our chosen vacation spot because it was 'restricted'. And when I wanted to enter the graduate school of my choice, I was told that the Jewish quota was full. I was the first Jew ever hired on the history-faculties of the two state universities where I have taught (Iowa and Wisconsin), and this was, I am sure, because I was a German Jew of a 'good family' who had gone to an excellent English public school and Cambridge University". Yet, Mosse's upbringing in a family that represented the best traditions of German-Jewish civility and cultivation attuned him to the advantages and dangers of humanistic education. His most personal book, *German Jews Beyond Judaism* (1985), describes the German-Jewish dedication to *Bildung* or

cultivation as helping to transcend a narrow group identity. But it also reveals how, during the Weimar Republic, it cultivated a collective blindness toward the harsh and illiberal political realities that engulfed enlightened Jewish families like the Mosses. His skeptical liberalism also informed his supportive but critical judgment on Zionism and the State of Israel, where since the 1960's he spent half a year each academic year teaching at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. In an essay written on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Zionism, he wrote that, whereas the early Zionists envisioned a commonwealth that was liberal and based on individualism and solidarity, in the State of Israel a "more aggressive, exclusionary and normative nationalism eventually came to the fore".

At the University of Wisconsin, George Mosse became legendary as a charismatic and inspiring teacher. In his 1992 book, *Rads: A True Story of the End of the Sixties*, Tom Bates describes how students flocked to Mosse's courses to "savor the crossfire" with his friend and rival, the Marxist historian Harvey Goldberg. In Mosse's memorable lecture, the culture of Weimar Germany met the American sixties head on. Mosse's popularity was due not only to his compelling style of his critical skepticism, laced with humor, irony and empathy. He was uniquely able to address contemporary issues with historical insight while remaining true to his own principles without deprecating the opposing view.

During the 1960s, when political divisions among students and faculty sometimes threatened to tear the university apart, Mosse was able to speak with integrity and sympathy to both sides. Mosse trained a generation of historians who now teach at distinguished universities around the world, and who still affectionately think of themselves as "Mosse students". It is a testament to his personal generosity and intellectual tolerance that his students are a remarkably diverse group, ranging from leftists to conservatives, and encompassing careers in both the academy and in public life. To the many who felt his influence, Mosse's compassion and kindness were as radiant as his erudition and his gift as a teacher. In a letter sent to him during his illness, his close friend, Professor Gerda Lerner, captured the connection between George Mosse's impact as a scholar and the inspiring force of his personality when she spoke of his "cheerful defiance of convention and stupidity".

Perhaps his generosity and devotion to his students is best illustrated by the extraordinary bequest he left the University of Wisconsin-Madison to establish the George L. Mosse Program in History. Funded by restitution of Mosse family property stolen by the Nazi regime, Professor Mosse viewed the ongoing use of the restituted funds to educate future generations to be a validation of the liberal beliefs of his family, and an "unforeseen irony of history" that allowed for some level of justice.