

## An Appreciation of George L. Mosse by Gordon Craig (1913-2005)

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**George L. Mosse**, John C. Bascom Professor of European History Emeritus at the University of Wisconsin and Koebner Professor of History Emeritus at Hebrew University, died at his home in Madison, Wisconsin, on 22 January 1999. He was eighty years old and had been a member of the American Philosophical Society since 1997. Mosse was born in September 1918 in Berlin, where his grandfather Rudolf Mosse had been a distinguished press and advertising magnate and publisher of the liberal newspaper the *Berliner Tageblatt*. He had his primary education in Berlin, but in 1928 was sent to the junior school of the famous Schule Schloß Salem, near Lake Constance, whose headmaster was Kurt Hahn, the former secretary of Germany's last imperial chancellor, Prince Max von Baden. There the emphasis was on character-building and physical toughness and discipline, plus a great deal of reading, and Mosse seems to have flourished on this regimen despite his dislike of the program's national-conservative leaning. His career there, however, was interrupted by Adolf Hitler's accession to power in 1933 and the beginning of the persecution of the Jews, as a result of which his family was forced to flee the country and lost most of its possessions.

Mosse made his way to England and was enrolled at Bootham School, a Quaker institution in York, England, and later at Cambridge University. It was at the former that his interest in the study of history was first awakened by reading the works of George Macaulay Trevelyan, while the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War during his Cambridge years first stimulated that strong liberal interest in politics that was to remain with him for the rest of his life. The outbreak of the European war interrupted his Cambridge career and led him to immigrate to the United States, where his Bootham connection helped him gain admission to Haverford College. Here he took his bachelor's degree before going on to Harvard, where he worked with Charles McIlwain and David Owen and took his Ph.D. in 1946. Two years before this, he had begun his teaching career at the State University of Iowa, where he had been brought to instruct junior army officers training for occupation duties, but he was soon made a regular member of the history department because of his extraordinary talents as a teacher, and particularly as lecturer in the Western Civilization course. In contrast to the didactic dry-as-dust manner affected by many of his colleagues, Mosse had the gift of communicating to his students both his own interest in his material and his belief in its importance, and his lectures were well structured and delivered (never read) in a clear and commanding tone that he reinforced by looking at his students rather than at his manuscript. His reputation as a speaker was reflected in the ballooning of class enrollments and also in the number of invitations he received to speak at high school commencements during his Iowa career.

In 1956 Mosse moved to the University of Wisconsin at Madison, where he played a major role in developing the university's European program, particularly on the graduate level, where a total of thirty eight students completed their doctorates under his direction. His own scholarship was, despite his heavy teaching load, remarkably prolific, and was marked by extraordinary range and analytical penetration. He was originally a student of the English Reformation, but, after producing two monographs and a short general history (*The Reformation*, 1950) that remained in print for more than thirty years, he shifted his interest to European political and cultural history shortly after coming to Madison. There can be little doubt that his own personal background dictated this choice. He once described himself to two East German scholars as "an eternal emigrant," and it was natural that he should have been driven to analyze the culture from which he had come and the forces that had compelled him to leave it. Mosse's first experiments in his new field—*The Culture of Western Europe* (1961) and *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (1965)—were not markedly different in method from conventional histories of political thought, although in the former he gave a definition of culture that foreshadowed his approach in virtually all of his later work, describing it as a way of life intimately linked to the challenges and dilemmas of contemporary society and influenced profoundly by the aspirations and dreams of significant parts of the population. In his memoirs, *Confronting History*, which appeared in 2000, after his death, Mosse wrote that the real breakthrough in putting his stamp on the analysis of cultural history came with *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from The Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich* (1977). This work dealt with the sacralization of politics, and in particular with the Nazi political liturgy and the ways in which it interacted with the hopes and dreams of the German people, and it inspired what Mosse's colleague Stanley Payne has called a whole sequence of new trends and subspecialties in modern European history. In the years that followed, Mosse's interest in rituals and imagery and what can be called the aesthetics of fascism deepened, as is demonstrated by the collection of essays entitled *Masses and Man: Nationalist and Fascist Perceptions of Reality* (1980), and he also turned his

attention increasingly to the erotic aspects of the fascist movements, with such studies as *Nationalism and Sexuality* (1985) and, particularly, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (1996). Nor were his abundant energies limited by attention to these themes. In 1990, in a brilliant study called *Fallen Soldiers*, he analyzed the psychological effects of the fearful losses that were suffered in the First World War and demonstrated the ways in which these casualties haunted the postwar generation and, instead of serving as a warning and restraint upon its passions, tended to brutalize politics and invite new bloodshed. Given Mosse's own background, the relationship between Germans and Jews was a theme to which he constantly recurred, in his teaching at Wisconsin and later at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem as well as in his writing. His interest was not a religious one, for after his childhood membership in the Berlin Reform Community's Sunday School, he was never a practicing Jew. But he recognized a special bond with his fellow Jews through the shared fate that history had assigned to them, and as a historian he felt called upon to explain the fate of the Jews in Germany and, more particularly, why it was that the more the Jews came to resemble the Germans the more they were rejected by them. This was the theme of his book *German Jews Beyond Judaism* (1985), which was based upon lectures that he gave at the Hebrew Union College at Cincinnati. In this highly personal and often deeply moving book, Mosse found the key to this tragic situation: the German Jews, to an extent that was never true of most Germans, dedicated themselves to the ideals of the Enlightenment—faith in reason, love of humanity, cosmopolitanism, belief in progress, willingness to be modern at the expense of the traditional and the orthodox—and remained faithful to them long after these ideas had been replaced in the German consciousness by romantic notions of Germanness that were based on a distortion of the cultural ideas of Johann Gottfried Herder and by an increasingly xenophobic nationalism. The results of this fatal disjuncture were dreadful in ways that almost defy description. Mosse admitted this, but insisted nevertheless, in words that explain his later description of *German Jews Beyond Judaism* as “almost a confession of faith,” that the German-Jewish dialogue did take place, and in it the Jews came to exemplify a German humanist tradition which at one time had provided the space for Germans and Jews to meet in friendship. The humanist ideals of *Bildung* and the Enlightenment lived on, even under the Nazis. Among liberals and left-wing intellectuals, the flame was kept alive from exile. . . . It was the German-Jewish *Bildungsbürgertum* which, more than any other single group, preserved Germany's better self across dictatorship, war, holocaust, and defeat. It says much for George Mosse's devotion to his profession that in 1966, when invited by Walter Laqueur to collaborate with him in founding and editing a new *Journal of Contemporary History*, he cheerfully agreed to undertake these heavy new responsibilities. The *Journal* gave a tremendous impetus to the study of European history in the twentieth century, and the publication of an article in it (there were fifteen hundred in the thirty-three years of Mosse's co-editorship) launched many a young scholar on a fruitful scholarly career. The critical advice that Mosse gave to apprentice historians in his editorial capacity was matched by the counseling that he provided, above and beyond formal teaching, for students and young colleagues at Wisconsin and at Hebrew University, and wherever he was teaching at the moment. He loved working with young people and was good at imparting to them something of his own critical method and his openness and tolerance. For this and for much else his loss will be deeply felt.

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