Central European History 41 (2008), 281–288.
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doi: 10.1017/S0008938908000344 Printed in the USA

MEMORIAL

Gerald D. Feldman (1937–2007)

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Whether it was his prodigious publication rate or the untiring help he extended to his students, the remarkable generosity he showed to colleagues or the anger he occasionally displayed over what he considered to be problematic scholarship, or merely his outsized appetite for good food, Gerry Feldman was a titanic force in the field of German history for more than forty years. His fascination with the past, love of the present, and concern for the future transformed his spacious home in the Oakland hills and his cramped office at the University of California at Berkeley into international destinations for itinerant intellectuals. His writing and his personal relations were infused with an exuberant delight in the most mundane of things and a wry appreciation of life's greatest challenges. With his passing, we have lost a great advocate of transnational scholarly relations, one of the profession's most talented economic historians, and our foremost expert on the Weimar Republic, its antecedents, and the men who dug its grave.

Feldman grew up in modest circumstances in a Jewish household in New York City. He acquired a love of opera at a young age by listening to radio broadcasts while visiting with his father in his workshop. A state scholarship helped to pay for his undergraduate education at Columbia University, where he published his first scholarly paper as a senior in 1958 on the Treaty of Versailles. From Columbia he went to Harvard University, where he studied with Franklin Ford and William L. Langer. His dissertation, which was published in 1966 as *Army, Industry, and Labor in Germany, 1914–1918*, remains a classic commentary on Wilhelmine collapse and Weimar weakness.

The book was immediately recognized for its thorough documentation of the Army's attempt to mobilize the civilian economy for military purposes, its rich portrait of a vacillating and incompetent military leadership, its innovative emphasis on interest group politics, and its skillful location of Weimar's origins in Erich von Ludendorff's military dictatorship. Especially influential has been Feldman's argument that the Army's logistical needs led it to broker a truce between capital and labor, which dealt a fatal blow to the alliance

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938908000344 Published online by Cambridge University Press

between the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie on which the *Kaiserreich* rested. Yet the new institutional arrangements that emerged between the army and the Republic on the one hand and industry and labor on the other hardly formed a reliable guarantee of stability for the fledgling Republic. On the contrary, Feldman pointed out, these hastily conceived agreements severely weakened Weimar out of the gate and forced the Majority Socialists to defend antidemocratic compromises and ill-advised economic concessions. Where Imperial Germany had promoted economic growth at the expense of democratic politics, he implied, Weimar would be forced to promote democratic institutions at the expense of economic growth.

The dissertation brought Feldman to Berkeley, where he joined an imposing faculty that included Hans Rosenberg, Wolfgang Sauer, and, for a time, Carl Schorske. The intellectual influence of Rosenberg and Sauer on the young Feldman is most readily evident in his next monograph, *Iron and Steel in the German Inflation, 1916–1923* (1977). Although it drew on his analysis of the wartime triangle from his first book, *Iron and Steel* focused more specifically on heavy industry's changing fortunes and Weimar's fragile political economy. Based on a wide range of sources, including neglected company archives, Feldman demonstrated how iron and steel magnates such as Hugo Stinnes exploited inflationary trends to improve their market share at home and abroad, adopted a strategy of vertical integration in response to economic chaos, and emerged from a period of instability stronger than before. Yet *Iron and Steel* is not a traditional work of business history or economic analysis. Rather, it offers detailed accounts of industrial lobbying and intricate profiles of individual industrialists alongside structural explanations for the inability of democratic forces to co-opt or constrain men such as Stinnes. Feldman's trenchant analysis of German institutional arrangements, with its almost Rankean emphasis on documentation and context, together with his storytelling ability, with its almost novelistic depiction of historical actors, would come to characterize his unique approach to German history.

In some ways, *Iron and Steel* can be read as preparation for Feldman's magnum opus, *The Great Disorder: Politics, Economics, and Society in the German Inflation, 1914–1924* (1993). Written over a fifteen-year period that was punctuated by personal misfortune, including a divorce, the destruction of his house in the Oakland fire of 1991, and his second wife's struggle against breast cancer, this masterpiece of political economy immediately became the definitive work on the destruction of the German mark and its disastrous consequences. Eschewing the more fashionable but narrow monetary interpretation of inflation, Feldman adopted a structural explanation for Germany's slide into chaos. This interpretive choice enabled him to fashion a complex portrait of the domestic forces that undermined Weimar's stability while embedding Germany's misfortunes in the larger story of inter-Allied competition and international financial disarray.

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Although Feldman's interest in economic analysis reinforced his transnational approach, he nevertheless insisted on the primacy of historical contingency over economists' attempts to extract a general theory of inflation from the German experience. In *The Great Disorder*, for example, he maintained that the policy of fulfillment advocated by successive Weimar governments offered a real prospect of stabilization until the autumn of 1922, when it was upended by nationalism, political incompetence, bureaucratic rivalries, and bitter ideological disputes. Nevertheless, Feldman rejected ahistorical approaches to diagnosing Weimar's economic ailments. Instead, he reminded us that the policy options available to Weimar's leaders were circumscribed by prevailing economic theory, which could not account for inflation—much less hyperinflation.

The result is a work of sprawling erudition, colorful anecdote, and deadpan humor that renders what was a most disorderly history remarkably coherent. To explain the difference between real and nominal prices, for example, Feldman recounts the popular story of a rope manufacturer who had become a billionaire by selling his rope for an ever increasing amount of paper marks. The problem was, however, that these marks were losing value so quickly that they purchased an ever-smaller amount of hemp to make the rope. In the end, he had only enough to produce one piece of rope, which he used to hang himself. Nonetheless, Feldman refused to leave this businessman hanging. Instead, he rounded on the story, pointing out that it was an urban myth, no matter how well it illustrated the logic of the hyperinflation. With characteristic enthusiasm, he then proceeded to explain the sorts of problems manufacturers actually encountered.

If *The Great Disorder* is remarkable for its depth as well as its breadth, it is no easy read. Weighing in at nearly five pounds with more than a thousand pages of double-columned and closely argued text, the book is forbidding in length. At times the empirical detail can seem excessive. Yet Feldman's thick description always served the pointillist's clarity of purpose, resolving a myriad of individual incidents together into a larger landscape of economic turmoil. It is true, too, that Feldman's reluctance to make sententious pronouncements about the arc of German history frustrated easy answers to complex questions. Upon closer examination, however, the deceptive simplicity of his prose reveals an intense engagement with modernization theory and economic hypothesis, relieved only by his sometimes mordant wit. What makes Feldman's work so engaging, moreover, is his eye for human weakness, which he used to stimulate interest in a potentially dry subject. Whether it is Colonel Max Bauer, Ludendorff's ruthless aide in *Army, Industry, and Labor*; Hugo Stinnes, the egomaniacal but shrewd industrialist in *Iron and Steel*; or Karl Helfferich, the talented financial expert and vicious antidemocrat in *The Great Disorder*, Feldman's work is studded with Dickensian descriptions of vile conspirators, corporate scalawags, and incendiary provocateurs.

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If Feldman was an imposing and prolific scholar—he wrote seven books, more than 125 articles and essays, coauthored another four books and seven articles, and coedited some seventeen essay collections—he was an equally energetic and sympathetic teacher. His undergraduate lectures were enlivened by plot twists and pointed anecdotes that only hinted at the rigorous analytical framework underlying them. His classes acted as standing invitations to engage more deeply with history, and it is no surprise that he inspired many students to go on to graduate school.

As a doctoral advisor, Feldman was a rare combination of astute intellectual guide and emotionally supportive shepherd. Despite his increasingly demanding speaking schedule and administrative commitments, he always found time to check in with and encourage his graduate students. Whether he was relating colorful anecdotes designed to support flagging spirits, such as his improbable decision to ascend a tree stand while deer hunting with Hugo Stinnes' grandson, or imparting unerring insights about academic institutions, Feldman was an attentive advisor who always dispensed advice with self-deprecating humor. But Feldman was not simply generous with his time. Not only did he open up his house to graduate students, even lending them his car when he went out of town, but he adopted a liberal attitude toward historical inquiry, enabling his students to pursue their own intellectual commitments even when they conflicted with his own. As he himself would point out, many of his students followed his example and published robust social and economic histories, while others became leading proponents of cultural and intellectual history. By the end of his life, he had trained an astonishing number of German historians, most of whom found permanent positions in the U.S. and abroad, and many of whom have made lasting contributions to the profession. Well beyond graduate school, Feldman continued to act as a friend and mentor to his students, sharing his extraordinary knowledge and ironic wit.

Nor were Feldman's professional engagement and personal kindness restricted to his own students. He was concerned to help colleagues, and extended invaluable intellectual and institutional support to countless scholars who did not study with him. Partly for this reason, he was a dynamic and talented administrator. He served on the board of key professional organizations, leaving his imprint on the Conference Group on Central European History and the German Historical Institute in particular. Closer to home, he served beginning in 1994 as director of the University of California's Center for German and European Studies. Initially established with funding from the German government as one of three "centers of excellence" in North America, the Center provided support for students and faculty on all campuses of the University of California whose research focused on Europe. When government funding elapsed in 2000, it was thanks to Feldman's prodigious efforts that the Center did not expire along with it. Having secured new funding, Feldman reorganized the Center

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along European lines and renamed it the Institute of European Studies. Thanks to his leadership, the Institute continues to provide a home for researchers throughout the University of California system and a bridge between the social sciences and humanities.

Given his generosity and tolerance, it is all the more puzzling that Feldman became embroiled in what became known as the "Abraham affair." Feldman had acted as an outside reader for Princeton University Press in 1979 on a manuscript entitled *The Collapse of the Weimar Republic* submitted by a young scholar named David Abraham. The book drew on social science theory to argue that German heavy industry had helped the Nazis take power. Despite some initial reservations, Feldman recommended the book's publication. But he withdrew his support after Henry Ashby Turner, who was writing a book on the same topic, published a scathing attack on Abraham's methods in 1983. Not only did Turner charge Abraham with committing numerous errors of translation, transcription, and attribution, but he argued that they amounted to a "systematically tendentious misconstrual" of the historical record. In response, Abraham conceded that his book contained factual inaccuracies, but maintained that they were "technical and not unusual" errors of the sort committed by every historian working in archives and in a different language. More importantly, Abraham claimed, these errors did not significantly alter the substance of the book's argument.

Feldman, however, perceived in Abraham's explanation of his mistakes a trivialization of professional standards and subjected Abraham to withering criticism. In a number of private and public letters, including an extended rebuke that appeared in the pages of this journal entitled "A Collapse in Weimar Scholarship," Feldman argued that the frequency and severity of Abraham's errors completely discredited the book and its arguments. At stake, Feldman maintained, were none other than the truth claims at the heart of historical inquiry, since Abraham's inaccuracies had called into question the methods by which historians distinguish fact from fiction.[1]

The resulting controversy evoked strong passions, splitting the historical profession along political and philosophical lines, spilling over into the mainstream media—even meriting mention in *Pravda*—and causing the American Historical Association to consider adopting a code of professional ethics. Some have argued that the dispute should be understood as but one episode in the recurrent methodological struggles between positivists and "relativists." To the extent that epistemological concerns entered into this often bitter debate at all, they were likely

[1]Gerald D. Feldman, "A Collapse in Weimar Scholarship," *Central European History* 17 (1984): 159–77; David Abraham, "A Reply to Gerald Feldman," *Central European History* 17 (1984): 178–244; Feldman, "A Response to David Abraham's 'Reply,'" *Central European History* 17 (1984): 245–67; Abraham, "On Professor Feldman's Insistence: Some Closing Remarks," *Central European History* 17 (1984): 268–90.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938908000344 Published online by Cambridge University Press

related to the linguistic turn, which had been brewing in the background for some time. After all, post-structural theories such as deconstruction and Foucault's critique of knowledge production appeared to threaten the professional historian's reliance on documentation to distinguish plausible interpretation from unsubstantiated speculation. Arguably more relevant to the "affair," however, were the Cold War and the renewed debate about Marxist historical paradigms. After all, Abraham's argument represented a sophisticated attempt to refine left-wing explanations of the relation between economy and politics and, more specifically, demonstrate that National Socialism was the political expression of German capitalism's economic needs.

Whatever the case, the controversy was poisonous. Abraham was unable to find employment as a historian, due in part to Feldman's efforts. Instead, he ended up retraining as a lawyer and now teaches at the University of Miami's law school. In contrast, Feldman continued to write historical works that helped to set the profession's research agenda. But he had become a controversial figure, shunned for a time by those colleagues who had taken offense at the vehemence of his criticisms. Whatever one thinks of the affair, it is worth remembering that Feldman assigned Peter Novick's book on the American historical profession in his graduate methodology class—precisely because of its hostile portrayal of his role—so that his students could make up their own minds.

After the "Abraham affair" and publication of *The Great Disorder*, Feldman turned his attention once again to business history. In the early 1990s, he led an international group of prominent scholars in assessing Deutsche Bank's 125-year history. The collection of essays that resulted, entitled *The Deutsche Bank, 1870–1995* (1995), was instrumental in easing scholarly access to previously closed archives. It also helped to refocus historical attention on German corporations, which have been oddly neglected despite the importance of commerce to an exporting nation such as Germany.

In his next book, *Allianz and the German Insurance Business, 1933–1945* (2001), Feldman undertook a more systematic examination of the power of the state to shape markets and the ability of economic interests to influence the state. For the first time, he brought his extraordinary grasp of Weimar's history to bear on the Nazi takeover. In crossing over from Weimar to the Third Reich, Feldman was uniquely able to assess continuities of personnel and principle yet give radical discontinuities their due. The result is a devastating account of the ability of racial prejudice to determine market conditions, of corporate collaboration with the Nazis, and of the despoliation of the Jews.

As always with Feldman's work, the book includes spellbinding sketches of historical actors, including sometime heroes such as Hans Heß, the Allianz general director who demonstrated intermittent courage against the Nazis; foolhardy adventurers such as Kurt Schmitt, the Allianz chief and Nazi Economic Minister who loved to parade in SS uniform; loathsome opportunists such as

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Eduard Hilgard, the Allianz director and scheming head of the Reich Group for Insurance; and world-historical villains such as Hermann Göring. In a particularly memorable passage, Feldman recounted a meeting a few days after *Kristallnacht* between Göring, Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels, SD-chief Reinhard Heydrich, police chief Kurt Daluege, and representatives of the insurance industry. By turns menacing and genial, Göring first silenced (a somewhat chastened) Goebbels, then convinced insurance executives to pay compensation for property that had been destroyed during the pogrom to the German state rather than to its Jewish owners. Feldman's chilling description of Göring's smiling frankness and barely contained savagery ranks among the best depictions of Nazi lawlessness in recent scholarship. But it is Feldman's frank condemnation of the insurance industry's disturbing readiness to act on anti-Jewish sentiment, even where it did not entail pleasing the Nazis or making money out of evading contractual obligations, that is most arresting. Feldman often argued that economic interest did not necessarily dictate political choice. Perhaps for this reason, he was reluctant to criticize the systemic shortcomings of capitalism. The willingness of Allianz executives to array themselves with evil may not have been determined by profit-seeking behavior or the distribution of capital. Yet Feldman's own evidence reveals that their anti-Semitic behavior was not simply a consequence of cultural prejudice.

Toward the end of his life, Feldman became increasingly interested in the financial history of the Holocaust. His research on the banking and insurance sectors led him to participate in the London Gold Conference in December 1997, which investigated gold looted by the Nazis; the Washington Conference on Holocaust Assets, which was instrumental in restoring stolen assets to a variety of victims; and the Advisory Council to the Presidential Commission on Holocaust Assets in the United States. Just before he took ill, moreover, Feldman had completed a two-volume history of the Austrian banking sector between the *Anschluss* and the German defeat in 1945 in conjunction with two Austrian scholars. Together with the Allianz book, this research transformed Feldman into a leading authority on the Nazis, the collaboration of German and Austrian corporations with Nazi racial policy, and the systematic plunder of Jewish wealth. Unfortunately, he was unable to pursue his next project, which was to analyze the pursuits of Jewish entrepreneurs in Berlin and Vienna before the Holocaust. As he explained the project, we know so much about Jewish businessmen as victims of the Nazis, but so little about them before they were eliminated.

His colleagues in the United States and Germany recognized Feldman's accomplishments, bestowing numerous prizes and awards on him. He won the Newcomen Prize for the best essay in *Business History Review*; the Prize of the Historisches Kolleg München for Accomplishments in History; the DAAD Book Prize of the German Studies Association and the Book Prize

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awarded by the Conference Group for Central European History of the American Historical Association (AHA) for *The Great Disorder*; the Financial Times/Booz-Allen & Hamilton Business-Book Award for *The Deutsche Bank, 1870–1995*; and the Hagley Prize for the Best Book in Business History for *Allianz and the German Insurance Business*. He also served on the boards of an international list of journals and research institutions, and was president of the Friends of the German Historical Institute, president of the Conference Group for Central European History of the AHA, and chairman of the European Association for Banking History. He was elected corresponding member of the Historische Kommission zu Berlin and corresponding member of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences. In 2000, he was awarded the Commander's Cross of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany.

Feldman took ill in January 2007, but his cancer went undiagnosed until April. Characteristically optimistic, he fought with great tenacity against an aggressive lymphoma. Even after a debilitating cough had effectively silenced him, a terrible itching caused by the diseased lymphocytes deprived him of sleep and peace of mind, and the highly toxic medications affected his power of concentration, he retained his ironic sense of humor. Gerry Feldman died on October 31 in Berkeley, California, at the age of 70. He is survived by his wife, Norma von Ragenfeld-Feldman, his son Aaron Joseph Feldman, and his daughter Deborah Eve Feldman.

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