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MEMORIAL

Michael H. Kater (1937–2025)

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Michael H. Kater, who passed away in November 2025, was a truly exceptional historian. In substance and style he represented the stance of a critical post-war intellectual who wrestled with the shocking legacy of Nazi Germany. With his speckled beard, informal attire, and winning smile, he projected a friendly and progressive demeanor. Due to his dual background, he developed into a hybrid Canadian-German scholar whose impressive work was inspired by a transatlantic perspective. By being an insider and outsider in both academic systems, he became a member of a group of migrant historians who established the field of contemporary German history in the English-speaking world.

Born in 1937 in the east German town of Zittau, Michael was a member of the *Kriegskind* generation whose childhood was overshadowed by Hitler's war. He subsequently grew up in the Rhenish city of Krefeld, where he attended the Ernst Moritz Arndt Gymnasium several years before I did. When he was fifteen years old, his businessman father, who had been a Nazi Party member, moved the family to Canada, where Michael finished his high school education. As a result of this emigration, Michael completed his BA and MA at the University of Toronto. But he returned to Germany for his dissertation, which he wrote at Heidelberg in 1966 under Werner Conze on the SS Aryan heritage foundation.[1] In the following year he began to teach at the newly founded York University in Toronto, Ontario, where he remained for his entire distinguished career, until his retirement in the 1990s. In 1965 he married Barbara Streit and had two daughters, enjoying by all accounts a harmonious family life.

In our early scholarship we had much contact since we shared similar topical interests and methodological approaches. While I started my research by working on the international reaction to Hitler's rise to power, Michael's pathbreaking dissertation dealt with the SS *Ahnenerbe*, Heinrich Himmler's institution that tried to prove the superiority of the Aryan race. His second book investigated the right-wing drift of German students in the Weimar Republic, many of whom embraced a dangerous ethno-nationalism already before the formal NS take-over of the universities.[2] Also adopting the quantitative turn to social history, he then published a detailed statistical study of the composition of Nazi Party, based on the Berlin Document Center's membership files, which explored the societal reasons that

[1] Michael H. Kater, *Das "Ahnenerbe" der SS: Ein Beitrag zur Kulturpolitik des Dritten Reiches* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1974).

[2] Michael H. Kater, *Studentenschaft und Rechtsradikalismus in Deutschland, 1918–1933* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1975).

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made many Germans turn into Nazi perpetrators and accomplices.[3] Michael then worked on the Nazification of the medical profession, since doctors were particularly susceptible to biopolitical reasoning in spite of their Hippocratic oath.[4] Finally, he returned to his own early experiences by taking a closer look at the popularity of the Hitler Youth.[5] With this cluster of pioneering monographs, Kater became one of the leading scholars working on the social history of the Third Reich.

Another focus of Michael's scholarship which combined his academic interest with his personal passion was a set of books on the role of music and musicians in Nazi Germany. The first of these monographs, called *Different Drummers*, dealt with jazz in the Third Reich, a musical subculture that was prohibited since it represented decadent America, although its popularity was such that the regime could not wholly suppress it.[6] A second study in the trilogy on music under National Socialism was *Twisted Muse*, which shifted to the Nazi involvement of classical musicians. While Jewish composers and performers were forbidden, some musicians openly became National Socialists and many, especially modernists, lived in an unedifying gray area in-between.[7] Based on his great archival knowledge, he then offered portraits of eight individual composers,[8] and finally he wrote a biography of the opera singer Lotte Lehmann.[9] These pioneering works were somewhat controversial since they addressed the touchy topic of collaboration with or resistance against Nazism by such problematic figures as the composer Richard Strauss or the conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler, who were beloved among music lovers, though despised by liberal critics for their cooperation with the NS regime.

The final concern of Michael Kater's work was a broader approach to cultural history by focusing on the city of Weimar as a case study of the political vulnerability of the heritage of the German classics.[10] As culmination of his NS research, Kater offered a general reading of German culture in the Third Reich, both as a Nazi attempt to create a volkish vision and as an effort by liberal modernists to resist its instrumentalization by external and internal emigration.[11] Lastly, he carried his reflections beyond the Third Reich on to an examination of the culture of West Germany after 1945.[12] These syntheses excelled in the combination of individual creativity, biographical detail, institutional background, and cultural trends that showed his mastery of blending social context with artistic form.

Taken together, these books constitute a most impressive oeuvre. With twelve monographs and well over one hundred articles, Michael Kater was a prodigious researcher and prolific writer. Among his peers he was universally acclaimed as a leading historian of the Third Reich, a pathbreaking music scholar, and a general historian of German culture. His intellectual impact was based more on this published scholarship rather than on his

[3] Michael H. Kater, *The Nazi Party: A Social Profile of Members and Leaders, 1919–1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

[4] Michael H. Kater, *Doctors Under Hitler: Professional Crisis of Medicine in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989).

[5] Michael H. Kater, *Hitler Youth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

[6] Michael H. Kater, *Different Drummers: Jazz in the Culture of Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

[7] Michael H. Kater, *The Twisted Muse: Musicians and their Music in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[8] Michael H. Kater, *Composers of the Nazi Era: Eight Portraits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[9] Michael H. Kater, *Never Sang for Hitler: The Life and Times of Lotte Lehmann: 1888–1976* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[10] Michael H. Kater, *Weimar: From Enlightenment to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

[11] Michael H. Kater, *Culture in Nazi Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

[12] Michael H. Kater, *After the Nazis: The Story of Culture in West Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023).

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mentoring of students. As a result, he received much well-deserved recognition in prizes, fellowships, visiting professorships, and honorary memberships such as his election to the Royal Society of Canada. Like other children of the war, Michael set out to expose the sins of their fathers by establishing a critical understanding of the German past. For this academic and political achievement, he will continue to be remembered in years to come.

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