

**Steven Welch / Charles Zika**

## **German History in Australian Universities: an Overview**

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The teaching and writing of German History in Australian universities reflects the more general history of the profession over the last half century. [1] Although history was a foundation discipline in Australian universities when they were established in the second half of the nineteenth century, only in the second half of the twentieth century with post World War II expansion was a history profession created within the university environment. This brought with it much greater specialisation in teaching and research, especially in the field of European, Asian, North American and Pacific history, as well as the creation of sub-disciplines such as archeology, classical history, economic history and the history of science.

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The expansion also involved a systematic approach to postgraduate training and research, and a growing emphasis on research and publication on the part of academic staff. In the mid-1950s there were seven history departments employing about 60 historians; ten years later there were ten departments with 150 staff; ten years after that, in the mid 1970s, sixteen departments numbered 320 tenured lecturing staff; and it has been estimated that together with temporary lecturers and tutors, and historians in departments of Economic History, Classics, Education, and so on, 750 historians were employed in Australian universities by the early 1970s. And student numbers in undergraduate history increased correspondingly, rising from 30.000 in 1945 to 200.000 in 1973.

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As part of the post World War II expansion of the university sector, and especially the establishment of new universities and a dramatic increase in the number of students and staff in the 1960s and 1970s, specialization in the teaching of European history followed. [2] Prior to World War II, modern European history had been taught as an extension of British History; now lectureships specifically dedicated to German History, or at least to European History on the understanding that some teaching subjects would focus on German History, began to be filled, and especially in the older universities.

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A political interest in German History had already been evident in the work of earlier teachers, such as Stephen Roberts, who held the chair of history in Sydney between 1929 and 1947; [3] but the adoption of German History was clearly assisted by the migration of refugees and displaced persons to Australia before, during and after World War II, which included a number of prominent scholars of German history and culture. [4] And with the increased resourcing of local and international scholarships at Australian universities from the 1960s, Australian students such as John Foster of the University of Melbourne and John Moses of the University of Queensland, the leading light of modern German scholarship in Australia for a generation, were able to go on to European universities to do their postgraduate studies and then return to teach in Australia. [5]

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Since the 1980s the number of historians at Australian universities has begun to decline. By 1989 the number of history staff was reduced to 451; by 1995 it was 410. [6] The current estimation is 'closer to 300'. [7] This has been complicated by the fact that in the newer Universities established after 1975, stand-alone history departments were not found: history programmes were sometimes maintained in larger humanities clusters, or a small number of historians were employed to teach history as well as other disciplines, such as sociology, religion, gender or tourism, in large multidisciplinary schools or departments.

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Moreover, the established history departments at the older universities have been reduced, and in many cases have been combined with more or less cognate disciplines, such as art history or gender studies or politics. Queensland has been cut from 27 academic staff in 1988 to 19; Macquarie from 28 to 14; Sydney from 41 to the low 20s. [8] Moreover, there has been a proliferation of 'studies areas', such as American Studies, Australian Studies, Gender Studies, Jewish Studies, and of course European Studies – sometimes in an attempt to achieve 'rationalization' and cost cutting, but often in line with a broader intellectual shift to cross- and trans-disciplinary teaching and research. As a result, although the research and teaching of German history are still primarily found in history departments or programmes, they may also be found in European Studies, in Cinema Studies, in Music, and of course in German Language and Literature or German Studies programmes. And in the case of the teaching of earlier periods of German history, the German Reformation might be located in Theology, Church History or Religious Studies.

## **Undergraduate Teaching**

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In 2002 a small number of history departments were still offering dedicated German History subjects. [9] The overwhelming concentration is on the twentieth century, and more specifically on the Nazi period, the Second World War and the Holocaust. But there is also some attention given to the postwar period and the nineteenth century. The University of Queensland offers two subjects with the titles, 'Germany from Bismarck to Hitler' (40), [10] and 'Germany from Hitler to Unification' (60); while a substantial German component is found in 'The Radical Right and Fascism in Europe' (25) and 'European Thought in the Age of Modernism' (7). Sydney University lists two subjects dedicated to German History, one on the nineteenth century and another on the twentieth century (each 25); while it also offers a subject on the Holocaust. Latrobe University offers a subject on 'Hitler and the Third Reich' (80); and also includes a component on the Berlin Olympics in a subject on the history of sport. The University of New England offers 'Germany 1888-1939' (60) and includes German materials as part of 'Europe in Turmoil and Transition, 1871-1991' (60) and 'The Experience of War, 1569-1991'. The University of Melbourne offers 'Hitler's Germany' (150) and 'The Rise and Fall of the German Empire' (50); and for the earlier period, it has 'German Society and Culture (1450-1750)' (30), and a subject taught in intensive mode on-site in Germany, 'Medieval and Renaissance Nuremberg' (20). Melbourne also teaches other subjects with a strong German History content, such as 'The Holocaust and Genocide' (80), 'Screening the Holocaust' (60), 'Total War in Europe: World War I' (120) and 'Total War in Europe:

World War II' (115), 'Witches and Witch-Hunting in European Societies' (90), and (through the United Faculty of Theology) 'The Radical Reformation' (20).

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Many other history departments teach subjects with a substantial German component. The History Department of the University of Western Australia, for instance, teaches a large first-year subject 'Hitler, the Holocaust and the Historians' (140) and 'European Fascism' (80); at Wollongong University History offers a subject entitled 'War, Dictatorship and Propaganda 1918-1945'; History at Macquarie University offers topics related to German history in 'The World since 1945', in 'European History 1789-1914', and in '20th-Century Europe'. History at the University of New South Wales offers two units on 'Twentieth-Century European History'; while at the ANU (Australian National University), History lists 'World at War 1939-1945' and 'Technology and Society, 1800-2000', the second of which includes an exploration of German attitudes to technology in Weimar and Nazi Germany.

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The ANU demonstrates how German history at Australian universities is by no means exclusively taught in History departments. At the ANU two German History subjects are taught as part of the European Studies programme: 'The German-Jewish Experience' (20) and 'German Revolutions?' (35); whereas several other subjects have substantial German components: 'The Attractions of Fascism' (30); 'The New Europe – "A Divided Germany in a Divided Europe" ' (100); 'The New Europe B – "The Process and Impact of German Unification"'. And in the School of Language Studies, subjects are offered on 'Postwar German Society' (15), on 'German Cinema' (30) and on a host of German literary subjects; whereas Art History offers a subject on 'German Expressionism' (10).

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Likewise, at the University of Western Australia, History offerings are complemented by five units with a strong historical focus taught in the European Studies programme and some of them in German. At Adelaide University, German History is also a strong component of the European Studies programme and includes subjects on 'German-speaking Jewish writers in German-speaking countries (Crusades to the present)' (20); 'German-speaking countries in 2001' (20); 'History of German film since 1920' (30); '1848 - 1945: social and cultural history'. Other subjects concern German researchers in the South Seas, German views of Australia in the nineteenth century, and a history of German song and German opera. The Politics department also teaches 'Fascism and Anti-Fascism' (50) and Germany and Austria in Europe (25). The School of International Studies at Deakin University teaches two units on the Holocaust; while the School of Liberal Arts at Newcastle University offers two modern history subjects with a strong German component: 'Fascism, War and Genocide' (40) and 'Modern European History' (70). At the University of Melbourne, the strong German History programme in the History Department is complemented by subjects offered by the German Studies programme in the School of Languages, and the Faculty of Music, with specialist subjects on 'Baroque Music of the German Speaking Lands'.

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As the above overview shows, the teaching of German history in Australian universities is strongly concentrated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Apart from the subjects listed above for History at the University of Melbourne, there are no dedicated German History subjects for the period prior to 1750. However there is some

concentrated teaching of the German Reformation in a subject at the University of Western Australia, 'Reformation Europe' (30); while German history also features in general subjects on early modern Europe offered at Macquarie, Adelaide, the University of New South Wales, and the University of New England. Some earlier German history is also represented in the teaching of late antiquity and medieval history – at Queensland, Macquarie, Sydney, Monash and Melbourne. The concentration here is on late antiquity, the Carolingian Empire, the Hohenstaufen, monastic culture in the high Middle Ages, but such topics are generally covered within broad medieval history courses.

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Whereas some undergraduate courses a decade ago focused more specifically on topics in medieval and Reformation German history, these have disappeared or at best been incorporated into more generalist European courses. The tendency is indeed similar to that for the modern period, where many departments no longer believe that subjects which focus on a single European state or culture are tenable, on grounds of restricted funding, library resources and student interest. However, unlike the modern period, for which the teaching of German history within a broader continental European field was probably only second to French history over the last three to four decades, medieval German history has lagged well behind the teaching of French and Italian (especially Renaissance) as well as English history. And the teaching of German Reformation history, despite Australia's considerable international reputation in that field, [11] has been traditionally taught more in terms of intellectual and church history, and as with early modern German history, is considerably overshadowed by the teaching of early modern French and especially British history.

## **Professional Organization, Conferences & Networks**

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There is no organisation of professional historians in Australia dedicated exclusively to the field of German History. Historians of Germany are, however, strongly represented within the Australasian Association of European Historians. The Association, founded in 1969, has held thirteen biennial conferences; the next conference is scheduled for 2003 in Brisbane. The proceedings from several of the previous conferences have been published. [12] The most recent conference in Auckland focused specifically on modern German history and several of the papers from this conference have been published in a special edition of the 'Australian Journal of Politics and History'. [13]

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Historians of the earlier period were represented by the Australasian Historians of Medieval and Early Modern Europe, which held regular biennial conferences from 1971. In 1996 they combined with an association of mainly literature and language scholars to form the multi-disciplinary Australian and New Zealand Association of Medieval and Early Modern Studies, partly in response to a gradual decline in numbers. Such conferences help galvanize research and collaboration, and also provide funding to bring scholars of earlier European (including German) history to Australia on a regular basis.

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Through research grants from the Australian Research Council, from individual universities and from foundations, academic staff from Australian universities is able to

carry out research projects in Germany. Connections to colleagues and institutions in Germany are developed and cultivated as a result of these contacts. Three Australian universities – University of Queensland, University of New South Wales, and the University of Melbourne – and the University of Freiburg in Germany are members of the international consortium Universitas 21. [14] Plans are being developed for staff and postgraduate exchanges between the Australian partners and the University of Freiburg.

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Themes and topics of contemporary German history are given substantial attention in the research programs, seminar series and conferences run by the three key European centres in Australia. The Contemporary Europe Research Centre (CERC) at the University of Melbourne sponsors several thematic conferences each year and these invariably include German topics and guest academics from Germany. [15] The recently created National Europe Centre in Canberra has as its central focus Australia-European Union relations; this naturally entails considerable attention to Germany's pivotal role in the EU and to contemporary German history. [16] Professor John Millful's Centre for European Studies at the University of New South Wales in Sydney has been especially active in the field of modern German history. [17] Through conferences, seminars and lectures featuring visiting German scholars, the Sydney Centre has been a major promoter of the study of twentieth-century German history.

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Visiting scholars programs at various universities also facilitate regular contact between Germany and Australia. The Deutsche Forschungsgesellschaft and the Goethe Institut have been instrumental in helping to finance these exchanges. Postgraduate research in Germany has been aided by fellowships from the Deutsche Akademische Austauschdienst, while the Humboldt Stiftung has financed advanced research for academic staff.

## **Research**

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Postgraduate research in German history is confined primarily to the larger institutions (University of Queensland, University of Melbourne, University of New South Wales, University of Sydney, University of Adelaide and University of Western Australia). Based on our survey results, the overwhelming majority – about 75% – of postgraduate research focuses on topics in the field of modern German history (replicating, not surprisingly, the heavy concentration on this period in the undergraduate curriculum). Within the modern period twentieth-century topics predominate.

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Among the current topics being researched are the following: Otloh of Emmeram , Hildegard of Bingen, the grotesque body in sixteenth-century German visual culture, saints and devils in the German Reformation, the reception of Ficino's work in Germany to 1550, German colonialism in Southwest Africa, the Transsylvanian Germans, 'Sippenhaft' in the Third Reich, women and military service in Nazi Germany, German women's survival strategies in 1945, German-Jewish emigration to Australia, National Socialist activity in Australia, the German minority in Yugoslavia in World War II, Peter Handke and the Serbian issue, and the foreign policy of the Greens.

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A significant hindrance to postgraduate research in the field is the relative dearth of German language skills among Australian university students. The absence of language requirements at Australian universities means that very few students acquire the basic proficiency necessary for advanced research. A shortage of funding for conducting archival and library research in Germany also makes it difficult to increase postgraduate numbers in German history.

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The major research focus for academic staff is nineteenth- and twentieth-century German history. Nearly 70% of the current research topics reported by our survey respondents are in this area. Medieval topics constitute about 13% and early modern topics about 17% of the total. Among the current topics or areas being researched are the following: Graeco-Roman rhetoric in German lands during the medieval and Renaissance periods; twelfth-century German monastic and intellectual history; music at the Dresden court 1700-1750; Argula von Gumbach and the Reformation; visual images of witchcraft; Shylock on the German stage 1870-1945; history of the German labour movement; 1936 Olympics; 'Heimat'; German deserters in World War Two; the crime of 'Wehrkraftzersetzung'; the Churches and resistance movements in Nazi Germany; Holocaust; post-1945 intellectual history; and Catholic student associations in Cologne and Halle 1950s-70s.

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Historians of Germany in Australia are quite cognisant of the historiographical debates generated by their colleagues in Germany and elsewhere. From the Fischer debate of the 1960s and 1970s and the 'Historikerstreit' of the late 1980s through the Goldhagen controversy, the debate surrounding the recent exhibition 'War of Extermination: The Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941-1944' and the contested establishment of a Holocaust memorial in Berlin, the key controversies have been taken up and incorporated into teaching and research agendas. It seems likely that increased internet access has made it easier over the past decade for Australian historians in the field to keep abreast of the concerns and the 'hot topics' of the moment, and international lists such as H-German and others have undoubtedly facilitated communication with overseas colleagues in the field and more rapid reception of current topics of interest. When it comes to issues and debates related to the institutional setting of tertiary history teaching at German universities, such as the 'Hochschulrahmengesetz', our suspicion is that these have sparked little interest here in Australia.

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Within the field of German history in Australia there has been no complement to the 'Historikerstreit' of the late 1980s. In the 1990s two issues which were directly related to the field of German history did generate public attention and controversy. The first involved attempts to try alleged World War Two war criminals living in Australia. Historians played an important role in the general political and social debate about the desirability and purpose of such trials, and in providing historical information about the nature and extent of wartime atrocities.

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The second was the so-called Demidenko affair which centred on a prize-winning novel, purportedly based on historical fact, which presented an account of the Holocaust from a Ukrainian perspective. [18] The anti-Semitic nature of the book's content, its historical

inaccuracies and later revelations that the author had fabricated her own family background and name (she was of British not Ukrainian background and was named Darville not Demidenko) caused a public scandal. Historians, as well as scholars from other disciplines, contributed significantly to the public debate about the novel and in the process brought into the public arena some of the results of recent scholarly research on the Holocaust and its perpetrators.

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As both of these examples indicate, issues related to Nazism and the Holocaust continue to attract significant public interest. Without a doubt, the Third Reich is the historical period which dominates public perceptions about German history, draws the largest number of students at undergraduate level in the universities and attracts the lion's share of research attention among postgraduates and academic historians.

## **The Future?**

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The respondents to our survey offered a variety of perspectives in answer to the question: what are your views about the future of German history at Australian universities?

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"Probably even bleaker than the future of history in general or physics. One problem will be the incorporation of Germany into the EU. Germany is disappearing from sight, and memory of and interest in twentieth-century German activities may be difficult to sustain."

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"Under the present regime we will be lucky to maintain 'history' as a subject! The present Vice Chancellor considers history (and told a newspaper that it is) a 'luxury' subject! No attraction!... Universities should be teaching German language and German history courses! But it will not happen under this present system... Tertiary education has been commodified into dollars and cents!"

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"[The future looks] good: Nazis always a popular topic, but beyond that?"

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"There seems to be a continuing interest in modern German history, especially in relation to the Nazi period. However, the demise of language study, especially German, is a threat to serious postgraduate research."

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"[German history] will survive because it is such a mainstream aspect of European history, which is very popular."

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"Given the intense interest in twentieth-century Germany, I think the future of German history is pretty rosy."

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"Thanks to Hitler even our language students in the Business German stream and the translation classes ask for 'historical' digressions."

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"[German history will become] part of European and/or thematic history units. No single European state or culture has the drawing power at present to form the basis of a stand-alone unit."

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"The future is probably nil in departments of German or their equivalent, for, as their staff numbers fall rapidly, ever more 'options' are deleted from course offerings and we revert to the old-style lecture because of student numbers."

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There seem to be three discernible trends. First, at a number of institutions, especially smaller or regional universities, German History has already disappeared or appears likely to disappear from the curriculum. Second, at some other institutions it is gradually being absorbed into broader European History or European Studies programmes; one can speculate that as a result its profile is bound to diminish in this context. Third, at several of the larger universities the future looks brighter; new appointments in German History at Sydney and Monash provide some grounds for optimism, as do continued high enrolments in German history subjects at several other universities.

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As many of our colleagues emphasised in their survey responses there are several major difficulties facing the field. The lack of adequate language training reduces the number of students capable of carrying out significant postgraduate research, and this carries with it disturbing prospects for the future staffing in the field. Staff reductions, such as those outlined in the first part of this article, continue to be a major concern. As Arts Faculties shed staff in order to balance their budgets, the field of German history is under threat at a number of institutions. Reductions in library budgets and the rising cost of serials and books mean that maintaining adequate collections becomes increasingly difficult. This in turn is related to the general crisis in university funding, a crisis likely to be exacerbated rather than resolved by the current conservative Australian government.

## Notes

[1] For the following see: Stuart Macintyre: History, in: Challenges for the Social Sciences and Australia, vol. 1, prepared by the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, Canberra 1998, 129-40; Stuart Macintyre: History in a New Country: Australians Debate their Past (unpublished paper); Geoffrey Serle: The State of the Profession in Australia, in: Australia Historical Studies 15 (1973), 686-702; Brian Crozier: History and the Community: 3. The Historical Community; or, Seeing the Whole Elephant, in: Australian Historical Association Bulletin 59-60 (1989), 53-54.

[2] For the below, see John Moses: The Doing of Modern European History in Australasia, in: Australian Journal of Politics and History supplementary edition (1988), (3)-20.

[3] Stephen Roberts: *The House that Hitler Built*, London 1937, which was later translated into Czech, Dutch, Swedish, Danish and German. See *Moses: The Doing of Modern European History*, 5-7.

[4] *Moses: The Doing of Modern European History*, 7-8, names Ernest Bramsted, Eugene Kamenka, George Kertesz, and for New Zealand, Peter Munz and Carl Popper.

[5] For John Foster, who went to Tübingen and Swansea, see Mark Baker (ed.): *History on the edge: essays in memory of John Foster (1944-1994)*, Parkville, Victoria: Department of History, University of Melbourne 1997. 1-6 (Introduction), 318-28 (Appendix: Eulogies); for John Moses, who went to Munich and Erlangen, see Andrew Bonnell, Gregory Munro / Martin Travers (eds.): *Power, conscience and opposition: essays in German history in honour of John A. Moses*, New York 1996. x-xiv (Preface).

[6] Crozier: *History and the Community*; Norman Etherington, Tom Stannage, and Julie Londey: *So you want to study...History*, Canberra 1995.

[7] Macintyre: *History in a New Country*.

[8] Macintyre: *History*, 131.

[9] The following information relies on responses to a questionnaire circulated in 2002 to 83 university staff in Australian universities, which resulted in 35 replies. Though the results are by no means comprehensive, they are strongly indicative of trends in the research and teaching of German history in Australia.

[10] Where numbers in brackets appear after the titles of subjects, this represents the average student enrolment in these subjects as claimed in answers to the questionnaire.

[11] The reference is to the high international regard for the work of two Australian leaders in the fields of German Reformation and Early Modern German History: Bob Scribner (1941-1998), of Cambridge and later Harvard, a graduate of Sydney University; and Lyndal Roper, of London and more recently Oxford, a graduate of the University of Melbourne.

[12] For example, John Perkins / Jürgen Tampke (eds.): *Europe: Retrospects and Prospects: Proceedings of the 1995 Biennial Conference of the Australasian Association of European Historians*, Manly East, NSW 1996. Peter Monteath / Fredric Scott Zuckerman (eds.): *Modern Europe: Histories and Identities: Proceedings of the Eleventh Biennial Conference of the Australasian Association of European Historians*, Unley, SA 1998. Franz Oswald / Maureen Perkins (eds.): *Europe - divided or united?: Proceedings of the twelfth biennial conference of the Australasian Association for European History*, Canberra 2000.

[13] Christian Leitz (ed.): *Writing Europe's Pasts: Germany's Twentieth Century*, Special Issue of the *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 48 (2002).

[14] See the Universitas 21 website for more information on this consortium.  
<http://www.universitas.edu.au/introduction.html>

[15] Contemporary Europe Research Centre website at <http://www.cerc.unimelb.edu.au/>

[16] National Europe Centre website at <http://www.anu.edu.au/NEC/homenec.html>

[17] Centre for European Studies website at <http://www.arts.unsw.edu.au/ces/>

[18] Stephen Wheatcroft (ed.): Genocide, History and Fictions: Historians Respond to Helen Demidenko/Darville's *The Hand That Signed the Paper*, Melbourne University History Conference Series, Parkville, Victoria 1997. Robert Manne, *The Culture of Forgetting: Helen Demidenko and the Holocaust*, Melbourne 1996. For a brief account of the affair in German, see Darren O'Brien / Richard Tidyman: *Der Hohe Preis der Dichtung*, in: *Jahrbuch für Antisemitismusforschung* 5 (1996), 233-41.

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