

Fritz R. Stern

Fritz R. Stern is a German-American historian of German history, Jewish history, and historiography. He is a University Professor Emeritus and a former provost at New York's Columbia University. His work focuses on the complex relationships between Germans and Jews in the 19th and 20th centuries and on the rise of National Socialism in Germany during the first half of the 20th century.

Stern was born in 1926 in Breslau, Silesia, to a locally prominent medical family of Jewish heritage. His father, Rudolf Stern, was a physician, medical researcher and a veteran of the First World War. His mother, Käthe Brieger Stern, was a noted theorist, practitioner, and reformer in the field of education for young children. Through family, friends, and colleagues, they were connected with some of Europe's (and later America's) leading scientific and cultural figures.

The family had converted from Judaism to Lutheran Protestant Christianity at the end of the 19th century, while sharing the increasingly secular worldview frequently found among Germany's educated classes. Stern was baptized shortly after his birth and named after his godfather, Nobel Prize winner Fritz Haber (also a Christian convert from Judaism). Nonetheless, the family emigrated to the United States in 1938, forced to leave by the virulently anti-Jewish policies of Adolf Hitler's National Socialist government and the increasing violence against all Germans of Jewish ancestry.

The Sterns settled in New York City, in the Jackson Heights section of the borough of Queens. There, Stern spent the remainder of his childhood, attended public school and quickly learned English while his parents reestablished their respective careers. He then attended Columbia University where he received his bachelors, masters, and PhD. From 1953 to 1997, he served as a professor at Columbia, obtaining the eminent Seth Low chair before attaining the rank of University Professor. Stern also briefly served as provost of the university. He is recognized in the United States and in Germany as an eminent historian.

The focus of much of Stern's work is attempting to track the development of the rise of National Socialism in Germany and its characteristics. Stern has traced the origins of Nazism back to the 19th century *völkische* movement. In Stern's opinion, the virulently anti-Semitic *völkische* movement was the result of the "politics of cultural despair" experienced by German intellectuals who were unable to come to grips with modernity. However, Stern rejects the *Sonderweg* interpretation of German history. In his view, the ideas of the *völkische* movement were merely a "dark undercurrent" in 19th century German society. In the 1990s, Stern was a leading critic of the American political scientist Daniel Goldhagen, whose book *Hitler's Willing Executioners* Stern denounced as unscholarly and full of Germanophobia. Another major area of research for Stern has been the history of the Jewish community in Germany and how the Jewish culture influenced German culture and vice-versa. In Stern's view, this interaction produced what Stern has

often called the "Jewish-German symbiosis". In Stern's view, the best example of the "Jewish-German symbiosis" was Albert Einstein.