

**Obituary: Professor Dr DLitt (h.c.) Wolfgang J. Mommsen**  
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In a 1971 collection *Die Großen in Weltgeschichte* Wolfgang J. Mommsen used the title 'A liberal in despair' for his article on Max Weber. This well describes the intellectual centre around which turned the historian Mommsen's massive scientific achievement, his dedication to the Max Weber Gesamtausgabe edition, and his spontaneous political interventions. 'In despair' was how Mommsen analysed the profound structural change undergone by the liberal and elite-educated middle-class citizenry in the mass society of industrial capitalism and democratic pluralism. In Max Weber Mommsen had chosen a durable and challenging explorer and interpreter of the uncharted territory of modern political conflict and its historical origins. His path-breaking dissertation appeared in English translation (*Max Weber and German Politics, 1890-1920*, University of Chicago Press) in 1984 at a time when Weber's international reputation had reached a high point. It is difficult to imagine that the first German edition of *Max Weber und die deutsche Politik* was written in an atmosphere where it was only with difficulty that a way had to be opened up for an intellectual debate with Weber. Mommsen also examined most critically the 'decisionist' theory of modern domination and what it could mean for democracy in Germany after the Second World War. Weber showed him how to place national-historical questions in a universal-historical perspective. The second, and significantly enlarged, 1974 edition of his Weber book profited from this and from new sources; the English translation was based on this second edition. Mommsen gave a very influential lecture on 'Max Weber's idea of universal history' at the International Historians' Conference of 1985. Mommsen saw in Weber the most attractive and unrivalled capacity to analyse the ideal and material driving forces of world-historical change. This led him to an ever new and lifetime's fascination with Max Weber.

In selecting his own historical themes Wolfgang J. Mommsen preferred to adopt Weber's viewpoint, though less so his critical conceptual methods. He did not wish to give up the narrative element of history