

BEDŘICH LOEWENSTEIN, THE EUROPEAN CENTRAL EUROPEAN

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In his contribution, Miloš Havelka delineates the key features of the historical thinking of Bedřich Loewenstein (1929-2017). He characterizes the Prague historian, who taught at Freie Universität Berlin from 1979, as an exceptional thinker and humanist in the best sense of the word. Although Loewenstein's engagement with the deep breaks of European civilization was motivated by the experiences of a Central European intellectual who had suffered the consequences of these disruptions in the most distressing fashion himself, it would extend far beyond this personal dimension. His work was dedicated to European modernity and the forces that questioned and attacked it, and in doing so, he began following different paths than the majority of Czech historians early on. Loewenstein chose unpopular topics (for example in the 1960s with a study on Bismarck) and avenues outside of traditional political and national history. Already in his early career, he was working interdisciplinarily and always seeking an anthropological approach to history. His aim was to explore the emotional disposition of individuals and understand their actions in their concrete cultural and historical contexts. This shaped his view of phenomena like nationalism or fascism – and in more general terms, of rule and violence – whose roots and structures he worked to comprehend. Loewenstein was sceptical of great theories, and Havelka portrays him as an opponent of essentialist notions and advocate of a fundamental openness of history. Finally, Havelka emphasizes Loewenstein's Europeanness – his hope for trust, reason and tolerance as principles by way of which humans could reach agreement and states could integrate.