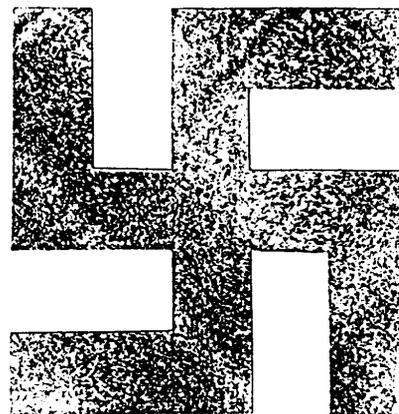


THE NATURE OF NAZI IDEOLOGY

ROBERT THOMAS



There have been various attempts to explain the National Socialist episode in German history. Crude Marxist interpretations have seen Fascism and National Socialism as symptoms of a capitalist society overcome by its own contradictions. It was, the Marxists said, a last ditch attempt to save the capitalist system through authoritarianism. Others have sought to combine Marxist theory with psychoanalysis. The proponents of such theories were prominent in the German Frankfurt school and included most notably Adorno and Wilhelm Reich. In simple terms their theories saw Fascism as a product of middle class collective psychology brought on by the oppressions of capitalism and sexual repression.

Other non-Marxist historians have likewise seen National Socialism as personality/psychology based. In such explanations the personal psychosis of the National Socialist leadership is tolerated by the German people as a consequence of the economic circumstances which arose in Germany after the first world war. (An example of this personality based work can be found in *The Face of the Third Reich* by Joachim Fest.¹)

In recent years writers of the 'New Right' have stressed the socialist aspects of Fascism. Its statism and collectivism are emphasised. (The collectivism of National Socialism differing only from that of International Socialism in that its legitimising higher purpose was based on race rather than class.) Paul Johnson² describes Fascism as a "Marxist heresy" born out of a synthesis of Marxist doctrine with the nationalist impulses mobilised by the first world war.

Whilst this 'New Right' theory is right to suggest links between the Fascist and Communist ideological doctrines it wrong in seeing Fascism as being a deviant branch of Marxism. Fascism draws instead upon an older tradition of anti-rational millenarian paternalism. This tradition developed in nineteenth and early twentieth century Germany until it permeated German philosophy, literature and art, forming a nexus of anti-reason.

It must, however, be asked whether this millenarian paternalism was a purely German ideology or whether the same ideas and potentialities existed in countries where Fascism did not triumph, such as Britain. The failure of Fascism in Britain has often been attributed to the existence of an individualistic and anti-authoritarian tradition

which did not exist in Germany. If similar ideologies did exist it may have been that had Britain suffered defeat in the First World War a similar march to totalitarianism may have been set in motion.

One Race and One Nation

The Enlightenment saw nationalism as a positive force. It represented the integration of the masses into the political "nation". There would be an equality of nations as there was an equality of individuals. From the time of the French Revolution onwards, however, a contradiction appeared between the individualistic aspirations of nationalism and its collectivist reality.

In Germany in the nineteenth century there emerged an intellectual nationalism based on the idea of the racial superiority of the organically unified German people (Volk). The state (Reich) represented the political expression of the union of land and people. This ideology was anti-parliamentary (representative parties disrupted the unity of the volk) and anti-capitalist (capitalism and modernity were antipathetic to the natural state of the volk). The state attained its highest state of virtue by war and the shedding of blood. To these ideologists the Jews represented all that was alien, rootless and opposed to the aristocratic and spiritual vision of nationhood. It was a scarcely altered volkish ideology which provided the basis of National Socialism. Crucially, however, the social change precipitated by the First World War nullified the aristocratic element of this volkish formula. The National Socialists coped with this ideological change in two ways. Firstly amongst the North German Strasserites the "Red" element of National Socialism was stressed, with emphasis being on the fact that the Volk was not a union of peasants ruled by aristocrats but a revolutionary union of German racial equality. Secondly the Nazis compensated for the destruction of the old aristocracy by the creation of a new aristocracy of blood. The epitome of this new aristocracy was to be found in the organisation of the SS.

This message had its first major nineteenth century proponent in Johann Fichte who made his *Addresses to the German Nation* from the University of Berlin in 1807. Fichte told the Germans that they alone, in contrast to the decadent French and Jews, had the ability to create a new age of spiritual regeneration.³

When it was first made this represented a message of hope to a defeated people but with the increasing power of the unified Germany as the nineteenth century progressed it came to be an ideology of success and strength. This belief system was given a scientific basis in the mid-nineteenth century by the crude adaption of social Darwinism (the intellectual development of racial Darwinism reached its apogee in 1899 with the publication of Haeckel's *The Riddle of the Universe*.⁴)

The lauding of the "volkish" German tradition was a project which could involve non-Germans who saw in the Teuton a generalised expression of the superiority of the Aryan race. One such non-German was the mystically inclined French diplomat Arthur de Gobineau who between 1853-1855 wrote his *Essay on the Inequality of Human Races*. Gobineau's work sought the origins of Aryan superiority in bizarrely atavistic mysticism and anti-modernity. (The

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Aryan self, he believed, was hindered by Christian values, and whilst serving as ambassador to Sweden he toyed with the idea of reviving a neo-pagan cult religion.) These ideas were readily received in Germany and Gobineau societies sprang up dedicated to propagating his vision of racial history.⁵

Other German volkish authors could not bring themselves to abandon Christianity so lightly. Paul de Lagarde (writing in *Deutsche Schriften* from 1873 onwards) urged the adaptation of Christianity to the Germanic character whilst effecting a programme for the destruction of urbanism, capitalism and money. Despising what he regarded as unnatural political creeds he declared: "Let us not be liberal but liberated, not conservative but German." Above all, however, Lagarde detested the Jews, whom he equated with the hated powers of Capitalism.⁶ This totalitarian formula was reinforced by Heinrich von Treitschke (professor of history at the University of Berlin from 1874-1896) who declared his opposition to liberal values and mercantile trade whilst singing the praises of the authoritarian power of the state and the spiritual liberation of war and violence.⁷

This backward looking mode of thought grew up at the time when capitalism was turning Germany into a major European power. The German intelligentsia were, however, increasingly engaged in a flight from reality into the strange comforts of fantasy and myth. The German liberal poet Heinrich Heine was moved to declare:

They conjure up the demonic powers of the ancient Germanic pantheon and because that lust to fight comes alive in them ... a spectacle will be performed in Germany compared with which the French Revolution may look like an innocent idyll.⁸

Racial Nationalism in the Twentieth Century

The work of Houston Stewart Chamberlain bridges the gap between the intellectual racism of the nineteenth century and the twentieth century reality of National Socialism. He had met and been influenced by the aging Gobineau, he became a close friend of Kaiser Wilhelm II, and on his death bed he was visited by Hitler, whom Chamberlain had earlier declared to be the "German Messiah". Chamberlain, a passionately pro-German Englishman who had married one of Wagner's daughters, was of uncertain mental stability and whilst allegedly possessed by a demon he wrote *The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century* which was published in 1899. This book attempted to explain German power not by reference to modern political conditions but by a retelling of ancient history using racial theory as the key. The book came to be regarded as a primary ideological text for the National Socialists. The defeat of the Germans in the First World War shattered Chamberlain's dreams of German dominance of Europe based on collective superiority. His faith, however, was restored on meeting Hitler in 1923.⁹

The German defeat forced many Germans to rethink their world view. For many, however, this meant a reassertion of national collectivism rather than a coming to terms with the individualism of the Weimer constitution. Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West* had been written in 1911 but achieved popularity on publication in 1918 in post-war Germany. It contrasted Western civilisation (individualism, urbanism, capitalism) with German culture (collectivism, spirituality, militarism). In order for German culture to be defended Spengler argued the nation needed to be united under an authoritarian dictator. Whilst Spengler's aristocratic Prussianism was at odds with the plebian nature of the National Socialist party much of his work provided intellectual scaffolding for the structures Hitler was to create. Similarly the writer Moeller van den Bruck, who was not anti-semitic and believed Hitler to be unsuitable to run Germany, nevertheless provided considerable ideological input to the National Socialist Movement. Bruck believed that liberalism and freedom were a symptom of cultural chaos. The role of good government was to restore authority and stability, which could only be achieved by the implementation of a new political order which Bruck christened "The Third Reich".¹⁰

As in the nineteenth century Darwinism had been harnessed to the volkish cause so in the twentieth century the new science of psychology was used to give credence to the National Socialist cause. The Nazis found the ideas of Carl Jung, who talked of the collective or racial unconscious particularly amenable in this respect. Jung him-

self talked of how he sometimes found it impossible to analyse German patients, so permeated were their minds with Judeo-Christian morality. He talked of how he dreamed that a Germanic "Wotan" figure would arise to set the Teutonic spirit free. In a similar vein Ludwig Klages wrote his psychological study *The Intellect as the Antagonist of the Soul* (1932) in which he stated that a heroic Germanic Siegfried was needed to set the soul of the volk free from the powers of (Jewish) rationalism.¹¹

By the 1930's there was a solid bedrock of anti-individualist racial collectivism on which political circumstance allowed National Socialism to be built. Hitler and the other Nazi leaders did not to indulge in any act of independent creative thought in order to arm their movement with ideas. Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and Alfred Rosenberg's *The Myth of The Twentieth Century* were simply rambling reiterations of that which had been said many times before.

Back to Nature

While these traditions were developing in German academic and philosophical circles similar sentiments were being conveyed to a wider audience by popular literature. In German nineteenth century novels the peasant or rural artisan, spiritually rooted to the German soil, is glorified. By contrast the Jew is represented as spiritually shallow and rootless. The most famous examples of this genre are *Debit and Credit* by Gustav Freytag (1855) and Wilhelm Raabe's *Poor Pastor* (1862). The racism of these novels can be identified with the anti-capitalist volkish ideology. It can be argued that the Jew, as an alien disrupter of the volk, represented capitalism and the Jewish ghetto, which featured in many of the novels, represented the worst aspects of urbanism. The idea of an all pervading Jewish conspiracy can be seen as a symbol of the inescapable nature of capitalist progress from which the collectivist fantasies of volkish back to nature ideology were an attempt to escape.

Despite their racism, however, behind many of the nineteenth century novels was the idea that it was possible for Jews to be integrated into the German volk. In the twentieth century a hardening of racial attitudes is reflected in a body of literature which rejected any idea of Jewish assimilation and warned readers of the perils of miscegenation. Such racialism can be found in Nathaniel Junger's *Volk in Danger* (1921) and Arthur Dinter's *Sin Against Blood* (1918).¹² A whole genre of "Peasant" novels arose which glorified German rural life and advocated anti-semitism. It is no accident that one of the leading "Peasant" writers of the 1920's was Dieter Eckhart who was also one of the founding members of the National Socialist party.¹³

The musical work of Richard Wagner was also thoroughly permeated by volkish ideology. One of the great themes of the Ring cycle is how German heroes (the unified volk) can be corrupted by the power of gold (capitalism). Like other German artists Wagner had no qualms about equating materialism and the acquisition of wealth with the Jews. Wagner said of himself: "Perhaps I will be the last German to remain upright ... in face of an all powerful Judaism."¹⁴

In 1913 a pyramid structure was erected to commemorate the Prussian triumph over Napoleon in the "Great Battle of Peoples". Its structure was explained as representing the Nation - a concept which could not be portrayed by realism or rationality. The Germans saw the ideas of the volk confirmed to them at every level of art and philosophy.¹⁵

The Lords of Unreason

The volkish irrationality on which National Socialism was based found its epitome in the occult societies which flourished in nineteenth and early twentieth century Germany. The late nineteenth century in Germany witnessed an upsurge in occult activity. This activity took the form of a fusion of German volkish neo-pagan romanticism and the doctrine of Theosophy.

The ideas of Theosophy were not native to Germany, being an Anglo-American import based on the writings of Helena Blavatsky, principally *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888). These works postulated a prehistoric past ruled by an elite of mystic initiates and inhabited by a succession of superior races. Accord-

ing to Blavatsky the latest of these superior races was the Aryans. Such ideas found a ready audience among German volkish scholars. Much of Blavatsky's work, especially in *Isis Unveiled*, yearns for a mystic, natural Golden Age and is a diatribe against modernity and capitalism.

A key figure in this synthesis of ideas (known as Ariosophy) was Guido Von List. List started his career as a volkish novelist. His ideas, however, became steadily more orientated towards the supernatural until he (in the tradition of Blavatsky) had created a fantastic German prehistory where the land was dominated by a secret priesthood. According to List this priesthood's secret wisdom had survived Christian persecution by means of secret societies and cryptic signs (one such sign being the swastika). In 1908 the List society was founded as a conscious attempt to establish a neo-pagan cult. When the first world war broke out List welcomed it as an opportunity for the Germans to sweep away the decadent west. Shortly after the war List died, but his ideas were carried forward by other mystic writers.

One of List's Austrian disciples was Jorg Lanz von Liebenfels. Liebenfels mixed occult ideas with crude racial Darwinism in what was known as Theo-zoology. Lanz in his early career was an acknowledged expert on early Jewish religious texts and his Darwinist racial ideas were treated with some seriousness (they were published in Ernst Haekkel's *Monist Journal of Racial Science*). By 1908 Lanz was increasingly involved with volkish and supernatural ideas. He founded his own occult "order of the New Templars" dedicated to preserving the purity of the Aryan Race, which used the swastika as its symbol. The order's journal *Ostara* sold 100,000 copies in 1907. There is reliable evidence that one of its readers was Adolf Hitler.

Within Germany itself the many anti-semitic and volkish organisations achieved a degree of unity in 1912 when two groups were formed, the Reichhammersbund and Germanenorden. Both were organised along Masonic and Listian lines and neither was very successful. The Reichhammersbund quickly foundered and under the strains of the First World War the Germanenorden split into the "Loyalist German Order" and the "German Order Walvater".

In 1916 Rudolf von Sebendorf joined the Walvater branch and was charged with reviving the fortunes of the Bavarian section of the order. He renamed the order the "Thule society" (Thule being a lost continent from German Mythology) and made its symbol the swastika, oak leaves and the sword. In 1918 the Thule decided to extend their ideas beyond their own esoteric circle. To achieve this Anton Drexler and Karl Harrer founded a workers circle as an adjunct to the Thule, named the German Labour Party and later renamed the National Socialist German Workers Party. Many early Nazis were also Thule members, including Drexler and Harrer, Rudolf Hess, Alfred Rosenberg and Dieter Eckhart.¹⁶

In *Mein Kampf* Hitler spoke contemptuously about "volkish wandering scholars" and on coming to power he acted to ban many occult societies. While he may have eschewed neo-paganism Hitler does, however, seem to have contemplated a personal cult in which the Bible would be replaced by *Mein Kampf*, the cross by the swastika and a sword would rest on the church altar. Himmler was in many ways sympathetic (to a far greater degree than Hitler) to Listian currents of thought and, under the influence of Karl Maria Wiligut, an occultist allegedly able to communicate with the Teutonic ancestors, he organised the SS along lines which would have been easily in tune with List's priesthood of the blood and Lanz's chivalrous Knights of racial purity.¹⁷

The Nazi Paradox

The irony of the National Socialist glorification of the volkish principles of the peasant and the countryside was that none of the National Socialist leadership came from such a social background. Furthermore the very rootedness and stability of provincial life militated against the popularity of the National Socialist activist creed. As an anti-capitalist cause National Socialism was initially based amongst the urban disaffected. In *The Myth of the Twentieth Century* Rosenberg wrote that National Socialism would create the new concept of the mobilised activist peasant, but ultimately the National

Socialists could not resolve the contradictions inherent in an ideology based on the irrational.

The Liberal Death Wish

The store of ideas that the National Socialists drew upon came from a common German tradition. Indeed volkish ideas can be found amongst the liberal intellectuals of the Weimar Republic. One of the reasons that liberalism failed to combat the Nazis may have been that in contrast to the Nazi will to power the liberals had no clear understanding of what they stood for or what they wanted to preserve. Thomas Mann (whose books were burnt by the National Socialists) regarded the French values of political liberalism with the same scorn as did the Nazis. In the paintings of Max Ernst anti-urban themes emerge which are clearly compatible with volkish ideas. Even the sociologist Max Weber, who wrote the Weimar constitution, mourned the fact that "the world has been robbed of its magic". It was this same lost spirituality which many sought within the National Socialist Party.¹⁸

Heinrich Mann (a liberal intellectual of impeccable anti-fascist credentials) said that after attending one of Wagner's operas during the period of the Nazi rise to power, with: "Shield and swords, much rattling tin, loyalty to the emperor, much shouting raised banners and the German oak - one was tempted to play along."

Such unity of ideas allowed many intellectuals of formerly liberal persuasion to be lured into alliance with National Socialism. In the immediate aftermath of the First World War the poet Gottfried Benn had defended free speech and written against the power of the German military and in favour of individualism. But by the 1930's he had abandoned the uncertainties of liberalism for the spiritual peace of totalitarianism. Benn wrote of his conversion to Nazism:

There are moments when the whole tortured life sinks into nothingness when only the horizon seems to exist, its infinity, the seasons, the earth, in simple words - the volk.¹⁹

The Other Side of Weimar

This tradition of backward looking racial collectivism presents only one side of Weimar Germany. Despite the German anti-Semitic tradition Germany had what was probably one of the best integrated Jewish communities in Europe. Anti-Semitic writing in print rarely seems to have been translated into violence. Pogroms such as occurred in Eastern Europe do not seem to have taken place. Significantly the National Socialists did not begin widespread anti-semitic violence until after they had seized power in Germany. The Weimar Republic also had a constitution which ensured that political liberalism was institutionalised in a way not found in other European states of the time. It was this degree of free speech which allowed the Berlin cultural scene of the 1920's to flourish.

Germany was not therefore without elements of liberalism and individualism. It was simply that in the battle between liberalism and collectivism it was collectivism which triumphed.

The Empire and the Romantics

It might legitimately be asked whether if Britain had suffered defeat in the First World War the same nationalist and collectivist tendencies would not have taken hold. The British victory in its first war against Germany left its parliamentary and legal system intact. There were, however, political and cultural traits in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Britain which, given the right circumstances, could have provided a basis for the rise of Fascism. Conservative thinkers of the early twentieth century regarded conservatism as crucially different from rival creeds such as Marxism and liberalism. The difference was that conservatism was based on spiritual attachment to British tradition where other beliefs were based on materialism. The material manifestation of this spiritual power was the British empire. An extension of this belief meant that the British had a God-given right to rule. Cecil Rhodes in his desire to build the British Empire in Africa from the Cape to Cairo regarded his role as to create a breeding ground for the British race to propagate itself (an early example of the concept of lebensraum).

Legitimation for Imperial rule was sought not only from God but also by glorifying the British past. An example of this can be found in the retelling in poetry of the Arthurian myths by Alfred Tennyson. In the poem *Boadicea* by the Victorian poet William Cowper a druid is made to prophecy to Boadicea that "Regions Caesar never knew thy posterity shall hold sway". A statue of Boadicea was erected beside the Thames as a vindication of the British Empire, without any apparent sense of irony. The British, as well as exporting Houston Stewart Chamberlain to Germany, had no shortage of race historians ready to prove that the British were racially ordained to rule. These historians disagreed as to whether British racial superiority was derived from descent from the Germans, Celts, or a lost tribe of Israelites, but they agreed in their belief that the British were a chosen people. The idea of race and state had increasingly become surrounded by an aura of romanticism by the turn of the century. It is quite possible that in a defeated Britain these ideas of the Empire as an expression of Britain's ordained destiny shorn of their attached values could have become a malign basis for Fascism. Even in Britain's victorious society there existed large numbers of men unable to adjust to peace. In the immediate aftermath of the war some of these men found employment in the Black and Tans (in Germany similar men served in the Freikorps and later the Brownshirted SA).

Poets and Playwrights

In the early twentieth century some important British literary figures were showing a distinctly volkish angst about the nature of society. In *The Waste Land* T. S. Eliot frequently refers to London (and other urban centres) as an "Unreal City". This anti-urbanism is coupled with an expression of spiritual devastation and alienation from the modern world. This can be contrasted with his praise of the continuity of rural life in *Little Gidding*. Like the volkish authors Eliot racialised his feeling of alienation with pejorative references to the Jews.

Similar sentiments can be found in G. K. Chesterton's poem *The Secret People* (a title reminiscent of the Nazi poet Stefan George's description of the Volk as the "Secret Germany"). The poem is a history of England from the point of view of the ordinary people. Chesterton describes the capitalists of the industrial revolution as the "New Unhappy Lords" whose power rests upon the "Cringing Jew". Chesterton mourns the fact that the old bond between the rural aristocracy and the peasants (the unified volk) has been destroyed by alien capitalism. G. K. Chesterton's cousin, A. K. Chesterton, later used the phrase "The New Unhappy Lords" as the title of a book he wrote reiterating for a British audience the Jewish conspiracy theory set out in the *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*. A. K. Chesterton had formerly been active in the British Union of Fascists and in the late 1960's became the first chairman of the National Front. In the late 1980's the economic ideas of G. K. Chesterton, known as "Distributionism" and based upon a decentralised non-urban economy, enjoyed a vogue amongst the Strasserite leadership of the British National Front.

Other intellectuals sympathised with Fascist thought for other reasons. Wyndham Lewis despised democracy as essentially proletarian and saw Fascism as a bulwark against the masses. This idea was in line with the idea of the collective volk which German philosophers had always seen as a union between the leadership and the masses on a hierarchic basis. Henry Williamson saw Fascism as a "natural" government as opposed to the artificial institutions of divisive democracy. This political view was in line with Williamson's glorification of nature (Blood and Soil). Williamson is best known for his book *Tarka the Otter* published in 1927. Ezra Pound also turned to Fascist ideas because of his anti-capitalist sentiments. His opposition to finance was typically racialised as opposition to usury, the old Jewish profession.²⁰

Though not anti-Semitic, Bernard Shaw despised democrats and liberals and supported many collectivist and Fascist governmental ideas. In this context W. B. Yeats should also be mentioned, though much of Yeats' ultra-Nationalist sentiment is directed towards Irish Republicanism. Yeats admired Fascism, and like Lewis saw in it the promise of aristocratic government to guide the masses. Yeats went as far as to write marching songs for the Irish Fascist leader General Duffy and his Blue Shirt movement. Yeats' poem *Easter 1916* is

redolent with the ideas of blood sacrifice and the rejuvenation of the volk by war. Yeats was also keen to legitimise Irish republican aims by reference to Celtic mysticism. His embracing of the irrational went as far as membership of the occult order of the Golden Dawn. A fellow member was General J. F. C. Fuller, who was an expert on tank warfare and, which was strange for a convinced anti-semitic, on Jewish mysticism. He was a personal friend of both Hitler and the occultist Aleister Crowley. Fuller was a prominent supporter of the British Union of Fascists.

Against this evidence it must be said that the vast majority of intellectuals in Britain remained opposed to Fascism. This, however, is no more than is to be expected in a country where by and large the institutions of the *status quo* retained the confidence of the intelligensia. What would have happened in a Britain where all the old institutions had collapsed and new institutions had been imposed by a foreign government must, of course, remain conjecture.

The Volkish Legacy

The ideology of anti-rational millenarian paternalism would appear to have been totally discredited following the end of the Second World War. In modern Britain, however, such volkish ideas still flourish. They can be found amongst the National Front and other neo-Nazi groupings keen to establish their "green" credentials. They are also evident in the increasingly open mysticism of the "green" movement itself, with its apocalyptic vision of the destruction of man by natural catastrophe.²¹

Even more insidiously, however, the volkish current of thought lies behind the idea, restricted to no particular political party, that capitalism and rational individualism are somehow "unnatural". It must be in the agenda of libertarians to win the battle of ideas against such ideological atavism.

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