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National Socialism

Probably no other historical topic worldwide has been researched and published on more than National Socialism. Even experts are barely able to keep pace with the wealth of publications, and there is no sign that this ongoing interest is on the wane. The “Third Reich” and its formative historical antecedents is a past which will not pass away, and so continues to influence our present and retain its eminent political relevance. It is impossible within the scope of the following exposition to even outline the complexity of scholarly debate on National Socialism. The intention is thus more modest: to address some key aspects of this discourse with a view to providing a general introduction.

The history of the Nazi Party commences several years before the “seizure of power” in 1933. Founded in early 1920, from the outset Hitler succeeded in imposing his claim to absolute power on the party and converting it into his own personal instrument in the political struggle. The resounding success of the Nazi Party, which rose swiftly from an insignificant splinter party to a mass movement in the final years of the Weimar Republic, is still in need of explanation. For many years it was thought that the Nazi Party had recruited its members and attracted voters mainly from the middle classes. In 1930 Theodor Geiger had therefore spoken of a “panic seizing the middle classes”.¹ However, more recent research, in particular that of Jürgen W. Falter, has shown that the Nazi Party may indeed be characterized as the first broad-based “people’s party” in Germany, one which was nonetheless decisively influenced by the middle classes.²

The reasons for the Nazi Party’s success are varied and cannot be treated here in detail. What should be considered though are the influences which were at work in the broader context and led ultimately to Hitler’s “seizure of power“. The dominant thesis for many years, and still advocated today by some historians, was that Hitler owed his appointment as Reich Chancellor to the influence exerted by industrialists and bankers – a thesis mostly put forward by historians who assume the primacy of economic interests when interpreting the “Third Reich“. The research of the last 30 years has revealed, however, that there are numerous arguments for assuming a primacy of politics, with regard to both the process leading to the “seizure of power,” upon which industrialists had no influence,³ as well as in the years of Nazi dictatorship, when, although the capitalist system remained in tact, entrepreneurs were forced to accommodate their interests to the dictates of politics. Nevertheless, to this day there are authors who, working from the assumption of the “socio-economic laws of class conflict” as the motor of history, propose a historical connection between capitalism and National Socialism.⁴

1 Theodor Geiger: Panik im Mittelstand, in: *Die Arbeit*, 7 (1930), S. 637-654

2 Jürgen W. Falter: *Hitlers Wähler*, München 1991, S. 372

3 See Henry Ashby Turner, *German Big Business and the Rise of Hitler*, (Oxford, 1985)/*Die Großunternehmer und der Aufstieg Hitlers*, (Berlin, 1985)

4 See Timothy W. Mason, *Sozialpolitik im Dritten Reich. Arbeiterklasse und Volksgemeinschaft*, (Opladen, 1977), p. 41

Even before the Nazis assumed power in Germany a debate had begun as to whether the concept of fascism or that of totalitarianism was the more productive for understanding National Socialism. The concept of fascism was viewed as the more pertinent by those who spoke in favor of the primacy of the economy and regarded fascist movements as mere agents of capitalist economic interests. In so far as it was aligned to a Marxist model, this concept of fascism was subsequently refined into more differentiated interpretations (August Thalheimer, Otto Bauer).⁵ In contrast, Ernst Nolte was to then define fascism as a specific historical epoch in Europe, basing his argumentation on intellectual history.⁶

What the advocates of an interpretation of National Socialism as fascism have in common is their opposition to the totalitarianism theory. Like the fascism theory, this theory was a creation of the era between the World Wars, but it became politically charged during the Cold War, so that when tensions eased with the *détente* of the 1970s many historians came to regard it as discredited.⁷ Furthermore, this approach, which in its comparative examination of Nazi and Communist dictatorship sought commonalities between the respective practices of domination – one ideology, one party, a terrorist secret police, a monopoly of the press and media, a centrally steered economy⁸ –, was criticized as being incapable of grasping processes of change, for example in Communist countries. More recently however, it has been repeatedly pointed out that totalitarianism is “still a useful concept”⁹ and must therefore continue to be emphasized. Historians such as Karl Dietrich Bracher and Hans Maier see the advantage of the totalitarianism concept over that of fascism as residing in how it is more suited to interpreting and understanding modern dictatorships.¹⁰

Critique of the totalitarianism concept also targets how its advocates interpret the “Third Reich” as a monarchy. Denying that this was in fact the case, this criticism has been most vehemently put forward by Hans Mommsen, who qualified the importance of Hitler’s role and indeed characterized him as having been a “weak dictator” in many respects.¹¹ In contrast, most historians have maintained that Hitler played the determining role in the system of rule erected in the

5 For an overview see Wolfgang Wippermann, *Faschismustheorien. Die Entwicklung der Diskussion von den Anfängen bis heute*, (7th revised edition, Darmstadt, 1997)

6 Ernst Nolte, *Der Faschismus in seiner Epoche. Action française. Italienischer Faschismus. Nationalsozialismus. Mit einem Rückblick nach fünfunddreißig Jahren*, (5th edition, Munich-Zurich, 2000)/ *Three Faces of Fascism: Action Française, Italian Fascism, National Socialism*, (New York, 1965)

7 Gerhard Schulz, *Faschismus – Nationalsozialismus. Versionen und theoretische Kontroversen 1922 – 1972*, (Frankfurt/Main, 1974), pp. 138-147

8 Carl J. Friedrich, *Totalitäre Diktatur*, (Stuttgart, 1957), p. 80

9 Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich. A New History*, (London, 2000), p. 14./ *Die Zeit des Nationalsozialismus. Eine Gesamtdarstellung*, (Frankfurt/Main, 2000), p. 30

10 Karl Dietrich Bracher, *Zeitgeschichtliche Kontroversen. Um Faschismus, Totalitarismus, Demokratie*, (5th revised and extended edition, Munich, 1984), pp. 13-33; Hans Maier (ed.), *Wege in die Gewalt. Die modernen politischen Religionen*, (Frankfurt/Main, 1995)

11 Hans Mommsen, “Nationalsozialismus,” in *Sowjetsystem und demokratische Gesellschaft. Eine vergleichende Enzyklopädie*, vol. 4, (Freiburg i. Br., 1970), p. 702

“Third Reich,” although some advocates of the totalitarianism theory were willing to concede that the “Third Reich” was a polycentric system,¹² without going so far as to question Hitler’s position of power. Dieter Rebentisch has characterized the Nazi state as an “atavistic group of persons centered on Hitler’s despotic rule,”¹³ and Hans-Ulrich Thamer – as Karl Dietrich Bracher before him – has pointed out that the “Third Reich” featured an “explicitly monocratic apex with simultaneously polycratic power structures.”¹⁴

Ultimately this discussion revolves round the argument between the individual’s role in shaping history as against impersonal “structural determinants“. While the advocates of the former regard biographical approaches to historical writing as productive, the supporters of the latter believe that it is possible to largely neglect the human factor and locate the necessary explanations solely in structural conditions. In contrast to these polarized approaches, Klaus Hildebrand has pointed out how precisely research into National Socialism demonstrates that both positions are more indebted to and reliant on one another “than the debate, frequently conducted with a hefty lacing of academic polemic, would lead us to believe“.¹⁵

Debate on the interpretation of National Socialism entered a new stage at the beginning of the 1980s, when, as a continuation of the controversy about the monocratic or polycratic character of the Nazi state, the so-called “intentionalists” and “functionalists” crossed swords.¹⁶ This debate did not prove to be particularly fruitful however, because any attempt to claim the absolute truth for one-sided interpretations necessarily overlooks crucial aspects of the reality of the “Third Reich,” as Dieter Rebentisch in particular was able to demonstrate through his intensive study of sources.¹⁷

For as long as the “Third Reich” has been researched and discussed, the issue of historical continuity, the roots of National Socialism in German history, and hence the question of a German “Sonderweg” (“special path”), have been under consideration. Contrary to a perspective – mainly from abroad – that initially simplified historical complexities and imputed a continuity running from Luther through Prussia to Hitler, and so postulating a German “Sonderweg” into modernity, more differentiated appraisals have since come to the fore. Thomas Nipperdey, for instance, has pointed out that “1933 is closely connected with the majority of dominant (if different) continuities in German history and no historical exegesis is even possible without recourse to continuity,” while objecting to any narrowing of the historical past to being solely an “ante-

12 Gerhard Schulz, “Der Begriff des Totalitarismus und der Nationalsozialismus,” *Soziale Welt* 12 (1961), pp. 112-128; Gerhard Schulz, “Neue Kontroversen in der Zeitgeschichte. Führerstaat und ‘Führermythos,’” *Der Staat* 22 (1983), pp. 262-280, especially p. 269

13 Dieter Rebentisch, *Führerstaat und Verwaltung im Zweiten Weltkrieg. Verfassungsentwicklung und Verwaltungspolitik 1939-1945*, (Stuttgart, 1989), p. 553

14 Hans-Ulrich Thamer, *Verführung und Gewalt. Deutschland 1933-1945*, (Berlin, 1986), p. 340

15 Klaus Hildebrand, *Das Dritte Reich*, (6th revised edition, Munich, 2003), p. 168

16 Gerhard Schulz, *Führerstaat*

17 Dieter Rebentisch, *Führerstaat*

cedent” of National Socialism.¹⁸ There seems to be no end in sight to the “Sonderweg” debate. Although a few authors have demonstrated that there was no such thing as a “normal path” into modernity in Europe, and that consequently every country embarked on its own “special path,” Karl Dieter Bracher has proposed using a concept of “special consciousness” when speaking of Germany,¹⁹ while Heinrich August Winkler has only recently firmly supported the “Sonderweg” thesis,²⁰ understandably provoking objections.

The interpretations and controversies about National Socialism and the “Third Reich” dealt with here in extremely succinct form, which themselves by no means exhaust all facets of historical debate, are the result of meticulous evaluation of source materials by numerous historians over a number of decades. At the beginning of the 1980s, Konrad Repgen highlighted the importance of sources for forming historical judgment: “contemporary history without a continuous and insistent critical assessment of sources is not scholarship.”²¹ It follows from this that edited source materials which – in so far as it is a matter of scholarly endeavor – “always [originate] in close connection with questions raised by research,” are of crucial importance as well. Horst Möller’s verdict is therefore to be agreed to unreservedly. He concluded an article on editions of contemporary history documents with the observation that they are “indispensable for continuous innovation within research,” and proclaimed the simple but telling motto “revision through edition.”²²

Herein lies the value of the series “20th Century German History Online,” the first segment of which is now available and covers the thematic areas “National Socialism, Holocaust, Resistance, and Exile 1933 to 1945“. The sources, biographical materials, and reference works on National Socialism provide researchers and students with unprecedented opportunities to study texts in their entirety in archival editions; they also open up guided access to source materials on persons, institutions, places, and property indexes as well as other search aids. This makes accessible for the first time a database of previously unparalleled dimensions. Of course scholars will still have to visit archives – but the present online edition will facilitate their initial inquiries into a subject of their choice or be instrumental in developing new research projects. The online edition is of particular importance for academic teaching, because from now on stu-

18 Thomas Nipperdey, *Nachdenken über die deutsche Geschichte. Essays*, (2nd edition, Munich, 1986), p. 197 and 204

19 *Deutscher Sonderweg - Mythos oder Realität? Ein Kolloquium des Instituts für Zeitgeschichte*, (Munich-Vienna, 1982), p. 53

20 Heinrich August Winkler, *Der lange Weg nach Westen*, (Munich, 2000), especially p. 648 f.

21 Konrad Repgen, “Vom Fortleben nationalsozialistischer Propaganda in der Gegenwart. Der Münchener Nuntius und Hitler 1933,” in *Festschrift für A. Kraus zum 60. Geburtstag*, editors Pankraz Fried and Walter Ziegler, (Kallmünz, 1982), p. 473

22 Horst Möller, “Wie sinnvoll sind zeitgeschichtliche Editionen heute? Beispiele aus der Arbeit des Instituts für Zeitgeschichte,” in *Quelleneditionen und kein Ende? Symposium der Monumenta Germaniae Historica und der Historischen Kommission bei der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, editors Lothar Gall/Rudolf Schieffer, (Munich, 1999) (HZ-Beiheft 28), p. 111f.

dents will have at their disposal sources on the history of National Socialism which will most certainly have a positive effect on the quality of seminar and examination papers.

These general statements need to be specified. The edition of Hitler's speeches, papers, and orders serves not only as "biographical preliminary work" but may also be used as a reference work "that can provide information on many facets which are connected with the rise of the Nazi Party during the decisive years of 1925 to 1933".²³ The diaries of Joseph Goebbels furnish not just "a host of new insights [...] into the political decision-making processes and the power structures of the Nazi regime," but are also the unique self-testimony of a man from the Nazi Party's inner circle of power that mirrors equally both "the early history of the Nazi Party" as well as "Nazi mastery and the destruction of old Europe and the catastrophe which dragged Germany into the abyss".²⁴

The particular value of the "Records of the Nazi Party Chancellery" (Akten der Parteikanzlei der NSDAP) is to be seen in how they have "significantly extended knowledge of the polycratic structures in the Fuehrer state".²⁵ The card index held by the Institut für Zeitgeschichte on the Nuremberg Trials (the main trial and all twelve subsequent trials) makes accessible all of the "prosecution's documentary evidence" and thus provides a crucial contribution to researching this still vital body of sources.

Of a different nature, but likewise indispensable for research is the "Inventory of Archival Materials referring to the Nazi State" (Inventar archivalischer Quellen des NS-Staates), which contributes "to placing the evaluation of research possibilities in the university and non-university area on the foundations of sound information on sources and thereby to organizing research projects more economically in terms of work as well as innovatively in terms of profile".²⁶ A similar function may be ascribed to the reference work "Authorities and Departments, Titles and Abbreviations used in the Nazi State" (Ämter, Abkürzungen, Aktionen des NS-Staates), which shall serve to clarify for users "comparisons within the regime's leadership hierarchy, often impenetrable due to the multitude of official titles and ranks which came into existence through the dualism of state and party in the Nazi dictatorship".²⁷ Similarly helpful for the user of the online edition will be the inclusion of an extract from the "German Biographical Encyclopedia" (Deutsche Biographische Enzyklopädie) in which persons are listed who had already reached

23 Hitler. Reden – Schriften – Anordnungen. Februar 1925 bis Januar 1933. Band VI: Register, Karten und Nachträge. Edited by Katja Klee, Christian Hartmann, and Klaus A. Lankheit, (Munich, 2003), p. XI

24 Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels. Im Auftrag des Instituts für Zeitgeschichte und mit Unterstützung des Staatlichen Archivdienstes Russlands, edited by Elke Fröhlich. Teil I: Aufzeichnungen 1923-1941. Band 1/I: Oktober 1923 – November 1925. Edited by Elke Fröhlich, (Munich, 2004), p. 7

25 Michael Ruck, "Akten der Parteikanzlei der NSDAP: Metamorphosen eines editorischen Großversuchs," in 50 Jahre Institut für Zeitgeschichte. Eine Bilanz. Edited by Horst Möller and Udo Wengst, (Munich, 1999), p. 233

26 Inventar archivalischer Quellen des NS-Staates. The Institut für Zeitgeschichte. Band 3/1. Edited by Heinz Bobrach, (Munich, 1991), p. VII

27 Ämter, Abkürzungen, Aktionen des NS-Staates. The Institut für Zeitgeschichte. Band 5. Edited by Heinz Bobrach, Rolf Thommes, and Hermann Weiß, (Munich, 1997), p. 5

adulthood at the time of the “Third Reich“. These short remarks, referring to specific examples, underline the variety of opportunities the online edition provides for research and academic teaching.

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