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Writing the German catastrophe : Mann, Meinecke, Spengler, and the fatal appeal of National Socialism

David Mark Grimm Choberka

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by David Mark Grimm Choberka entitled "Writing the German catastrophe : Mann, Meinecke, Spengler, and the fatal appeal of National Socialism." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in History.

Owen Bradley, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Vejas Liulevicius, Palmira Brummet

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

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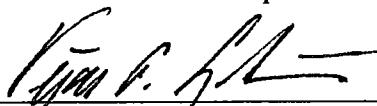
To the Graduate Council:

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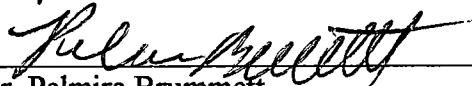


Dr. Owen Bradley, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:



Dr. Vėjas Liulevičius



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Associate Vice Chancellor and
Dean of the Graduate School

WRITING THE GERMAN CATASTROPHE:
MANN, MEINECKE, SPENGLER,
AND THE FATAL APPEAL OF
NATIONAL SOCIALISM

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

David Mark Grimm Choberka
May 1999

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my wife, Erica,
whose love and grace have made this thesis possible in too many ways to count,
to my family,
for their encouragement, love, and endless support,
to all my friends,
with their kind hearts and open minds,
and to my dog and cat, Samson and Schwagg,
who have been my constant companions as I researched and wrote this manuscript.

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I would like to express my gratitude to a number of people who have helped me in writing my thesis and obtaining my degree at the University of Tennessee. The Department of History has provided me with a stimulating environment and graciously supported me in my graduate studies.

I would like specifically to thank Dr. Palmira Brummett and Dr. Vejas Liulevicius for their interesting courses and for serving on my thesis committee. Their patient support and high standards were very helpful in bringing this project to a successful completion. My thesis advisor, Dr. Owen Bradley, has my highest thanks and praise. Without his kindness, encouragement, and acumen, I would have never been able to reach this moment.

My deepest gratitude also goes out to my wife, Erica, who worked so hard to support me while I wrote this thesis and who really stepped in at the end to give me the love and help I needed to finish.

ABSTRACT

This thesis is a study of how Oswald Spengler, Friedrich Meinecke, and Thomas Mann criticized National Socialism. I analyze their criticisms to demonstrate how, despite their opposition to Nazism, they reiterated a fatalistic mood in interwar Germany that contributed to the appeal of Hitler's revolution and, in retrospect, made it appear inevitable. They each approached the topic of Nazism from different disciplines and political attitudes, allowing me to examine the fatalism of German interwar culture through several kinds of discourse.

My discussion of these authors' discourses is premised on this pervasive mood of fatalism, which has been thoroughly examined from various angles by a number of scholars of early twentieth century German culture, including Mosse, Iggers, Stern, Gay, and Eksteins. These scholars all suggest that fatalistic discourses were interwoven with the goals of interwar culture and represented a catastrophic collision with modernity as the nation's highest ideal.

I explore how Spengler depicted modernity and Germany in a manner that reinforced the fatalistic mood of German, interwar culture. I look at similar themes in Meinecke and Mann, each of whom participated in the same despairing discourses even though they were not part of the extreme political culture of the period. In the context of Germany's cultural and political despair, even moderate critics of extreme nationalism tended to reiterate a fatalistic anti-modernism and tragic representation of the German spirit.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This thesis is a study of how Oswald Spengler, Friedrich Meinecke, and Thomas Mann criticized National Socialism. I analyze their criticisms to demonstrate how, despite their opposition to Nazism, they reiterated a fatalistic mood in interwar Germany that contributed to the appeal of Hitler's revolution and, in retrospect, made it appear inevitable. They each approached the topic of Nazism from different disciplines and political attitudes, allowing me to examine the fatalism of German interwar culture through several kinds of discourse.

Spengler, Meinecke, and Mann became important figures in debates about German culture and politics immediately after World War I. Each one of these authors represented a different aspect of interwar culture and politics. Spengler's *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (The Decline of the West), published in 1918, reflected a popular despair in Germany after World War I. This work elevated Spengler to the status of a spokesman for extremist, right-wing political groups that despised Western liberal and constitutional traditions and celebrated war. Meinecke was an important representative of the Rankean historical tradition. Associated with Naumann's group of conservative reformers in the late nineteenth century, he made his name as one of Germany's foremost historians with the publication of *Weltbürgertum und Nationalstaat* (Cosmopolitanism and Nation-State) in 1908. His belief in an authoritarian German state was shaken during World War I by his disagreement with the nation's war aims and violent nationalism. In the interwar period he made a distinct separation between politics and culture, grudgingly supporting the liberal Weimar constitution while asserting its incompatibility with German cultural

traditions. Mann became a leading literary figure in 1901 with the publication of *Buddenbrooks*, one of the two novels for which he was awarded a Nobel Prize in 1929. Like many artists of the early twentieth century German avant-garde, Mann viewed art as a high, ideal sphere, detached from the prosaic world of politics. World War I prompted him to reevaluate the separation of art and politics, and in the interwar period he used his reputation and his literature to encourage Germans to support the Weimar government and participate in a cultural community with Western Europe.

With the collapse of the Weimar government and Hitler's seizure of power, these three authors turned their political and cultural criticism towards the National Socialist Party. Their last major works were all critical analyses of the policies and causes of National Socialism, written with the intent of giving Germans an understanding of their past and political direction.

Spengler published *Jahre der Entscheidung* (Years of Decision) in 1933, soon after Hitler had consolidated state power. He wrote this work to voice his concern that the Nazis would not pursue an aggressive enough foreign policy to deal with what he perceived to be an inevitable global conflict. He criticized the Nazis for representing all the negative aspects of modern politics and for focusing on building a utopian Germany rather than emphasizing foreign policy. Spengler encouraged Germans and the National Socialists to reaffirm Prussian values of authoritarianism, militarism, and forceful statecraft.

While Spengler wrote *Jahre der Entscheidung* at the beginning of the Nazi period in order to influence the regime's policies, Meinecke wrote his criticism of National Socialism after the war to aid Germany in making sense of its history. *Die Deutsche Katastrophe* (The German Catastrophe), published in 1946, explored the

development of Nazism from modern socio-politics and German cultural traditions.

He hoped to save German culture from the stigma of Nazism.

Mann, like Spengler, began to criticize the Nazis when they first began to gain power. He was politically active in Germany and then in the United States throughout the Nazi period. He gave numerous speeches and wrote political pamphlets and essays, in which he explained the sources of National Socialism and its relation to German culture. Then, like Meinecke, he wrote a major recollective work after the war, turning his true literary talents to the subject of National Socialism. He published *Doktor Faustus*, a novel, in 1948. It explored in detail how Germans, including Mann himself, had in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reworked and pieced together elements of their culture in a way that made a catastrophe like National Socialism appear to be inevitable.

This thesis examines these three authors' works on National Socialism. It explores how their representations of German culture and of modernity reiterated a fatalistic attitude that Mosse, Iggers, and Stern all suggest pervaded interwar and Nazi culture. Before explaining the fundamental work done by these scholars on the development of National Socialism, I should clarify two terms that I use throughout my thesis, modernity and fatalism. By modernity I mean opening up culture, social organization, and political legitimacy to constructive critique. This does not imply any particular politics, but rather the idea that society and politics are open, developing human constructs rather than closed, unchanging structures that reflect some sort of universal order. The anti-modernism that I discuss throughout my thesis is primarily an attitude that opening up culture and society to criticism made modern civilization inauthentic, untenable, and headed for disaster. I mean what Peter Gay describes as "the hunger for wholeness," which he explained was "a great regression born from a

great fear: the fear of modernity.”¹ My use of modernity is certainly debatable, and the contentious issue of modernity is far too complex to explore here. What is certain, however, is that the Nazis opposed the ideas of politics and society that I described as modernity above.² When taken to its extreme the anti-modernism that I described is fatalistic in that it represents modern history as destined for catastrophe.

I use fatalism for its dual meaning as both destiny and doom. The fatalism that I examine can be summarized as an attitude or mood suggesting that some kind of violent and self-destructive catastrophe was a historical necessity. In addition to anti-modernism, the fatalism that I explore in Spengler, Meinecke, and Mann has another major component. That is a romantic notion that greatness and suffering are always tragically linked. This idea was very important to the particular romanticism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century avant-garde and of the morbid romantics of the World War I generation.³ In the interwar period this romantic trope was often applied to the nation, resulting in discourses that reified the esthetic of tragic greatness as an inherent German trait. The implication was that a catastrophe was Germany's necessary fate.

¹ Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 96.

² These are some of the works that have been most important in helping me develop my definition of modernity. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961); Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation” and “Science as a Vocation,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and ed. by H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 77-156; Michael Walzer, *Regicide and Revolution: Speeches at the Trial of Louis XVI* (New York: Columbia University, 1992); Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991); Hans Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* (The Legitimacy of the Modern Age) (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1966); and Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Thought*, trans. David Macey (Oxford: Polity Press, 1988).

³ For more information on these forms of romanticism see George L. Mosse, *The Culture of Western Europe: The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, 3rd ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988), chs. 14 and 18-22; and Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age*, Anchor Books ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1989).

My thesis is an examination of some of these discourses. I look at how despite their opposition to National Socialism, Spengler, Meinecke, and Mann represented Germany and modern socio-politics in ways that reiterated a fatalistic mood that permeated German culture after World War I and greatly aided the appeal of Nazism. My discussion of these authors' discourses is premised on this pervasive mood of fatalism, which has been thoroughly examined from various angles by a number of scholars of early twentieth century German culture, including Mosse, Iggers, Stern, Gay, and Eksteins.

In the 1960's Mosse, Iggers, and Stern each wrote a pivotal work in the study of the cultural development of National Socialism. Stern's study of cultural and political despair, Iggers's history of the abstract idealization of state power and force, and Mosse's examination of the infatuation with violence in German nationalism all seem to point to a pervasive fatalism. In the next several paragraphs, I will look at each of their works in order to provide some basis for my examination of fatalistic discourses in the upcoming chapters.

Mosse's *The Crisis of German Ideology* (1964) looks at the celebration of violence in German nationalism, from the late nineteenth century to its culmination in National Socialist ideology. He calls this nationalism *völkisch* to emphasize the central role played in it by the idea of the *Volk*, a word variously translated as people or nation, and which connotes a cultural and historical entity rather than a political state. Mosse explains that *völkisch* nationalists saw the *Volk* as a historical entity with roots in an idyllic pre-modern past. The *Volk* was seen as preserving the true spirit of the people despite the social and political developments of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and provided a sense of rootedness or wholeness.⁴ Mosse argues that this

⁴ George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third*

ideology grew out of popular ideas and a unique mood in Germany and that it guided Nazi policy much more than any pragmatic power or political concerns.⁵ Nazism succeeded as a mass movement because it wove these ideas together in the context of Germany's harsh post-war economic, political, and cultural crises.⁶ Mosse regards it as very important to note that Nazi ideology was accepted into mainstream culture. He argues that this shows how ideology can blind people to civilized behavior. This is a warning that he poses for all nations, which, he believes, each have their own *völkisch* tendencies.⁷

Despite exhibiting some modernist elements, such as an embrace of technology, Nazism and *völkisch* thought in general are depicted by Mosse as primarily anti-modern ideologies.⁸ Proposing a social psychology similar to Gay's "hunger for wholeness," Mosse suggests that *völkisch* thought gained popularity and became more violent throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This occurred in reaction against urbanization, industrialism, and social changes and in frustrated disappointment with modern politics. Many nationalists believed that modernity prevented the actualization of the ideal inner unity embodied in the *Volk*.⁹ Mosse's book shows how the nationalists' opposition between the true *Volk* and the inauthentic modern age developed into the idea that Germany was uniquely suited to violently break through "the discord of modernity."¹⁰

While Mosse traces *völkisch* nationalism to the Wars of Liberation against Napoleon, he argues that infatuation with force became its main characteristic as

Reich (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1964; reprint, New York: Schocken Books, 1981), 16.

⁵ Mosse, *Crisis*, 1-2 and 299.

⁶ Mosse, *Crisis*, v-vii.

⁷ Mosse, *Crisis*, 9-10.

⁸ Mosse, *Crisis*, vii-viii.

⁹ Mosse, *Crisis*, 2-4.

¹⁰ Mosse, *Crisis*, 34-6. The quote is on 34.

frustration with modernity grew in the late nineteenth century. Mosse notes a general turn to primitivism, which was regarded as a way to strip away modern artificiality.¹¹ Beginning in the late nineteenth century, infatuation with force increased. One component of the increase was a body of harsh, Darwinistic ideas that equated social and biological evolution and celebrated war as the engine that drove that development.¹² Another intellectual component was a New Romantic movement, which proposed that the only way to solve practical problems was to change the Germans' inner life and beliefs. Mosse argues that the New Romantic concern with rescuing an authentic inner life became a glorification of violence against the world.¹³ Mosse's "cult of force" had one more major component. Like many scholars of Nazi culture, Mosse presents World War I as the experience that drove the ideology to such extremes and allowed force to be seen as a panacea.¹⁴

To Mosse, anti-modernism and glorification of cruelty and violence in *völkisch* nationalism reached their pinnacle in the 'final solution.'¹⁵ For *völkisch* nationalists, Mosse asserts, "The enemy, modernity in all its ramifications, was epitomized by the Jews."¹⁶ This association had led to the conclusion that destroying the Jews would end the illegitimate modern age, allowing Germans to finally achieve the ideal unity embodied in the *Volk*.¹⁷ The acceptance of this idea into mainstream German culture produced a horrible, ethical double-standard that was epitomized for Mosse in the "pedestrian bourgeois" persona of Rudolf Höss, the commandant of Auschwitz, whose

¹¹ Mosse, *Crisis*, 26.

¹² Mosse, *Crisis*, 92-3 and 100-3.

¹³ Mosse, *Crisis*, 54-5 and 65.

¹⁴ Mosse, *Crisis*, 5-6 and 137.

¹⁵ Mosse, *Crisis*, 139.

¹⁶ Mosse, *Crisis*, 36.

¹⁷ Mosse, *Crisis*, 97.

autobiography is filled with dissonant scenes mixing the concerns of his banal family life and his murderous work.¹⁸

While Mosse emphasizes that *völkisch* nationalists had an idea of a positive future for Germans beyond the modern age, Mosse's analysis suggests that two kinds of discourse ran throughout the cultural context of National Socialism, one forward-looking and one fatalistic. The former sought to escape from modernity in ideal forms of community and politics, which restored a mythic lost wholeness. The latter saw no further than the destruction of modernity, and it often idealized the nation's self-destructive disregard for the consequences of its blind animosity.

Iggers's *The German Conception of History* (1968) examines how the German idealist tradition contributed to National Socialism. This tradition was characterized by a particular view of history and state power. History was regarded as a universal stage on which was enacted a great ethical drama. The actors were states, whose self-interested use of power drove forward the ethical unfolding of history. Iggers's book explores the history of the idealist tradition, from the Wars of Liberation to the mid-twentieth century. It shows how the German idea of history introduced a total abstraction of state power into politics and supported the perception that force was the engine of history and was, therefore, always virtuous.

The tradition that Iggers describes had two major intellectual components. One was the tradition of German cultural nationalism, very much like Mosse's *völkisch* nationalism. The other was the tradition of historical idealism, especially the ideas of Hegel and von Ranke. Iggers explains that beginning in the late eighteenth century, German nationalists had asserted German uniqueness and earthy authenticity in

¹⁸ Mosse, *Crisis*, 310. For a very insightful study of the normalization of inhumane policies in Nazi Germany, see Frank Trommler, "Between Normality and Resistance: Catastrophic Gradualism in Nazi Germany," *Journal of Modern History* 64, suppl. (December 1992): S82-S101.

opposition to the superficial civilization of the rest of Western Europe. They centered the nation in the people and culture rather than the political state, and they glorified international difference and the creative and rallying force of war.¹⁹ Von Humboldt typified the pervasiveness of this attitude in German nationalism. Despite his liberalism, he celebrated war as an educating and unifying force, and he worried that it was made less important in modern Europe, with its concern for personal welfare and decreasing suffering. Iggers argues that this was part of the "rejection of personal welfare as the highest ethical good" in the idealist tradition. German nationalists proposed that the highest good was the mass subordination of personal welfare to the ideal goal embodied in the nation-state.²⁰

Iggers argues that the German historical tradition supported the nationalists' idealization of state power. Hegel, the tradition's patriarch, represented the state as a rational entity that in serving its own ends served the ethical development of history.²¹ Von Ranke also saw the state as a unique and discrete historical entity whose primary attribute was forcefulness. To von Ranke, the state was forged and endured through struggle. History was the battlefield where victorious nations would distinguish themselves by the willingness of their individual citizens to sacrifice their personal welfare to the state's moral energy.²²

Iggers summarizes that the idealist tradition suggested a state's forceful pursuit of its own interests was the actualization of its inner potential and therefore necessarily part of historical progress.²³ Like Mosse, however, he argues that Germany's

¹⁹ Georg G. Iggers, *The German Conception of History* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1968; Wesleyan Paperback, 1983), 40-2.

²⁰ Iggers, 47-8.

²¹ Iggers, 210.

²² Iggers, 82-3.

²³ Iggers, 40.

experience in World War I was what caused the idealist tradition to degenerate into the worship of force as the most pure form of ethical action.²⁴ In the exultation of 1914, nationalists heralded war as a way to cleanse and unify the nation's inner life.²⁵ The horrible experience of the war then reinforced their disdain for the humanitarian ethics of modern Western civilization and their fixation on violence. In the interwar period, nationalists proposed that an instinctual, inner understanding of the primacy of state power made Germany the only nation capable of breaking through the inauthentic politics, society, and ethics that were the inheritance of the modern, Western intellectual tradition and of the popular revolutions of the previous two centuries.²⁶ Iggers's book argues that this was essentially the way that history, Germany, and the nature of force were understood by many Germans in the interwar period, and it was how they were represented in National Socialist discourses. Like Mosse, Iggers emphasizes that this complex of ideas was focused on a nebulous idea of a better future for Germany beyond the modern age, but his analysis also suggests a prominent fatalistic and self-destructive mood.

Stern's *The Politics of Cultural Despair* (1961) is a study of how discontent with modernity affected German culture and politics from the mid-nineteenth century to the Third Reich. He broaches this topic, which he calls a "study in the pathology of cultural criticism," with detailed studies of three of the leading voices in Germany's despairing cultural discourses, Langbehn, Lagarde, and Moeller van den Bruck. These three intellectuals defended a supposedly ancient Germanic tradition against the specters of modernity, liberalism, secularism, and the social changes brought by

²⁴ Iggers, 239-41.

²⁵ Iggers, 205.

²⁶ Iggers, 186.

industrialization.²⁷ He argues that they were united in their disdain for “the new, urban, secular” world and their longing for an ideal, totally unified community, which was precluded by modern inauthenticity.²⁸ In that respect, Stern’s depiction of the role of anti-modernism in the development of Nazi ideology is also similar to Gay’s “hunger for wholeness.”

To emphasize the reactionary tone and the radicalism of these three cultural critics, Stern calls them conservative revolutionaries, explaining that “they were conservative out of nostalgia and revolutionary out of despair.”²⁹ All of them greatly contributed to an ideology that attributed to the Germans an instinctual creative barbarism that offered the promise of destroying the modern world. Lagarde heralded the rebirth of a “heroic vitalism” that would end the stagnant modern age and bring the virtue of action back into history.³⁰ Langbehn championed Germany’s “populistic primitivism,” and he exhorted Germans to oppose the forces of modernity, which, he explained, were personified in the Jew, the mortal enemy of the German.³¹ Moeller van den Bruck celebrated the vitality of Germany’s youth and its revived authoritarian and militaristic spirit, which he believed would be able to overcome the socio-political and ethical values that had badly weakened modern Europe since the Enlightenment and the French Revolution.³²

Stern focuses on these three authors because of their similarities and their influence on German culture. Together their lives and intellectual work spanned the development of what Stern calls ‘the Germanic ideology.’ From its discontented

²⁷ Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology*, First California Paperback Edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), xi.

²⁸ Stern, 267-9.

²⁹ Stern, 268.

³⁰ Stern, 30-4.

³¹ Stern, 139-40.

³² Stern, 220 and 256-9.

rumblings in the mid-nineteenth century, to its height in the popular despair that ended the Weimar Republic and ushered in the Nazis, this ideology developed as “a mounting process of abstraction and usurpation” of various elements of German culture.³³ By the early thirties, disillusionment with modernity had deepened to the point that “many a conservative German shudderingly admired the terroristic idealism of Hitler’s movement. The National Socialists gathered together the millions of malcontents . . . for whose relief they had designed such dangerous and elusive ideals.”³⁴

Stern ends his book with a warning for all nations. He asks if a cultural criticism that is in total despair and seeking drastic remedies can ever lead to anything but irresponsible and pernicious politics.³⁵ Stern’s question suggests that anti-modernism and the idealization of force can produce fatalistic discourses, making a catastrophe appear to be inevitable.

Mosse, Iggers, and Stern all suggest that fatalistic discourses were interwoven with the goals of interwar culture and represented a catastrophic collision with modernity as the nation’s highest ideal. Spengler is an important figure in the nationalistic culture that these three scholars describe. In the next chapter, I explore how Spengler depicted modernity and Germany in a manner that reinforced the fatalistic mood of interwar German culture. In the next two chapters, I look at Meinecke and Mann. While they were not part of the extreme political culture that Mosse, Iggers, and Stern describe, I show how they participated in the same despairing discourses. In the context of Germany’s cultural and political despair, even moderate

³³ Stern, 294.

³⁴ Stern, xxvii-xxx. The quote is on xxx.

³⁵ Stern, 298.

critics of extreme nationalism tended to reiterate a fatalistic anti-modernism and tragic representation of the German spirit.

CHAPTER II

OSWALD SPENGLER

Perhaps more than any other intellectual, Oswald Spengler articulated a fatalistic mood in Germany after World War I. His first and most influential work was *Der Untergang des Abendlandes (The Decline of the West)*, the first volume of which appeared in the summer of 1918. 1500 copies were printed and sold out in 6 months. By the end of 1920, a second and third printing had also sold out, but Spengler refused to print more until he completed the second volume and revised the first. When the second volume was published in 1922, interest was renewed. Spengler's influence on German culture was strong enough that in that year a critical examination of Spengler was published in Munich. Looking back on *Untergang's* immediate importance in post-war culture, the book dubbed 1919 the "Spengler year." The revised first volume of *Untergang* was released in 1923, and by 1926, had sold 100,000 total copies in Germany, and the work had been translated into most major languages.³⁶

Spengler's book greatly contributed to a representation of history and German culture that made a catastrophe appear inevitable. Most scholars of interwar culture agree that by the thirties, his views permeated German culture; so much so that cultural critics from the most extreme National Socialists to moderate critics of political extremism, including Meinecke and, to some extent, Mann, shared a very Spenglerian worldview.

Spengler's importance for the extreme right is fairly easy to discern. He provided an influential criticism of modern inauthenticity and presented history as a

³⁶ H. Stuart Hughes, *Oswald Spengler: A Critical Estimate* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), 65 and 89.

grand battlefield on which mutually incomprehensible nations competed to the death. He exhorted his countrymen to reaffirm their aristocratic Prussian tradition and follow a worthy German caesar into what he believed was modern history's inevitable endgame. Jeffrey Herf calls Spengler's *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* a major document of the new right ideology of the interwar period. Herf labels this ideology reactionary modernism and explains that Spengler played an instrumental role in its development when he linked traditional conservative elements, including the military, the civil service, industrialists, and the Junkers, with the reactionary extremism of the World War I generation, exemplified in figures like Jünger and Hitler and organizations like the *Freikorps*.³⁷ Other historians agree with Herf's evaluation of Spengler's influence. Mosse explains that the impact of *Untergang* on interwar culture "was little short of enormous."³⁸ Iggers calls the best seller "the most radical expression" of "the re-evaluation of all political and social norms which took place in broad segments of opinion" because of the experience of the war.³⁹ He designates Spengler as a key figure in breaking "the classical tradition of German Idealism" away from "the humanistic values of Western civilization."⁴⁰

Because of the affinities between Spengler and National Socialism, researchers have tended to treat *Jahre der Entscheidung* (*Years of Decision*), Spengler's 1933 pamphlet criticizing the Nazi revolution, as an unimportant rant. The work repeated many of the themes from his previous works and applied them to National Socialism, leading to his not surprising conclusion that Germany needed a leader who was more aristocratic and conservative, in the classical, Burkean sense, than Hitler appeared to

³⁷ Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 11 and 38.

³⁸ Mosse, *The Culture of Western Europe*, 309.

³⁹ Iggers, 241.

⁴⁰ Iggers, 245.

be. Much more, however, can be gleaned from this book. Despite his criticism of National Socialism, he represented Germany and modernity in a way that made a catastrophic collision with the world appear to be both inevitable and welcome. Spengler's depiction of history and the nation reveals an important facet of the broad fatalism that interwar scholars suggest permeated so much of German culture.

AUTHOR OF DECLINE

Spengler was born in 1880 and grew up in the central German towns of Blankenburg and Halle. His unremarkable middle-class, protestant family, with its proud tradition of work in the Prussian civil service, was wealthy enough to send him to university after he graduated from a classical high school in Halle. Over the next several years he studied in Munich, then Berlin, and finally completed his doctoral thesis at Halle in 1903. His studies emphasized math and the natural sciences, but his frequent trips to Italy and choice of a thesis topic, the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus, revealed a strong inclination toward antiquity. Upon completing his degree, he began teaching and quickly achieved a respectable position at the *Realgymnasium* in Hamburg. While well-liked by students and colleagues, he led a notably withdrawn personal life, and when he received a small inheritance from his mother, he moved to Munich in 1911 and became a private scholar, supplementing his meager allowance with what money he could earn writing reviews and articles.⁴¹

It was in this personal and intellectual isolation that Spengler developed all of his major ideas and wrote *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*. The idiosyncrasies of his autodidactic intellectual development are rife throughout his works, which echo with the frustrated bellowing of a self-important critic who believes that his essential

⁴¹ Hughes, *Spengler*, 3-6.

wisdom is going ignored. Hughes calls Spengler a “half-educated” dilettante.⁴²

Sieferle goes much further, calling him “der Typus des gehemmten, vereinsamten und sozial isolierten Denkers” (the model example of the inhibited, lonely, and socially isolated thinker), who seeks to compensate for his inadequacy with “eine Weltvision, die alles übergreift und jede persönliche Kontingenz bedeutungslos erscheinen läßt” (a world-vision that encroaches upon everything, allowing all personal contingency to appear insignificant).⁴³ Sieferle’s psycho-biographical analysis gives an important insight into the writer. Spengler’s detachment from the university and resentful isolation are prominent aspects of his work.

If Spengler did suffer in isolation, his condition only worsened during the years of the Great War. Unable to perform military service due to ill health and with his inheritance greatly devalued amid the economic turmoil of the war, he spread out his monthly allowance to maintain subsistence in a run-down section of Munich. During that time he completed work on the first volume of *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*.

Hughes explains that, Spengler had the inspiration for the book in 1911. While thinking over the causes of the Second Moroccan Crisis, a colonial dispute that nearly became a war between Germany and France, Spengler had an epiphanic vision of a grand historical process. The present colonial crisis, he saw, was a minor but symptomatic event of the inevitable decline of Western civilization. Spengler described the moment in the introduction to the first volume.

At that time the World-War appeared to me both as imminent and also as the inevitable outward manifestation of the historical crisis. . . . Thereafter I saw the present—the approaching World-War—in a quite other light. It was no

⁴² H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society: The Reorientation of European Social Thought 1890-1930*, revised ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 372.

⁴³ Rolf Peter Sieferle, *Die Konservative Revolution: Fünf biographische Skizzen* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1995), 106.

longer a momentary constellation of causal facts due to national sentiments, personal influences, or economic tendencies endowed with an appearance of unity and necessity by some historian's scheme of political or social cause-and-effect, but the type of a *historical change of phase* occurring within a great historical organism of definable compass at the point preordained for it hundreds of years ago.⁴⁴

The First World War began just after Spengler completed the first draft of his book. The first volume was ready for publication in 1917 but, due to delays caused by the war, it was not released until the summer of 1918, reaching the public just as the post-war maelstrom began to swirl.⁴⁵

Spengler developed his evaluation of modern Germany within an ambitious and universal theory and narrative of world history. His intention was to show how contemporary geo-political crises were episodes in a much larger process. Building on the same Classical tradition that informed many other early attempts at a total world history, from Vico's *The New Science* (1725) to Toynbee's *Study of History* (1934-39), Spengler described a universal process of rise and decline that all civilizations followed. This process was universal not because it was predetermined that civilizations should thrive and then expire, but rather because civilizations were essentially organic systems that followed a natural life cycle through wholly internal processes. Spengler called his study of the universal, biological morphology of civilizations *Lebensgeschichte* (life-history).

Spengler's use of this traditional morphology was, however, significantly different than both the classical model and the uses to which Vico and Toynbee put it. While most theorists of world history proposed some kind of continuous cycle of rise and decline, Spengler depicted each civilization as a completely unique organism. In

⁴⁴ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, new and revised ed., trans. Charles Francis Atkinson, vol. 1, *Form and Actuality* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1928), 46-7.

⁴⁵ Hughes, *Spengler*, 6-7.

Spengler's biological model, a people lived through only one life cycle as an authentic civilization and then became one of the mass of anonymous peoples that are the objects and not the subjects of history. In Spengler's eyes, most of the globe had already passed into this phase. The great civilizations of Asia, Africa, the Mediterranean, and the New World were all dead, and their people were now a formless and threatening cosmopolitan mass.

For the sake of clarity, I should note that when I refer to a civilization, I am discussing the historical entity that progresses through the entire process that Spengler described. My clarification is necessary because Spengler made the already popular dichotomy between organic *Kultur* and inauthentic, dead *Zivilisation* a central part of his universal morphology. Spengler described the universal life cycle as essentially a process of degeneration from *Kultur* to *Zivilisation*.

Spengler explained that each civilization was the external reflection of an unconscious or instinctual soul or internal life as it developed through history. Institutions and culture were external facets or expressions of this internal spirit, so that each civilization had a certain style or form that functioned as an internal symbology but that also made it entirely unique and mutually incomprehensible to other civilizations. This aspect of his model added to its finality.

Spengler used a seasonal metaphor to describe the transition from *Kultur* to *Zivilization*. In the spring, culture and institutions developed organically and instinctually out of a robust and young internal life. In summer, these elements stabilized into the civilization's finest mature form, its golden age. In autumn, self-conscious refinement produced a highly developed civilization that, however, began to show hints of over-rationalization and detachment from the organic, unconscious roots of *Kultur*. Finally, in winter, organic institutions became totally

rational bureaucracies, and the arts and sciences became pointless speculation and trifling fancy. Losing the form that had kept it distinct from the rest of the world, any remaining spirit of *Kultur* was inundated and smothered by dead cosmopolitan *Zivilisation* as society left behind its traditional agrarian corporatism to join the homogenous masses in the barrack cities of world civilization, the inevitable end of modernity.⁴⁶

While much of *Untergang* was taken up in validating his theory with morphological analyses of the great civilizations of world history, Spengler's guiding purpose was to articulate what he saw as the present, late phase of Western civilization and to project its inevitable future so that Germany could respond. Spengler believed that the style or form that united the West was an endless striving to understand and master the world, a point that he constantly reiterated by referring to it as Faustian civilization. Spengler described the cultural seasons through which Faustian civilization had passed. Beginning in the flourishing spring of the late Romanesque and early Gothic, then passing through the summer grandeur of the Baroque to the golden autumn of Rococo refinement, Faustian civilization had felt the first chill of winter in Enlightenment rationalism and the political and industrial revolutions of the late eighteenth century.⁴⁷

Faust, a character of German folklore, sold his soul to the devil for total knowledge. In early modern popular stories, Faust's deal destroyed him, but the German romantics of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, most notably Goethe, rewrote the myth so that Faust's endless desire to know more prevented him

⁴⁶ Mosse, *The Culture of Western Europe*, 309-10; Herf, 52-3; Sieferle, 107-9.

⁴⁷ H. Stuart Hughes, "Preface to the Present Edition," in *The Decline of the West*, abridged ed., ed. Arthur Helps, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1932; New York: Oxford University Press paperback, 1991), ix-x.

achieving the total knowledge that would complete the deal. Spengler was part of another rewriting of the Faust myth in the early twentieth century. Like Mann's, Spengler's Faust was destroyed, but not because of some inherent evil in his quest, but rather because total and ecstatic knowledge was achieved only through destruction.

Spengler explained that the West expressed its Faustian spirit most clearly in an approach to technology (*die Technik*) as an extension of will rather than as a mere tool.⁴⁸ Herf explains, "In Spengler's view, modern Western science was an extension of the Greek idea of *Gestalt* and space. It expressed a 'Faustian world feeling,' a drive to expand into the natural spaces of the earth, to overcome resistance and formlessness."⁴⁹ This trait was unique to Western Europe and defined its historical character. It explained the West's drive to master the world in all respects, scientifically, politically, and culturally.

As occurred in all civilizations, the instinct that drove Faustian *Kultur* to greatness also set in motion the internal processes that naturally led into *Zivilisation*. The West's internal drive for total understanding and mastery of the world sowed the seeds of its death, by making the civilization stagnant and instigating hostility from abroad. It introduced a totalizing rationalism and bureaucracy and encouraged pointless speculation, paralyzing the civilization even as it produced a global crisis to which the West's advanced degeneracy made it incapable of responding. Spengler believed that as the West quarreled internally about how to engineer a socialist utopia, its colonial subjects were learning to use Western means to fight back.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Spengler's most thorough consideration of technology is in his *Mensch und die Technik* (Munich: C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1931).

⁴⁹ Herf, 54.

⁵⁰ Herf, 60-1 and 67.

That was the inescapable process that Spengler discerned in the years before World War I. The West's decline was inevitable, and the ensuing chaos meant that the future would be a time of barbarism. Spengler exhorted Germany to prepare itself for war by reaffirming its Prussian traditions and its traditional corporate and agrarian social order. Sharing in the new right's celebration of the 'new man' of the trenches, Spengler heralded the power of war to rally a nation's spirit. War had the unique double virtue of being both a creative force of *Kultur* and a destroyer of *Zivilisation*.⁵¹ Spengler's call for Germany forcefully to assert itself in the crisis, however, introduced an odd paradox—given the inevitability of Western decline, how could Germany ever be an agent in the creative barbarism of a new age? Spengler's ambivalence on the matter indicated an underlying fatalism. Whether or not Germany could have a future beyond the decline of the West, in Spengler's eyes, the only path that an honorable nation could take was to become a force against dead *Zivilisation*.

The publication of *Untergang* in the summer of 1918, just as Germany's war aspirations were turning into post-war despair, probably made the book much more popular than it otherwise would have been. It appeared to address Germany's defeat in a much narrower manner than Spengler had intended. As Hughes explains, "In the post-war circumstances of national defeat and humiliation, the German reading public could find in Spengler's work a tidy explanation of the calamities that had overwhelmed them—and that were about to befall their neighbors."⁵² Most researchers, like Gay, explain that *Untergang* immediately brought Spengler into the public spotlight.⁵³ Herf provides a bit more detail, explaining that, like other popular writers of the new right of the Weimar period, such as Jünger and Trötsch, Spengler

⁵¹ Herf, 56-8.

⁵² Hughes, *Consciousness and Society*, 378; also see 239, 372, and 377-9.

⁵³ Gay, 85.

was first supported by a “small right-wing sphere” that avidly purchased his books and supported an active lecture circuit.⁵⁴ A few years into the twenties, however, Spengler gained such stellar notoriety, that Iggers is not unusual in calling *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* “a Bible, and a source of inspiration for tens of thousands of educated middle-class Germans during a period of bewilderment.”⁵⁵

Spengler’s prominence in the new conservative movement deepened the impression that he was an author of Germany’s interwar crisis. Many researchers of Spengler, most notably Hughes, argue that this was and continues to be a misapprehension of Spengler’s much broader geographical and historical scope.⁵⁶ Sieferle concurs, arguing that *Untergang’s* success was largely due to the misapprehension of it as a “geschichtphilosophische Rechtfertigung des deutschen Sieges” (historical-philosophical justification of German victory).⁵⁷ I disagree that this is entirely a misapprehension. Separating Spengler’s ideas from the immediate crises of interwar Germany can be taken too far. He believed that vast historical processes came together in the immediate crises of the day. Indeed, as soon as Spengler gained the public spotlight, he began to clarify his views on Germany’s contemporary situation.

In 1919, he published *Preußentum und Sozialismus* (Prussianism and Socialism), a pamphlet contrasting the organic corporate structure of pre-modern Prussian society with the leveled and formless masses of rationalized English socialism. Throughout the twenties his political involvement increased, as he became a popular lecturer and pamphleteer. Because of the very same misapprehension of his

⁵⁴ Herf, 25.

⁵⁵ Iggers, 241.

⁵⁶ Hughes, “Preface to the Present Edition,” xii.

⁵⁷ Sieferle, 106.

scope that Hughes and Siefert describe, however, Spengler believed that his advice was never properly heeded. *Jahre der Entscheidung* (Years of Decision), a pamphlet published in July of 1933, soon after Hitler had consolidated power, was Spengler's last attempt to make the Germans recognize and affirm historical destiny.

Spengler treated National Socialism as simply one of a myriad of political parties, fixated on constructing a socialist utopia that would only increase rationalized bureaucracy and the engineered leveling of German *Kultur* and society. Spengler's criticism of the party did differentiate specific parts of his vision from the reception of his work that was popular in interwar Germany and important in Nazi ideology, but *Jahre der Entscheidung* only reiterated a broader anti-modern and romantic fatalism. This pamphlet that he wrote to warn Germans of Nazism's political shortcomings and nihilism instead represented modernity and the German nation in a way that made a self-destructive outburst of military force appear to be Germany's only honorable option.

JAHRE DER ENTSCHEIDUNG

Spengler opened *Jahre der Entscheidung* by proclaiming his overriding concern with Germany's interwar crisis and his affiliation with the conservative elements that had just dispatched the Weimar republic.

Niemand konnte die nationale Umwälzung dieses Jahres mehr herbeisehnen als ich. Ich habe die schmutzige Revolution von 1918 vom ersten Tage an gehaßt, als den Verrat des minderwertigen Teils unseres Volkes an dem starken, unverbrauchten, der 1914 aufgestanden war, weil er eine Zukunft haben konnte und haben wollte. Alles, was ich seitdem über Politik schrieb, war gegen die Mächte gerichtet, die sich auf dem Berg unseres Elends und Unglücks mit Hilfe unserer Feinde verschanzt hatten, um diese Zukunft

unmöglich zu machen. Jede Zeile sollte zu ihrem Sturz beitragen, und ich hoffe, daß das der Fall gewesen ist.⁵⁸

Not intended merely as a critical examination of National Socialism, Spengler explained, *Jahre der Entscheidung* was a revision of a lecture that he gave in 1929 entitled "Deutschland in Gefahr" (Germany in Danger). He changed the title for the 1933 publication in order to avoid giving the impression that the Nazi revolution was the danger. The content, however, he changed very little, explaining that he wrote "nicht für Monate oder das nächste Jahr, sondern für die Zukunft" (not for months or the next year, but rather, for the future).⁵⁹ The danger was not the Nazis themselves but the possibility that the Nazis would not be any better suited than the other political parties to react to the West's much vaster crisis.

The cause of the immediate "Zeitalter der Weltkriege" (age of world wars), Spengler explained, was a two-pronged "Weltrevolution" (world revolution) against the European ruling elite. Inside the West this revolution took the form of class war, which Spengler believed was the real goal of every modern political, social, or cultural institution. Externally, it took the form of race war, as Europe's colonial subjects fought back against their internally weakened masters.⁶⁰ In an insight that prefigured some of the fundamental ideas of recent post-colonial theory, Spengler explained that through colonial occupation, the West had exported its technology, its statecraft, and

⁵⁸ Oswald Spengler, *Jahre der Entscheidung: Deutschland und die weltgeschichtliche Entwicklung* (Years of Decision: Germany and the Development of World History) (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1961), 13.

(No one could have longed for this year's national revolution (*Umwälzung*) more than I. From the first day, I have hated the rotten revolution (*Revolution*) of 1918—that betrayal by the inferior portion of our people of the strong, robust portion that had awakened in 1914 because it was capable of having and wanted to have a future. Since then, everything that I have written about politics was directed against the powers that had entrenched themselves atop the mountain of our misery and misfortune in order to make this future impossible. Every line was meant to contribute to their overthrow, and I hope that has been the case).

⁵⁹ Spengler, *Jahre*, 18.

⁶⁰ Spengler, *Jahre*, 91 and 191.

its economic and credit systems to the very people in whom it was instilling a harsh resentment. Spengler depicted the decline of colonialism in the starkest terms. Seeing any cooperation between nations as weakness and sincerely believing that people should dominate one another, Spengler saw the end of Western dominance as leading to an inevitable war between "die farbigen Völker" (the colored peoples) of the world and the white West.

Cracks began to appear in the veneer of Western superiority in 1905 when the Japanese soundly defeated Russia.⁶¹ World War I then did away with any remaining fear the colonial world may have had of the West. "Nicht Deutschland, das Abendland hat den Weltkrieg verloren, als es die Achtung der Farbigen verlor" (Not Germany, rather the West lost the war, when it lost the respect of the colored people).⁶² The war also greatly weakened the West by setting the stage for socialist labor parties to gain power throughout the West in 1916 and by causing Russia to fall out of the Western sphere into what Spengler considered the mentality of a marauding central Asian horde. He called this mentality »Asien«. Spengler almost always put the word in scare quotes to emphasize that "Dies »Asien« aber ist eine Idee, und zwar eine Idee, die Zukunft hat" (This 'Asia' however is an idea, and, truly, an idea that has a future).⁶³ For Spengler, »Asien« was a paragon of all of the leveling force and herdish formlessness that he saw in the world revolution. The Soviet Union, rather than being Marxist, followed an ideology of "ein tartarischer Absolutismus" (a Tartar absolutism) and merely awaited its Khan to begin rolling into Europe.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Spengler, *Jahre*, 192 and 194-5.

⁶² Spengler, *Jahre*, 196.

⁶³ Spengler, *Jahre*, 73.

⁶⁴ Spengler, *Jahre*, 74.

Like other theorists of world history such as Toynbee and Burckhardt, Spengler likened modern Europe, threatened from without by barbarian hordes and weakened internally by cultural exhaustion and popular revolution, to Rome in the era of the Gracchan Revolutions. Referring to the vast historical scale of Rome's decline, Spengler argued that West's crisis was only just entering its crucial phases and would last perhaps into the next century.⁶⁵ He hoped to make Germany an active player in the global crisis. To that end, he advocated putting the nation firmly on a Bismarckian footing, emphasizing military readiness and a forceful foreign policy, and he disdained the domestic orientation of all of Germany's political parties, including the Nazis. With a phrase that became almost a refrain in *Jahre der Entscheidung*, Spengler exhorted his readers: "Aber Deutschland ist keine Insel. Kein zweites Land ist dem Grade handelnd oder leidend in das Weltchicksal verflochten" (But Germany is no island. No other land is so woven, whether acting or suffering, into the fate of the world).⁶⁶

Spengler explained that Germany would have a special position in world history even if it were only a matter of geography alone. A vulnerable land with no natural boundaries, it was both the center of Europe and a buffer against »Asien« to the East. But Germany's importance extended beyond the material world of geography to matters of culture and national spirit. Germany, he explained, carried a dormant cultural instinct that had to be reawakened if Germany was to become a historical actor instead of its victim. He called this inborn idea *Preußentum* (Prussianism), but judging from his explanation, it had more distant historical antecedents than the Prussian state. He explained that *Preußentum* was the same tradition that was upheld

⁶⁵ Spengler, *Jahre*, 172.

⁶⁶ Spengler, *Jahre*, 22.

by the “Deutschritterorden . . . , der in gotischen Jahrhunderten—wie heute wieder—die Grenzwacht der faustischen Kultur gegen Asien hielt” (the Teutonic Order, which in Gothic times—as again today—held the frontier of Faustian culture against Asia). It was “diese ethische Haltung, unbewußt wie jeder echte Lebensstil” (this ethical bearing, which is instinctive like every authentic form of living), that rose in splendor in August of 1914 before being betrayed by the forces of modernity in 1918.⁶⁷

Spengler saw reason for hope though. *Preußentum*, he argued, was a powerful force in the nationalist movement that had just taken power, and, like Heidegger, he wrote *Jahre der Entscheidung* not so much to steer Germans away from the Nazis as to steer Nazi Germany toward his own ideas. He criticized the Nazis’ domestic orientation and participation in factional socialist politics, but he saw much to laud “in der sittlichen Haltung der besten Einzelnen, und es ist möglich, daß von dieser Grundlage aus das deutsche Volk für die Aufgaben seiner schweren Zukunft langsam und beharrlich erzogen wird” (in the ethical bearing of its elite, and it is possible that from this basis, the German *Volk* will be slowly and tenaciously trained for the tasks of its difficult future).⁶⁸

As Spengler saw it, history had placed Germany in a unique position. If the nation could comprehend the movement of history and fulfill its unique role, Germany would be able to be a “Subjekt und nicht nur Objekt der Geschichte” (subject and not only an object of history), making it able “bei den kommenden Entscheidungen des Weltgeschehens mitzureden, mitzuhandeln haben und nicht nur ihr Opfer sein sollten” (to have a say and an active role in the coming decisions of world history, and not only

⁶⁷ Spengler, *Jahre*, 179.

⁶⁸ Spengler, *Jahre*, 179.

to be their victim).⁶⁹ That was a fatalistic opposition to present to Germany. If the only options Germans had were to be active or be victims, the implication was that activity meant victimization of others. Unlike the rest of the West, Spengler explained, Germany's history was not yet wholly written. With their origins in northern Europe, separate from Classical civilization, their history of infighting and fragmentation, and their comparatively late transformation into a modern nation-state, "die Deutschen noch genug jung sind, um die weltgeschichtlichen Probleme in sich zu erleben, zu gestalten, zu entscheiden, während andere Völker zu alt und starr geworden sind, um mehr als eine Abwehr aufzubringen" (Germans are still young enough to experience, give shape to, and solve world historical problems inwardly, while other peoples have become too old and rigid to do more than muster a defense).⁷⁰

The present crisis demanded that a nation rally around its caesar and take an offensive stance. The Germans could best prepare themselves to act by reaffirming their *Preußentum*, which Spengler depicted as both a set of cultural, political, and military traditions and as a uniquely German instinct. This instinct, which Spengler explained as "was wir von unseren Vätern her im Blute haben, Ideen ohne Worte" (what we have in our blood from our fathers, ideas without words), made Germans unusually equipped to see submission to the authority of distinguished leadership in the service of a powerful nation as the highest of ideals.⁷¹

It was the prominence of this leadership principle in National Socialism, whose forceful revolution Spengler applauded as "preußisch durch und durch" (Prussian through and through), that gave Spengler some hope that Germany would act in the

⁶⁹ Spengler, *Jahre*, 13.

⁷⁰ Spengler, *Jahre*, 19.

⁷¹ Spengler, *Jahre*, 16.

world crisis.⁷² All nationalism, Spengler explained, contained a latent monarchical principle that allowed the modern ideology of the nation to function as a transitional idea to the caesarism of the future. Fascistic nationalism in particular, with its focus on the dictator, prefigured the dawn of caesarism, but as long as Hitler retained his socialist utopian program and party orientation, he could be no caesar in Spengler's eyes. "Der Caesarismus der Zukunft kämpft nur um Macht, für ein Reich und gegen jede Art von Partei" (The caesarism of the future only fights for power, for one *Reich* and against every kind of party).⁷³ To Spengler, the leadership principle in Nazism and its potential for making Germany a powerful nation on the historical stage were badly impeded by the party's origins in modern socialism and by Germany's historical provincialism and insularity. Both shortcomings threatened to keep the nation from seizing its destined place in world history.

As a staunch advocate of forceful engagement in international relations, Spengler derided Germany's history of insularity and infighting, which he called "700 Jahre jammervoller provinzialer Kleinstaaterei ohne einen Hauch von Größe, ohne Ideen, ohne Ziel" (700 years of miserable, provincial particularism without a whiff of greatness, without ideas, without purpose). He saw the harsh partisanship of Germany's interwar politics as an extension of this past, which had left the average German "parteimäßig und partikularistisch . . . , das heißt flach, eng, dumm, krähwinkelhaft" (partisan and particularist . . . , that is shallow, narrow, dumb, and parochial). Germany's contentious, fragmented past was reflected not just in its political parties, but also in each of their ideologies, which Spengler depicted as

⁷² Spengler, *Jahre*, 14.

⁷³ Spengler, *Jahre*, 177.

self-absorbed, utopian dreams whose misguided social policies caused the West's decay and foolishly ignored foreign policy.⁷⁴

Somewhat surprisingly, Spengler explained that these introverted political ideologies, from Communism to Aryan nationalism to pacifism, were all variations of the German idealist philosophical tradition, which he presented as the intellectual counter-part of Germany's historical political character. The German, he explained, "sperrte . . . sich in zahllose Vaterländchen und Winkelinteressen ein, maß die Weltgeschichte an deren Horizont und träumte hungernd und armselig von einem Reich in den Wolken, wofür man das Wort Deutscher Idealismus erfand" (locked himself away in countless little fatherlands and narrow interests, measured world history by their horizon, and dreamed in wretched hunger of a kingdom in the clouds—for all of which he invented the name German idealism).⁷⁵ Considering Spengler's own deep immersion in the idealist tradition, his criticism appears a bit odd. Indeed, the consensus among modern scholars is that Spengler is a superb example of the pernicious uses to which the idealist tradition could be put. His work is a model example of the treatment of history as a dramatic stage on which nations appear as metaphysical entities that battle for duty, honor, sacrifice, and all the other high ideals represented in service to the state. Given the powerful role played by the idealist conception of history and the state in Spengler's politics and his representation of Germany, his argument against the tradition may have been an attempt to divert the charge of idealist abstraction away from his own assertions. The implication of his criticism was that he was being realistic and that those who did not agree with him were lost in hopeless speculative fancy.

⁷⁴ Spengler, *Jahre*, 23.

⁷⁵ Spengler, *Jahre*, 23.

With some amount of bravery, Spengler made no effort to spare the National Socialists from his criticism of German idealism. Specifically naming Jahn, Arndt, and Stein, some of the heroes of *Völkisch* nationalism, Spengler belittled their part in producing a German national mythology based on such things as the ancient Germanic constitution and Arminius's legendary victory over the Romans.⁷⁶ To Spengler, dreams of building a sacred Aryan nation, a soviet state, or a third *Reich* only took attention away from making Germany a viable nation-state and an actor in world history. "Und die Nationalsozialisten glauben ohne und gegen die Welt fertig zu werden und ihre Luftschlosser bauen zu können, ohne eine mindestens schweigende aber sehr fühlbare Gegenwirkung von außen her" (And the National Socialists believe they can oppose the world and, without it, build their castle in the sky, without there being, at minimum, a quiet but palpable reaction from abroad).⁷⁷ Spengler feared that the Nazis' bombastic attitude and deficient foreign policy could land Germany in an even more abject position than it was in already.

The unwillingness and inability of all of these utopian parties to face Germany's situation and formulate a viable national policy were, however, symptoms of not just a German problem. Spengler explained that the German tradition's extreme introversion was indicative of a general retreat from reality that pervaded the modern West. Making use of one of Nietzsche's most important ideas, Spengler explained that this retreat was a common characteristic of all 'late,' or advanced, civilizations. In its latter stages, a civilization became so speculative that it questioned its own legitimacy,

⁷⁶ For studies of this mythology see Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology*; George L. Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses* (New York: H. Fertig, 1975; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); George L. Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), chs. 1-3; Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair*; and Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995; reprint, New York: Vintage Books, 1996), ch. 2.

⁷⁷ Spengler, *Jahre*, 29-30.

losing the instinctual purpose of *Kultur* that had veiled an ultimate universal meaninglessness. The result, he explained, with an idyllic pastoralism that was very similar to the ideas being proposed by Martin Heidegger at roughly the same time⁷⁸, was “die allgemeine Angst vor der Wirklichkeit. Wir »Bleichgesichter« haben sie alle. . . . Es ist die seelische Schwäche des späten Menschen hoher Kulturen, der in seiner Städten vom Bauerntum der mütterlichen Erde und damit vom natürlichen Erleben von Schicksal, Zeit und Tod abgeschnitten ist” (the general dread of reality. We ‘pale-faces’ all have it. . . . It is the spiritual weakness of the *late* man of high civilizations, who is cut off in his cities from the peasant life and mother earth, and thereby from all of the natural experiences of destiny, time, and death).⁷⁹ The staunch, traditional conservatism of the second half of that statement made Spengler’s concept of the ‘late’ man significantly different from Nietzsche’s. While Nietzsche depicted the mentality of the ‘late-comer’ as a destructive discourse introduced into modern culture by a poor understanding of history, Spengler presented the ‘late’ man’s dread of reality as a symptom of an irredeemable and untenable inauthenticity in the modern West.⁸⁰

Spengler viewed Western Europe after the dual revolutions in politics and industry with essentially the same eyes as any traditional conservative, idealizing the corporate order of the old regime and lamenting society’s detachment from its organic roots. With a word of esteem for Burke, Spengler attacked modern politics for leveling society’s distinctions and hating all nobility and merit. “»Volk« bedeutet im Munde

⁷⁸ See Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Poetry, Language, and Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).

⁷⁹ Spengler, *Jahre*, 25.

⁸⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*, second revised ed., trans. Adrian Collins from *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben* (1874), The Library of Liberal Arts (New York: Macmillan, 1957).

jedes Rationalisten und Romantikers nicht die formvolle, vom Schicksal im Laufe langer Zeiten gestaltete, geschichtete Nation, sondern den Teil der flachen formlosen Masse, den jeder gerade als seinesgleichen empfindet, vom »Proletariat« bis zur »Menschheit«” (In the mouth of every rationalist and romantic, *Volk* means not the nation, shaped by destiny and ordered to the proper proportions and ranks over long spans of time, but rather that shallow, formless mass, from ‘proletariat’ to ‘humanity,’ that sees everyone as his equal).⁸¹ All modern intellectual movements, ideologies, and political parties represented the same illegitimate, modern project. To make his point, Spengler enjoyed explaining how ideologies that were commonly juxtaposed were actually symptoms of the same modern illness. Capitalism and socialism, for example, were both products of the greedy materialism of urban life—socialism was merely capitalism from below.⁸² Likewise, every materialist had romantic dreams of progress, while every romantic was motivated by want of material reform.⁸³

Spengler traced all these ideological symptoms of decline directly to the Enlightenment’s idea of rational progress and its unbridled criticism and speculation. Enlightenment intellectuals started a process of rational, engineered social leveling that Spengler traced through the French Revolution, the revolutions of 1848, and the Russian Revolution, to its culmination in Bolshevism, which Spengler used along with socialism as a blanket term for all modern ideas of socio-political legitimacy.⁸⁴ Spengler explained that the two modern, urban classes, the middle-class and the industrial workers, had conspired to undermine the West’s authentic social order. Having seized power during World War I, this degenerate coalition continued to make

⁸¹ Spengler, *Jahre*, 30-1.

⁸² Spengler, *Jahre*, 139-40.

⁸³ Spengler, *Jahre*, 28-9.

⁸⁴ Spengler, *Jahre*, 105.

unrealistic demands on society and the economy, causing the world economic crisis.⁸⁵ Spengler lamented, “Der Bolschewismus droht uns nicht, sondern er beherrscht uns” (Bolshevism does not threaten us. It rules us).⁸⁶ If the National Socialists were going to provide the leadership that Germany needed, they would have to leave behind their ideology and instead make the nation fit for action on the stage of world history. Agendas for social and political progress failed to see that history was determined by “robusteren Mächte. Menschengeschichte ist Kriegesgeschichte” (more robust powers. Human history is war history).⁸⁷

To Spengler, empty dreams of progress and peace had not just led the West to shrink from warfare; they had made it weak and unable to fight. As in all ‘late’ civilizations, the West’s cultural and political traditions had passed maturity and become organs of decline. Spengler explained that the real motivation behind the modern attack on traditional order and the desire for an egalitarian utopia was a self-destructive nihilism that struck all ‘late’ civilization. “Es muß wieder festgestellt werden: diese Gesellschaft . . . ist krank, krank in ihren Instinkten und deshalb auch in ihrem Geist. Sie wehrt sich nicht. Sie findet geschmack an ihrer Verhöhnung und Zersetzung” (It must be strongly reiterated: this society . . . is sick, sick in its instincts and therefore also in its spirit. It does not defend itself. It finds enjoyment in its own derision and corruption).⁸⁸ The masses, in dread of reality and out of resentment against anything that reminded them of their degeneracy, drove the West toward shallow formlessness, weakening it and preparing the ground for absorption into the ‘Asian’ horde of the Soviet Union and the post-colonial revolution. Spengler explained

⁸⁵ Spengler, *Jahre*, 140-1 and 144.

⁸⁶ Spengler, *Jahre*, 105.

⁸⁷ Spengler, *Jahre*, 28.

⁸⁸ Spengler, *Jahre*, 122.

that socialism was essentially “der unpersönliche asiatische Kollektivismus des Ostens. . . . Die Apotheose des Herdengefühls” (the impersonal, oriental collectivism of the East. . . . The apotheosis of the herd instinct).⁸⁹ All of the progressive plans of the political parties merely hid the fact that, in the modern West, “Man will nicht verändern und verbessern, sondern zerstören. . . . So entsteht der Nihilismus, der abgründige Haß der Proleten gegen die überlegene Form jeder Art, gegen die Kultur als deren Inbegriff, gegen die Gesellschaft als deren Träger und geschichtliches Ergebnis” (No one wants to change and improve; they would rather destroy. . . . That is the origin of nihilism, the abysmal hatred of the proletariat for everything superior, for *Kultur* as the embodiment of the superior, and for society as its bearer and historical product).⁹⁰ If Germany wanted to avoid being a pitiful victim in the upcoming crises, it would have to escape the West’s inward destruction and prepare for war.

Germany, he explained, was better suited than the rest of the West to put itself on a war footing. Its history, which Spengler lamented as miserable, at least had the blessing of retarding Germany’s development as a modern nation. Its middle-class was still healthy and mostly free from over-bureaucratization, and it retained an agrarian aristocracy in the Junkers. Germany also instinctually understood “das Preußentum als Tatsache in sich” (Prussianism as a fact in itself).⁹¹ Prussianism represented to Spengler everything that was threatened by the modern world revolution; most notably the organic ordering of society into that form that makes it best suited for warfare. “Preußisch ist die aristokratische Ordnung des Lebens nach dem Rang der Leistung. Preußisch ist vor allem der unbedingte Vorrang der Außenpolitik . . . über die Politik

⁸⁹ Spengler, *Jahre*, 187.

⁹⁰ Spengler, *Jahre*, 101 and 103.

⁹¹ Spengler, *Jahre*, 190.

im Innern, die lediglich die Nation in Form zu halten hat" (Prussian is the aristocratic organization of life based on the ranking of ability. Prussian is above all else giving foreign policy unconditional priority . . . over domestic policy, which has the sole purpose of keeping the nation in form).⁹² Prussianism provided Germany with an instinct for authentic social organization, for understanding duty to the state as a lofty ideal, and for the aristocratic bearing that it would need to act in history and not be its victim.

Germany's unique position in the West had other ingredients as well. Though he criticized romantic notions of Germany's barbaric, northern European origins, Spengler heralded in Germany the revival of a creative barbarism that marked the end of *Zivilisation* and the rise of a new *Kultur*. "Das uralte Barbarentum, das jahrhundertlang unter der Formenstrenge einer hohen Kultur verborgen und gefesselt lag, wacht wieder auf, jetzt wo die Kultur vollendet ist und die Zivilisation begonnen hat" (The ancient barbarism, which lay concealed and bound for centuries under the strict form of a high culture, awakens again, now that *Kultur* is completed and *Zivilisation* has begun).⁹³ Like many of the new conservatives of the Weimar period, Spengler believed that Germany had experienced a revival of this barbaric spirit in the trenches of World War I.⁹⁴ Such a spirit, he explained, was necessary to realize fully that history is a tragic story of war. "Wer Geschichte nicht erlebt, wie sie wirklich ist, nämlich tragisch, vom Schicksal durchweht, vor dem Auge der Nützlichkeitsanbieter also ohne Sinn, Ziel und Moral, der ist auch nicht imstande, Geschichte zu machen" (Whoever does not experience history as it really is, namely tragic—permeated by

⁹² Spengler, *Jahre*, 181.

⁹³ Spengler, *Jahre*, 35.

⁹⁴ Spengler, *Jahre*, 36.

destiny and therefore appearing to the worshippers of utility to be without sense, moral, or purpose—that person is in no condition to make history).⁹⁵

Because of its history and its instinctual Prussianism and barbarism, Germany retained “ein Schatz von tüchtigem Blut” (a treasure of hearty blood) that could be tapped for “der Kampf um den Planeten” (the battle for the planet).⁹⁶ Spengler wrote *Jahre der Entscheidung* because he feared that the Nazis were too immersed in modern decline to lead Germany in the battles that would end the modern West. However, rather than being a warning against the National Socialists, the book reads more like advice for the Nazi leadership. Though National Socialism was rotten with the diseases of ‘late’ civilization, it also exhibited positive elements that Spengler hoped to strengthen.

Spengler was impressed with the strong leadership principle in fascism, which he regarded as a transitional phase between old world monarchy and the caesarism of the future. The Nazis were also vocal advocates of modeling society on the *Frontgemeinschaft* (community of the front) that many of them had experienced in World War I, and they shared Spengler’s idea that Germany had discovered a vital barbarism in the war. Spengler also saw very strong Prussian elements in the National Socialist vision of a more organic society, ordered by rank and ability around the needs of the state.⁹⁷ He even lauded elements of the party’s socialism, which, unlike typical English socialism with its mere class warfare, had the purpose of keeping the nation “in form” for action by creating a corporate society reflecting natural, organic differences.⁹⁸ Still he warned that the Nazis’ concept of race was merely another

⁹⁵ Spengler, *Jahre*, 37.

⁹⁶ Spengler, *Jahre*, 208-9.

⁹⁷ Spengler, *Jahre*, 182-3.

⁹⁸ Spengler, *Jahre*, 178-80.

ideology of the leveling herd. Spengler regarded race aristocratically, as a matter of bearing and behavior not of inheritance. "Dies Barbarentum ist das, was ich starke Rasse nenne, das Ewig-Kriegerische im Typus des Raubtieres Mensch" (This barbarism is what I call strong race—the eternally warlike in the character of predatory man).⁹⁹ True race meant "Rasse, die man hat, nicht eine Rasse, zu der man gehört. Das eine ist Ethos, das andere — Zoologie" (race that one has, not a race to which one belongs. The one is an ethos, the other — zoology).¹⁰⁰ This criticism of the Nazi idea of race was, like Spengler's other criticisms, aimed at steering National Socialism away from ideologies of herdish formlessness that merely fueled the nihilistic self-destruction of the modern West.

Jahre der Entscheidung was a call to Nazi Germany to escape from modern nihilism and to build upon those unique traits that would allow it to become an actor in the world crisis. He asked:

Sollen wir als Träumer, Schwärmer und Zänker von den Ereignissen verschlungen werden und nichts hinterlassen, was unsere Geschichte in einiger Größe vollendet? Das Würfelspiel um die Weltherrschaft hat erst begonnen. Es wird zwischen starken Menschen zu Ende gespielt werden. Sollten nicht auch Deutsche darunter sein?¹⁰¹

Spengler's exhortation exhibited a deeply ominous tone that ran throughout his work. Despite his suggestions that Germany's resurgent barbarism might herald a youthful new *Kultur*, the overriding implication of his ideas was that not just Western history, but world history was in a 'late' stage of decay. Like an agent of the modern instinct of nihilism that he decried, Spengler suggested that the tragic, final act for German

⁹⁹ Spengler, *Jahre*, 208.

¹⁰⁰ Spengler, *Jahre*, 215, note 32.

¹⁰¹ Spengler, *Jahre*, 90. (Shall we be dreamers, zealots, and squabblers and be devoured by events, leaving behind nothing to bring our history to some kind of grand close? The rolling of the dice for world domination has only just begun. It will played to the end by strong men. Should not some of them be Germans?).

greatness must be an apocalyptic battle against the modern world. Rather than propose any positive future for Germany, he replaced the helpless self-destruction of the herd with a heroic fatalism.

DEAD-END HISTORY

Spengler's reluctance to grant the possibility for future German greatness was indicative of a broader fatalism that informed all of his works. The fatalism in his morphological model of world history was more than apparent, but it also appeared more subtly in Spengler's mixture of idealist and romantic notions of the state and history. Rather than halting nihilism in Germany, Spengler implied that it should be substituted for by a different kind of nihilism, one that could be taken up heroically as a way perhaps to break through inauthentic modern civilization to a new age of German power, and if that future could not be achieved, at least to drag the modern down in a final, tragic act of German greatness.

Spengler's retooling and mixture of various elements of the German tradition were strikingly similar to Hitler's ideology, especially as his war policy seemed purposely to create the inevitable and unwinnable global conflict that Spengler formulated. Despite their intellectual affinities, however, and despite Spengler's obvious effort to criticize constructively, the party leadership was extremely upset when they discovered Spengler's publication, of which 12,000 copies were already in circulation. Having considered him an important precursor, the Nazis, felt betrayed. Under serious scrutiny and fearing real harm, Spengler sent a copy of the book with an apologetic and explanatory letter to Hitler and had Cosima Wagner, the widow of the composer, make a personal appeal to the leader on his behalf. In the end, the party

decided to officially silence him, prohibiting him from publishing or speaking publicly. He died in Munich three years later.¹⁰²

Comparing Spengler's criticism and Nazi ideology, however, the similarities are far more striking than any vast differences. *Mein Kampf* revealed an attitude very similar to Spengler's on such points as the degeneracy of the whole modern social and political system, a general longing for an idealized pre-modern social order, and, ultimately, a simmering belief that German greatness had destined it for catastrophic collision with the illegitimate age that threatened to swallow it. Furthermore, throughout the thirties, the Nazis reordered society around supposed organic criteria of racial fitness in order to bring the nation in form for inevitable war with the East. Most importantly, Hitler's self-destructive war policy exemplified Spengler's deep fatalism about the irredeemability of the modern world and the necessity that Germany show its greatness by opposing the forces of modern decline to the last.

It is important to emphasize that Spengler's representation of German traditions should be approached with due criticism. These traditions contain multiple discourses from which Spengler chose certain elements in order to make his argument. My understanding of tradition is, however, greatly influenced by late twentieth century ideas about culture. For Spengler, culture was not an open repertoire of symbols, modes, and tropes, but rather a closed, organic structure that worked best when not open to speculation. His understanding of culture added another complicating level to his fatalism, in that he truly believed that his interpretation of the German tradition was inevitable.

Spengler provided a textbook example of the most pernicious uses to which the idealist concept of the state and history could be put. History, he explained, was the

¹⁰² H. Kornhardt, "Vorwort" in Spengler's *Jahre*, 7-8; Hughes, "Preface to the Present Edition," x-xi.

history of great political forces, and “die Form dieser Geschichte ist Krieg. Auch der Friede gehört dazu. Er ist die Fortsetzung des Krieges mit andern Mitteln. . . . Ein Staat ist das »In Form sein« einer durch ihn gebildeten und dargestellten völkischen Einheit für wirkliche und mögliche Krieg” (the form of this history is war. Peacetime also belongs to it. Peace is preparation for war by other means. . . . A state is that which is ‘in condition’ for real and possible war—a national unity, that it set up and trained).¹⁰³ Even by itself, this use of the idealist tradition encouraged a fatalistic attitude. Making a nation's aptitude for war the highest of all ideals reduced history to a wasted no-man's land, stretching between entrenched, eternally warring peoples. This is an example of how, despite or perhaps because of his opposition to modernity, Spengler took up some of its most destructive discourses, including a harsh social Darwinism and belief that existence was ultimately a valueless, pointless wasteland.

His attitude was pointedly evident in his observations about humankind and life. “Der Mensch ist ein Raubtier. . . . All die Tugendbolde und Sozialethiker, die darüber hinaus sein oder gelangen wollen, sind nur Raubtiere mit ausgebrochenen Zähnen” (Man is a predator. . . . All of the paraders of virtue and social ethics, who are beyond this truth—or would like to be—are merely predators with broken teeth).¹⁰⁴ The same sentiment was presented with similar gleeful nihilism when he explained, “Der Kampf ist die Urtatsache des Lebens, ist das Leben selbst, und es gelingt auch dem jämmerlichsten Pazifisten nicht, die Lust daran in seiner Seele ganz auszurotten” (Conflict is the basic fact of life—is life itself—and even the most pitiful pacifists have no success in eradicating the appetite for it from their souls).¹⁰⁵ Spengler's hopeless view of humankind was common to many of the more radical elements of the

¹⁰³ Spengler, *Jahre*, 49.

¹⁰⁴ Spengler, *Jahre*, 37.

¹⁰⁵ Spengler, *Jahre*, 38.

new conservative movement, including Hitler and Jünger. Most scholars agree that their nihilistic glee in force and disregard for life's value were common expressions of a generation badly damaged by World War I and disillusioned by subsequent economic and political crises. The use that these writers made of German traditions reflected the interwar generation's fatalism, the effects of which still resonate in those traditions, continuing to complicate Germany's reconciliation with its Nazi past.

When combined with his picture of world history, Spengler's use of the German tradition became even more ominous. Looming over his chest-thumping exhortation to enter forcefully into the game of world-domination was a picture of the world at the brink of endless and formless global cosmopolitanism. Spengler was consistently dubious about the future of German *Kultur*, wording his cries to the nation not as rallies to victory but to an honorable last stand.

After examining Spengler's unpublished notes from the last years of his life, Siefertle proposes that Spengler was even more fatalistic about world history than his published works suggested. Siefertle explains that Spengler had worked out an organic model for all of world history, not just for each civilization. After studying pre-history and the first civilizations, Spengler proposed that a formless and universal pre-history phase had preceded the procession of monadic civilizations that constituted history. More importantly, he suggested that because colonialism and the ceaseless striving of technology had made Western history into global history, the decline of Faustian civilization might introduce a new, universal, post-historical stage in which the globe became one formless, cosmopolitan world-city.¹⁰⁶ Spengler came closest to expressing this in *Jahre der Entscheidung* when he compared Western decline to the decline of other high cultures. All high cultures, he explained, developed a colonial style that set

¹⁰⁶ Siefertle, 116-7.

in motion the very revolutions that would bring them down. The decline of the modern West and of the Roman empire, he explained, were repetitions of the same post-colonial phase. Interestingly, however, he also hinted that the modern West was an evolved form of the Roman Empire, calling it the “*Imperium der weißen Völker*,” which, through a long dialectical process, had spread out across the globe to such an extent that it had begun to dissolve defenselessly into the barbarian hordes. The rise and fall of Rome was an episode in a larger, global process, whose final stages were propelled by the Western empire’s expansion.¹⁰⁷

The mixture of this vision of the end of history with Spengler’s view of the value of life and the state was volatile. Any proud, warring *Kulturstaat* would fight to total destruction against absorption into the mongrel world-city. Adding to that volatility was Spengler’s romantic understanding of history and of the sublime, which, like his idealism, reflected the nihilism of the war generation and the interwar years. Spengler presented history as though it was a dramatic stage on which nations battled like tragic Wagnerian heroes to fulfill their individual destinies. The drama was highest at the end of history. Truly great nations would see the end looming and plunge headlong into catastrophe rather than suffer humiliating, aching decay. The striving to be a great power in history would at least be evident in a tragic downfall. Spengler believed this was the Germans’ calling. Instinctual each German had a “*voll Freude gerade an der Schwere des menschlichen Schicksals. Man fordert es heraus, um es zu besiegen. Man geht stolz zugrunde, wenn es sich stärker erweist als der eigene Wille*” (well-developed joy in the difficulties of human destiny. He challenges and tries to overcome it. He goes proudly to his destruction if it proves to be stronger

¹⁰⁷ Spengler, *Jahre*, 194.

than his own will).¹⁰⁸ Spengler's application of a tragic esthetic to history completed his fatalism. It made sacrificing oneself to the nation in a catastrophic final battle against the world and history into the highest possible ideal. "Das Leben des einzelnen ist niemand wichtig als ihm selbst: ob er es aus der Geschichte flüchten oder für sie opfern will, darauf kommt es an" (The life of the individual is important to no one but himself: what is important is whether he wishes to flee from history or sacrifice his life for it).¹⁰⁹ Spengler's romanticism made a high experience out of a brave descent into destruction.

Spengler's romantic use of history also lent his ideas a powerful air of inevitability, to which he was no less susceptible than many of his readers. In describing the unstoppable organic process that ensured Western decline, he explained, "Hier sind wir alle ohne Ausnahme Sklaven des »Willens« der Geschichte, mitwirkende, ausführende Organe eines organischen Geschehens" (In that regard, we are all without exception slaves of the 'will' of history—contributing organs in the realization of an organic happening).¹¹⁰ Spengler exhorted his nation forcefully to take up its fatal historical destiny. "Eine entscheidende Reihe von Taten ist begonnen worden. . . . Jetzt müssen wir alle in dieser Richtung fortschreiten, ob wir sie gewollt haben oder nicht. Es wäre kurzsichtig und feige, nein zu sagen. Was der Einzelne nicht tun will, wird die Geschichte mit ihm tun" (A decisive chain of events has begun. . . . Now we must all march in its direction whether we want to or not. It would be short sighted and cowardly to say no. What the individual does not want to do, history will do with him).¹¹¹ Spengler appears truly to have believed that his ideas about destiny

¹⁰⁸ Spengler, *Jahre*, 36.

¹⁰⁹ Spengler, *Jahre*, 37.

¹¹⁰ Spengler, *Jahre*, 172.

¹¹¹ Spengler, *Jahre*, 17.

were inevitable. Adorno criticized Spengler for presenting as inevitable a view of history that supported the nihilism of the new conservative ideology while, at the same, proposing that individuals put their consciences “under the sway of blind necessity.”¹¹² Adorno’s remark helps explain the fatalism with which so many Germans followed the Nazis into a seemingly inevitable catastrophe.

While he always held open the vague possibility that a truly great culture could break through the decline of history, the resurgent German barbarism that he championed appeared more clearly as an agent of the modern West’s destruction than as a harbinger of a reborn Germany. Traditionally, Spengler scholars have seen his appeal to advance the Faustian spirit of technological and political world domination as a paradox or contradiction of his denigration of modernity. Sieferle, however, argues that Spengler was ultimately not an opponent to decline, but rather sought to accept and revel in it. Rather than be a victim of dead-end history, he proposed experiencing it as chosen.¹¹³

Spengler’s fatalism made him a powerful agent of the self-destructive nihilism that he decried in the herd mentality of modern politics and society. Far from being a problem inherent in modernity, the nihilism that Spengler discussed arose directly out of the kind of opposition to modern politics and society that Spengler so proudly represented. He sounded as if he could be writing about himself when he explained the self-destructive tendencies that festered in the modern age. “Der Ekel tiefer und starker Menschen an unseren Zuständen und der Haß tief Enttäuschter könnten sich schon zu einer Auflehnung steigern, die Vernichtung will” (The loathing that deeper and stronger men have for our circumstances and the hatred of the deeply disappointed

¹¹² Herf, 52.

¹¹³ Sieferle, 130.

could escalate into a rebellion that desires annihilation).¹¹⁴ That some reactionary elements in German interwar culture had already escalated to that extreme was more than evident in Spengler's fatalistic history and his demand that Germans show their greatness by embracing inevitable catastrophe.

¹¹⁴ Spengler, *Jahre*, 211.

CHAPTER III

FRIEDRICH MEINECKE

DIE DEUTSCHE KATASTROPHE

The end of World War II brought Meinecke into a position similar to the one he had been in at the end of World War I. Like the Wilhelmine Reich during World War I, National Socialism presented Meinecke with a political development that deeply challenged his conviction in the value of the German tradition. He lived until 1954, and in the last nine years of his life, he reevaluated the German tradition while extending his support to the Western allies and the Federal Republic with the same sort of resignation that he had given to the Weimar government. Meinecke explained how difficult it was to accept that Germany would be de-Nazified by occupation instead of by the Germans themselves. But fearing that this sentiment might lead even Germans opposed to Nazism to resent the Allies, he voiced his approval of the process, which he likened to a stern education.¹¹⁵

He wrote *Die Deutsche Katastrophe* (The German Catastrophe) immediately after the war to explain the causes of National Socialism and give Germany some cultural and historical orientation. While *Die Idee der Staatsräson in der neueren Geschichte* (The Idea of Raison d'État in Modern History) (1924) had considered that the German tradition did not inherently lead to the kind of ideal leadership that Meinecke saw in Bismarck, *Die Deutsche Katastrophe* (1946) considered the pernicious elements of the tradition that were promoted even by Meinecke's idols. Fearing blanket condemnation of the German tradition, Meinecke hoped to clarify the

¹¹⁵ Friedrich Meinecke, *Die Deutsche Katastrophe: Betrachtungen und Erinnerungen* (The German Catastrophe: Observations and Memories) (Wiesbaden: Eberhard Brockhaus, 1947), 151-3.

relationship between Nazism and German culture. Anticipating an important argument in the study of National Socialism, Meinecke explained the danger in depicting Hitler's rise as an inevitable product of the German past:

So würde das ein schlechteres Licht auf die moralische Widerstandskraft des deutschen Volkes werfen. Die Vergiftung, die es durch Hitler bereits erfahren hatte, und alle die säkularen Schwächen und Mängel, . . . die diesem Gifte vorgearbeitet haben, wurden als unheilbar erscheinen. Wenn alles genau so kommen mußte, wie es kam, so würde auch die heutige fürchterliche Katastrophe, die aus dem Hitlertum entsprang und ihm ein Ende machte, den Mut lähmen können, noch weiter zu leben und zu wirken.¹¹⁶

Die Deutsche Katastrophe was intended to avert such a fatalistic depiction of the Germans.

This same passage, however, hints at the ways Meinecke repeated the fatalism that he sought to avoid. His suggestion that copulating masses and modern socio-politics were the sources of Germany's problems and his dramatic presentation of the German catastrophe worked together to make Germany's self-destruction appear to be the tragic swan song of a national spirit that was too authentic to find a place in the illegitimate modern age. Iggers calls Meinecke's analysis of Nazism a form of apologia for National Socialism. He argues that Meinecke put off real questions about German guilt and about how the German tradition was useful to Nazism by employing a tragic esthetic and lamenting Germany's sad fate.¹¹⁷ While that is certainly how Meinecke's writing of the German catastrophe functioned in the post-war process of recollection, I argue that it is a mistake to see Meinecke's use of esthetic apologetics

¹¹⁶ Meinecke, 96. (That would cast a terrible light on the moral fortitude of the German people. The poisoning that it has already experienced in Hitler and all of the secular weaknesses and defects that paved the way for the poisoning would appear incurable. If everything had to happen as it did, the present, terrible catastrophe that sprang from Hitlerism and brought it to an end could paralyze the courage to live and labor).

¹¹⁷ Iggers, 252-4.

as a conscious effort to divert real analysis of Nazism; rather, his representation of German history sadly reflected and reiterated the fatalistic mood of the time. This hopeless mood was an essential ingredient of the ambivalent support given to Nazism by so many Germans who were not carried away with its ideology. Fatalistic representations of the nation and history, as seen in Spengler, Meinecke, and Mann, lent an aura of inevitability to the idea of a German catastrophe.

Meinecke examined two broad causes of National Socialism, the German tradition and modernity. While he proposed that Nazism developed out of the Prussian and idealist traditions, his overriding argument was that it was a product of modern crises. The development of National Socialism, he explained, was "die Geschichte der Entartung deutschen Menschentums" (the history of the degeneration of the German people).¹¹⁸ It was not the creation of a fundamentally diseased people, but rather a temporary infection inflicted by a few men on a Germany that was badly weakened immediately by World War I and its aftermath.¹¹⁹ Meinecke's analysis could have been the beginning of an analysis of how the German tradition was interpreted in the interwar period to support a nihilistic catastrophe like Nazism. Instead, he adhered to his conservative nineteenth century tradition, first, by clearly depicting Nazism as an inevitable result of modern political, cultural, and social developments rather than as a destructive reaction to them, and second, by fitting Nazi ideas of history and the state into his history of the inner development of the German spirit. Almost despite himself, he presented Nazism as the *Aufhebung* (culmination and end) of the German tradition. Like all three of his major works, *Die Deutsche Katastrophe* reveals Meinecke's disinclination or conceptual inability to examine the political imperatives that were

¹¹⁸ Meinecke, 28.

¹¹⁹ Meinecke, 140.

implied in his rigid and monistic use of the idealist tradition. As did his examination of the *Kaiserreich*, his analysis of Nazism fatalistically reiterated those pernicious implications as if they were inevitable. This was partially the result of his stubborn defense of his tradition, but it was also evidence that he was very much a creature of that tradition and had real difficulty grasping matters from a perspective outside of it.

This reiteration took the form of another radical distinction. Meinecke had no difficulty in lauding positive elements in Nazism while criticizing the party's methods and certain of its policies.¹²⁰ He premised his discussion of Nazism's positive elements on a vision of the modern West that was very similar to Spengler's. Meinecke believed that the dual revolutions had set in motion the ideological forces of nationalism and socialism, which the newly empowered masses blindly used to attack the pre-revolutionary order. Since the late nineteenth century, the German tradition had sought to avert disaster by uniting nationalism and socialism, "die beiden Quellen des Zeitalters" (the two wellsprings of the age), in a unique German manner and overcoming the untenable inauthenticity of modern society and politics. Meinecke praised Hitler's Germany as an unusually successful extension of this tradition and argued that the Germans should be *sadly proud* despite their abjection.¹²¹

Auch ein seiner nationalpolitischen Selbständigkeit beraubtes und zerstückeltes Deutschland, wie es uns heute beschieden ist, darf mit stolzer Trauer der Einheit und Macht gedenken, die es vordem genossen hat. Und sein einstiges Streben nach Einheit und Macht war nicht bloß . . . ein blindes Massenstreben, dem die Kultur nichts bedeutete. Vielmehr war es . . . einst getragen von jener großen Idee eines inneren Bundes von Geist und Macht, von Humanität und Nationalität, und große Kulturwerte sind daraus bei uns hervorgegangen.¹²²

¹²⁰ Meinecke, 137.

¹²¹ Meinecke, 108.

¹²² Meinecke, 159. (Even a dismembered Germany robbed of its political independence, as is our lot today, may think with proud sorrow about the unity and power that it previously enjoyed. Its erstwhile

Meinecke believed that the positive elements he saw in Nazism were entirely distinct from the regime's murderousness and nihilism. He lauded Hitler for presenting a viable alternative to Western liberalism. Like Spengler believed that because of the Anglo-French ideas of political legitimacy and social justice, "die Gesellschaft war die Gefahr gekommen, amorph zu werden" (society was in danger of becoming amorphous). As an example, he pointed to the youth of the Weimar Republic, who had been robbed of the state's guiding hand by the Versailles treaty's prohibition against German conscription. They wallowed in neglect and misdirection. Hitler at least provided them with structure and ideals.¹²³

The pathetic untimeliness of Meinecke's evaluation of Nazism was nowhere more apparent than in his discussion of the future of the German idea of *Volk*. Though the word still carries a powerful resonance from its very important role in all manner of unpleasant forms of German racist nationalism, Meinecke suggested in *Die Deutsche Katastrophe* that the *Völkisch* idea might be one of the most positive, enduring aspects of Hitlerism. He distinguished two kinds of *Völkisch* thought. One was a benign, inner-directed, and romantic form of *Völkisch* thought that was rooted in the early nineteenth century German tradition and was supportive of West European community. The other was an aggressive kind of *Volk*, which Meinecke attributed, in spite of all taste and decency, to the East Europeans that had just suffered so terribly under German occupation. "Die grenzdeutsch-kämpferische Form des Völkischen . . . ist gar nicht einmal etwas spezifisches Deutsch, sondern die gemeinsame Hervorbringung aller in osteuropäischen Zwischenraum lebenden und sich gegenseitig

striving for unity and power was not simply . . . a blind striving of the masses for whom *Kultur* means nothing. Much more, it was . . . carried along by this great idea of an inner bond between spirit and power, humanity and nationality. From it, there followed our great cultural values.)

¹²³ Meinecke, 108-109.

auf die Füße tredenden Nationalitäten" (The border-German, aggressive form of *Völkisch* thought is not even specifically German; rather, it is the mutual creation of all of the nationalities of the East European middle-space that are always treading on one another's toes).¹²⁴ Beyond this tangential reference to East European nationalism, he gave no sound reason for attributing German aggression to the East Europeans. Meinecke's idea that culture declined as one traveled east was a sad reiteration of an important facet not just of Nazi ideology but of Nazi genocide. Omer Bartov's *Hitler's Army* shows how the assumption that East Europeans were backward savages was very important in justifying barbaric acts against them.¹²⁵

While not as directly bound up with Nazi atrocity, Meinecke's depiction of modern socio-politics, ethics, and culture also repeated ideas that were fundamental to Nazism. Meinecke's belief that modern civilization had created an unprecedented crisis of previously solid and unquestioned religious beliefs reads like a classic example of the German reaction's disenchantment. "Wir sind alle in gemeinsamer Gefahr und Not! Und unsere deutsche Not ist hier die Not des christlichen Abendlandes überhaupt. Denn allenthalben ist das religiöse Leben in Gefahr, ausgetrocknet zu werden von der modernen Zivilisation" (We are all in collective danger and want. And our German predicament is here the predicament of the entire Christian West, for the religious life is, in every respect, in danger of becoming dried out because of modern civilization).¹²⁶ The main force driving the decline of modern civilization was the blind, purposeless, and unstoppable growth of the 'the masses' since the beginning of the nineteenth century. This population growth was "die

¹²⁴ Meinecke, 110-111.

¹²⁵ Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

¹²⁶ Meinecke, 167.

elementarste und dynamisch stärkste Ursache des universalen Umgestaltungsprozesses des Abendlandes" (the most elemental and dynamically powerful cause of the universal transformation of the West).¹²⁷

To Meinecke, this growth in population was, by itself, revoltingly dangerous to conservative order. What made it truly destructive, however, was the fact that the Enlightenment and the French Revolution had given 'the masses' bad ideas about improving their lives. Such ideas merely played into the hands of democratic demagogues. The ideas that came out of those late eighteenth century revolutions comprised the "Keim des großen Unheils, des falschen Strebens nach unerreichbaren Menschenglück der Massen" (seed of the great disaster—the false striving for the unachievable human happiness of the masses).¹²⁸ German history, from the idyllic age of Goethe to the Nazi catastrophe, was marked by the progressive advance of "der immer zahlreicher und anspruchsvoller werdenden Bevölkerungsmasse" (the ever growing and increasingly demanding masses).¹²⁹ But it was certainly not just Germany's problem. It was the "Geschichtsproblem einer verfallenden Kultur überhaupt. . . . Das Ganze erscheint zu sehr als moralische Entartungsprozeß der europäischen Gesellschaft" (historical problem of an entire declining culture. . . . In its entirety, it appeared as the moral degeneration of European society).¹³⁰ This hopeless depiction of modern history revealed Meinecke's bad repetition of the fatalistic mood that pervaded his despairing culture.

Meinecke had spent his entire career examining the difficult relationship between ethics and state power. In *Die Deutsche Katastrophe* he explained that

¹²⁷ Meinecke, 13.

¹²⁸ Meinecke, 9-10.

¹²⁹ Meinecke, 81.

¹³⁰ Meinecke, 10-1.

modern politics had greatly heightened the perniciousness of power. While in the past, politics and power had been the realm of an aristocratic few and common people were the naïve receptacles of Church guidance, modern politics had brought power to the people. "Damit vermehrten sich über auch die Schlüssel zum Giftschrank, in dem die Essenzen des Machiavellianismus lagen. Aus einer aristokratischen Angelegenheit wurde der Machiavellianismus zu einer bürgerlichen Angelegenheit, um schließlich MassenMachiavellianismus zu werden" (With that, the number of keys to the poison cabinet in which are stored the essences of Machiavellianism was increased. From an aristocratic concern, Machiavellianism became a bourgeois concern, and finally became mass-Machiavellianism).¹³¹ Meinecke's opposition to Western liberal democracy had certainly not waned during the Hitler regime.

Meinecke presented population growth as the main cause of modern crisis, but he also believed, like Spengler, that the West endangered itself with over-rationalism, which they both depicted as the hallmark of Western cultural development since the Enlightenment. Modern civilization, Meinecke explained, subordinated life to technology, causing humankind's spiritual side to either wither away or vent itself in an irrational outburst. Pre-modern social and political systems were based on an equilibrium of the soul's elements. Modernity had disrupted that balance by mechanizing life for work. *Homo sapiens* had become *homo faber*.¹³² Any examination of the German causes of National Socialism had to be framed within the decline of the modern West.

While he examined several specific German traditions that contributed to National Socialism, Meinecke explained that Nazism was most basically an expression

¹³¹ Meinecke, 81.

¹³² Meinecke, 57-63.

of a *Zwiespältigkeit* (inner contradiction) that was the defining characteristic of German culture. Idealism, *Völkisch* nationalism, and Prussianism, for example, all were made up of a mixture of the most uplifting and the most demonic elements. Meinecke believed this resulted in their greatness and value but also made them unusually susceptible to the imbalance created by modern civilization. He discovered “die Zwiespältigkeit der preußischen Seele” (the ambivalence of the Prussian soul) in his studies of the Prussian military tradition, which he had come to see was marked by the inner conflict of “ein höheres und niederes Prinzip” (a higher and lower principle) of power and force.¹³³

Germany’s inner conflict was the reason that the nation suffered more than the rest of the West under modern inauthenticity and that it produced the worst example of mass Machiavellianism. The German idealist tradition had had a healthy development from Luther to Goethe and Hegel, but through the nineteenth century, its metaphysical ideas were increasingly applied to material reality, until Bismarck and finally the experience of World War I completely fused German idealism and ruthless *Staatsräson*.¹³⁴ Meinecke listed the characteristics that distinguished Germany’s runaway *Staatsräson*: “die Offenheit und Nacktheit, die prinzipielle Schärfe und Bewußtheit, die Freude an rücksichtslosen Konsequenzen, die Neigung, etwas zunächst doch Praktisches zu etwas Weltanschaulichem zu erheben” (the openness and nakedness, the principled sharpness and purposefulness, the enjoyment of reckless consequences, the inclination for elevating something practical to something world encompassing).¹³⁵ In these remarks, Meinecke uncovered a bit of the fatalism in Nazi ideology, but his argument that these were forms of inherent German traits made his

¹³³ Meinecke, 155.

¹³⁴ Meinecke, 83-6.

¹³⁵ Meinecke, 28.

discovery little more than an uncritical repetition of National Socialist assumptions about the nation's culture. His representation of an instinctual German character emphasized elements of idealism and reckless force that were essential to the creative barbarism heralded by the Nazis.

Meinecke did not see Nazism so much as a change, break, or reinterpretation of German traditions, but rather as an imbalance of traits that had always been part of the German character and had even been utterly necessary to its greatness. Still believing that the Prussian military tradition was Germany's proudest accomplishment, he both explained its greatness and apologized for its implication in Nazism by invoking German *Zwiespältigkeit*.

Aber steht es nicht mit allen großen und fruchtbaren Ideen der Weltgeschichte so, daß im Laufe ihrer geschichtlichen Verwirklichung Heil und Unheil zugleich aus sich heraus zu entwickeln vermögen? Denn dies ist die Wirkung unserer Erlebnisse auf unser geschichtliches Denken, daß uns der dämonische Untergrund des menschlichen und geschichtlichen Lebens erschütternder als je vor Augen getreten ist.¹³⁶

Bismarck embodied the conflicted character of the German tradition. His greatest achievements were also pivotal transitions towards Hitlerism, making the nineteenth century statesman a "Grenzerscheinung" (border figure) in German history. The goal of the historian, Meinecke propounded, was to face the tragic mixture of greatness and disaster embodied in all great figures like Bismarck.¹³⁷ His assumption that this mixture existed and took form in German culture was one powerful way that his representation of Germany uncritically repeated the fatalistic understanding of German traditions that had become pervasive in the interwar period. The nadir of Prussianism

¹³⁶ Meinecke, 154. (But is it not so, that in the realization of all great and fruitful ideas of world history both good and evil are able to develop? This is the effect that our experience has had on our historical thinking—the demonic element behind human and historical life has stepped clearly before our shuddering eyes).

¹³⁷ Meinecke, 26-7.

came after World War I. Hindenburg's decision to place the state in Hitler's hands was guided at "der seelisch tiefsten und ursprünglichsten Schicht in seinem Denken" (the spiritually deepest and most primordial level of his thinking) by the horribly imbalanced Prussian military tradition, "und diesen darf man dann als diejenige geschichtliche Macht bezeichnen, die den Aufbau des Dritten Reiches wohl am stärksten gefördert hat" (and one can therefore designate this as the most powerful historical force in the construction of the Third Reich).¹³⁸

The spectre of modernity, however, was the real culprit that Meinecke saw behind the degeneracy of what had been a proud tradition. "Der moderne technisch utilitarische Geist" (the modern, technical utilitarian spirit) of the nineteenth century had infected Prussian militarism, badly exaggerating the rationalization that had made Frederick William I's system so effective. Seeking to completely organize society into a "mechanisches Kunstwerk im Dienste der Staatlichen Macht" (a mechanical work of art in the service of state power), Prussianism had tipped the modern imbalance of rational and irrational forces even further, leaving the nation with no healthy outlet for its spiritual needs.¹³⁹ The German military tradition, "durch seine geistige Verengung die Fühlung mit höheren Kultur verlor und dann, als bloßes Machtmittel des Staates empfunden, auch den Machtrausch des späteren 19. Jahrhunderts mit hervorbringen half" (through its intellectual and spiritual narrowing lost its contact with high culture, and then, perceived as a mere instrument of state power, it helped give rise to the intoxication for power in the late nineteenth century).¹⁴⁰ The Prussian General Staff embodied the ironically irrational over-rationalization of the German military tradition in the late nineteenth century. Rather than improving war policy and operations,

¹³⁸ Meinecke, 73.

¹³⁹ Meinecke, 64-70. The quote is on 65.

¹⁴⁰ Meinecke, 155.

Meinecke argued that this group of experts had horribly worsened Germany's geo-political situation with its narrow, technical planning. The Schlieffen Plan was an example of their poor policy—planned and calculated in minute detail, but based on fantastical assumptions that made all planning worthless.

The poor planning of the General Staff was minor, however, compared to Hitler's catastrophic foreign policy. The German invasion of the Soviet Union created an unwinnable two-front war. Despite all the planning, it was absurd in its conception. "Es war einer jener verhängnisvollen Rechenfehler, wie sie eine technisch gerichtete und zugleich von Phantasie geschwellte Mentalität heute leicht begehen kann" (It was one of those disastrous errors of judgment easily committed these days by a technically oriented mentality swollen with fantasy).¹⁴¹ Hitler was the culmination of the modern imbalance of rationality and irrationality.¹⁴² He was the epitome of "der moderne Machtmensch" (the modern person of power), and his movement appealed to Germans precisely because they suffered under the same modern imbalance. "Da sieht man, wie die einseitige Dressur des Intellektes, zu dem die arbeitsteilige Technik vielfach führt, zu einer jähen Reaktion der vernachlässigsten irrationalen Seelentriebe führen kann, . . . zu einer neuen Einseitigkeit, die nun wild und maßlos um sich greift" (Here one sees how the one-sided 'horse-training' of the intellect, to which the technical division of work often leads, can come to an irascible reaction of the most neglected irrational impulses, . . . to a new one-sidedness that clutches about wildly and without limit).¹⁴³ Hitler, who Meinecke analyzed as essentially a resentful,

¹⁴¹ Meinecke, 117.

¹⁴² Meinecke, 79.

¹⁴³ Meinecke, 59.

frustrated artist, was indicative of the dangerous and pervasive disenchantment caused by modern inauthenticity.¹⁴⁴

That inauthenticity had not only distorted Germany's healthy irrationality, it had also made Germans more likely to place their total faith in any ideology that was offered to them. Again echoing Spengler's vision of Western decline, Meinecke wrote: "Die Ideologie sitzen ja im Stadium einer zur Zivilisation verflachten Kultur nicht mehr ganz so fest, sind nicht überall echt und können unter Umständen leicht gegeneinander ausgewechselt werden" (In that stage of development when a culture is flattened out and made shallow by civilization, ideologies are no longer very stable, are not entirely authentic, and can, under circumstances, be easily interchanged with one another).¹⁴⁵ In several passages in *Die Deutsche Katastrophe*, Meinecke argued that Nazi ideology was entirely an opportunistic façade that the leadership was quick to change whenever it suited their purposes.¹⁴⁶

Meinecke's explanation of the German background of National Socialism ended in a discussion of modern causes and a denial of anything particularly German about Nazi culture. Discussing the modern degeneration of the German character, he emphasized "die Tiefe der Kluft zwischen Hitlergeist und gesundem deutschem Geist" (the depths of the rift between the mind of Hitler and the healthy German spirit).¹⁴⁷ Meinecke located that healthy spirit in the idyllic age of Goethe and saw its last glimmer in the glory days of August 1914. After that, in the disagreements over war aims that developed during World War I, two kinds of Germans distinguished themselves, *Kulturmenschen* (people of culture), who would later support the Weimar

¹⁴⁴ Meinecke, 113.

¹⁴⁵ Meinecke, 135-6.

¹⁴⁶ Meinecke, 91, 118-9, and 122.

¹⁴⁷ Meinecke, 74.

Republic, and *Machtmenschen* (people of power), who prefigured Hitler.¹⁴⁸ Post-war devastation fed the resentful, nationalist ideology of the *Machtmenschen*, laying the groundwork for the transformation of the Germans “zu einen neudeutsch entarteten Hitlermenschentum” (into Hitler’s degenerate, new-German people).¹⁴⁹

In a chapter titled “Der Zufall und das Allgemeine” (Coincidence and Generality), Meinecke explained that the chaos and reactionary politics of the Weimar period were background causes of Nazism, but that Hitler, the individual, represented a sharp historical contingency, a chance element, on which vast events turned. As in all history, the relationship between necessary and general causes in Hitler’s development was fluid and open to interpretation. “Aber die aus den Fugen gegangene Zeit rief eine aus den Fugen gegangene Natur zur gegenseitigen furchtbarsten Steigerung auf den geschichtlichen Schauplatz” (But a time that was out of joint beckoned an unhinged personality to arise terribly over the stage of history).¹⁵⁰ Having explained the difficulty in separating general causes from contingency, Meinecke made an extensive case for attributing National Socialism most directly to a few very specific personalities and decisions, most importantly the decisions of the Weimar and military leadership in the early thirties not to resist and then to embrace Hitler.¹⁵¹

In a flash of insight that broke down the radical distinction between history and politics that usually marked Meinecke’s fossilized tradition, he explained that the position that one took on the question of contingent and general causes in Nazism greatly reflected on the Germans and their traditions.

¹⁴⁸ Meinecke, 44-7.

¹⁴⁹ Meinecke, 51-55. The quote is on 55.

¹⁵⁰ Meinecke, 89.

¹⁵¹ Meinecke, 72-3, 92-4, and 104.

Denn je nach der Antwort, die sie erhält, fällt auch das Bild des geistigen und politischen Gesamtzustandes des deutschen Volkes verschieden aus — hoffnungsvoller oder hoffnungsloser. . . . Geben wir diese Möglichkeit in vorliegendem Falle zu und räumen wir ein, daß der Aufstieg Hitlers zur Macht mit Erfolg hätte verhindert werden können, so wird damit auch der Anteil des deutschen Volkes an der Schuld, Hitler zur Macht gebracht zu haben, geringer.¹⁵²

With his politics clearly in the open, Meinecke asked whether chance events in the early thirties might have averted Hitler's ascendancy. "Es ist eine billige Weisheit, diese Frage abzulehnen und mit düsterem Fatalismus das Unglück, das er über Deutschland brachte, als unentrinnbares Schicksal zu erklären" (It is a feeble wisdom to not accept this question and declare with dismal fatalism that the catastrophe that he brought down on Germany was an inescapable destiny).¹⁵³ Meinecke's uncharacteristically keen awareness of the political and cultural implications produced by different analyses of Nazism did not, however, prevent him from fatalistically presenting the catastrophe of Nazism as an inevitable result of the volatile combination of modern illegitimacy and German *Zwiespältigkeit*.

DEFENDING ENEMY GROUND

Meinecke maintained an alarmingly narrow interpretation of German culture, which he believed consisted solely of the proud Prussian military and idealist traditions that had appeared so gloriously in the war fever of 1914. Unwilling to face directly the particularly powerful role played by this monistic Prussianism in the development of Nazi ideology, Meinecke resorted to an esthetic apologetics. The relationship between National Socialism and Meinecke's tradition was evidence of

¹⁵² Meinecke, 96. (Depending on the answer that it receives, the picture of the spiritual and political condition of the German people comes out differently — either more hopeful or more hopeless. . . . If we grant the possibility in the case before us that Hitler's rise to power could have been prevented, then the German people's share in the guilt of having brought Hitler to power diminishes).

¹⁵³ Meinecke, 92.

that traditions tragic greatness. To begin his discussion of the positive elements in Hitlerism, he explained: "Der Untergrund satanischer Mittel der zugleich mit ihnen [den Idealen] in die Höhe stieg, durfte zwar niemals dabei vergessen werden. Aber bei welcher neuen großen, das Dasein umgestaltenden Idee hatte sich Satan nicht auch gleich als Einpeitscher und Nutznießer mit eingeschaltet!" (The underlying satanic ways that arose to the heights along with the ideal should never be forgotten. But in what great, existence transforming idea has Satan not insinuated himself as spokesman and beneficiary).¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁴ Meinecke, 106.

CHAPTER IV

THOMAS MANN

From 1930 to 1947, Thomas Mann devoted more and more of his creative energy to examining National Socialism. The Nazi revolution posed severe questions about German culture, society, and history, and Mann explained in essays, speeches, and the 1947 novel, *Doktor Faustus*, where Nazism came from and how it fit with German traditions. Over the seventeen-year period, Mann's ideas developed considerably, as he often tailored his message to events in Germany. But by the end of the war, indeed partially in reaction to the utter catastrophe of Germany's demise, Mann expressed his belief that Germany's own destructive and fatalistic romantic spirit was at the core of National Socialism. As a proud representative of the romantic tradition himself, Mann was more than well-acquainted with its morbid side and could understand the sublime appeal of the way Germany darkened the horizon of history, but he was able to break with this estheticism enough to take a clear stand against Nazism. I will first illustrate the development of Mann's political ideas up to the rise of National Socialism. Then I will explain how Mann depicted Nazism's connection to German history and traditions by fitting his analysis into three historiographical issues: the extent to which National Socialism was totalitarian, was modern, and was rooted in German traditions. Finally, I will show how, despite his clear opposition to National Socialism, Mann represented German culture and history in a manner that reinforced Nazism's appearance of inevitability and fed its distorted image as the destiny of a tragic national spirit.

THE AMBIVALENT GERMAN

In order to explain Mann's stance on Nazism's connection to Germany's past and traditions, it is important to provide Mann's climate of opinion and political ideas in the three decades before 1930. Mann's harsh judgment against Germany, from which it should be noted he did not exclude himself, came after years of trying to save German culture from going down in infamy with the Hitler regime. Exiled in 1933, Mann presented himself as a bearer of the German tradition.¹⁵⁵ He truly came into this role of cultural representative in 1938, when he emigrated to the United States. The American public heralded him as the unrivaled representative of and expert on the "good" Germany, and his writing and lectures enjoyed attentive audiences. He did his best to make his home in Los Angeles a gathering place for Germans in exile, and he expressed the need for them all to represent a good Germany to the rest of the world, perhaps most importantly, to Germany.¹⁵⁶ Mann expressed the extent to which he had taken on the role when he wrote, "Wo ich bin ist die deutsche Kultur" (Where I am, there is German culture).¹⁵⁷ Or perhaps he was being ironic and expressing the extent to which the role had taken him on in America. In any case, Reed is correct in seeing Mann's assertion as "a necessary political act" against the Nazis' control and crude redefinition of German culture.¹⁵⁸

Mann's deep immersion in politics in the 1930's and 1940's and his notion that political and cultural concerns were closely related were in stark contrast to his views earlier in life. Even more than Meinecke, the degree of self-criticism and revision that

¹⁵⁵ Gunilla Bergsten, *Thomas Manns Doktor Faustus: Untersuchungen zu den Quellen und zur Struktur des Romans* (Sweden: Scandinavian University Books, 1963), 8.

¹⁵⁶ Bergsten, 8-9; T.J. Reed, *Thomas Mann: The Uses of Tradition*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 1-2.

¹⁵⁷ Reed, 1.

¹⁵⁸ Reed, 1-2.

Mann demonstrated was remarkable given that he was fifty-five in 1930 and had already had such a full intellectual life. Before World War I, Mann, like many of his intellectual generation, expressed the belief that politics was a lowly, prosaic sphere to which the arbiters of culture should not lower themselves. He favored the idea that artists should be engaged with society, but he struggled with amorphous metaphysical notions of how the connection was made.¹⁵⁹ Like many of the pre-war intelligentsia, Mann suggested that by employing their talents, artists could awaken society to the ideal sphere of esthetics, connecting with the national spirit by raising it up to their level rather than lowering themselves to it.

Reed argues that Mann saw his opportunity to find a place for his talent when World War I broke out.¹⁶⁰ Again Mann's reaction was not uncommon to his generation. The enthusiasm with which Germany met the war is a well-discussed phenomenon, and many alienated intellectuals of the period were drawn to speaking for the active national spirit they saw awakening in the nation. Mann later expressed the infectious appeal of Germany's war enthusiasm through Serenus Zeitblom, the character who narrates *Doktor Faustus*. Serenus represents Mann as a rational humanist who repeatedly expresses distaste for the morbid and fanatical ideas that make up his cultural landscape. But when Serenus discusses the onset of the war, he explains that he too felt the appeal "einmal. . . im Allgemeinen unterzugehen" (just once to be submerged in the masses).¹⁶¹

In several works during the war, Mann expressed a jingoistic support of the Wilhelmine Reich and the German war effort. In *Gedanken im Krieg* (Thoughts in

¹⁵⁹ Reed, 5.

¹⁶⁰ Reed, 181.

¹⁶¹ Thomas Mann, *Doktor Faustus: Das Leben des deutschen Tonsetzers, Adrian Leverkühn, erzählt von einem Freunde* (Stockholm: Bermann-Fischer, 1948), 464.

War), he trumpeted the idea that Germany had a great cultural and national spirit that was destined to break through the modern bourgeois order and begin a new historical epoch.¹⁶² But Mann's pronouncements about Germany's destiny also contained the romantic fatalism of which he would later become so critically aware. By this I mean that he regarded suffering as intimately linked to greatness. As if history were a classical tragedy, Germany's destiny contained the seed of its own destruction. In *Friedrich und die große Koalition* (Frederick and the Grand Coalition), Mann compared Germany's confrontation with the entente powers to Frederick the Great's confrontation with the powers of Europe, emphasizing the profound intermixture of possible greatness and calamity in both situations.¹⁶³

In 1919, when he published *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* (Observations of an Unpolitical Man), Mann still retained his views of Germany's destiny to lead a cultural renewal of the entire West, but the reality of the war had dampened his militaristic zeal. In the book, Mann attacked bourgeois values and politics for denying the depth of humankind's soul and threatening to make culture shallow.¹⁶⁴ He argued that the freedom of modernity caused a crisis in art, which was losing all contact with real culture and becoming mere shallow appearance, existing solely for its own sake rather than speaking for the intellectual and spiritual life of society. Mann saw the need to reconcile modern socio-politics and mass culture with the structure of tradition in order to produce art that did not appear superfluous amid the crises brought upon Germany by the war.¹⁶⁵ As Jeffrey Herf aptly argues in *Reactionary Modernism*, this idea of saving culture by uniting the modern with the traditional was an important

¹⁶² Gay, 11-2.

¹⁶³ Gay, 73.

¹⁶⁴ Gay, 73-4.

¹⁶⁵ Bergsten, 132-4.

theme of Western culture in the first half of the twentieth century and, in Germany, supplied much of the ideological framework for Nazism. Mann's notion of art's precarious modern condition stayed with him throughout his life, and it is a central idea in *Doktor Faustus*. Adrian Leverkühn, the composer who is the subject of the novel, presents a notion of esthetic crisis very similar to Mann's. Adrian's desire for a breakthrough is the Faustian drive that leads him to dealing with the devil, who appears to the composer in a feverish hallucination brought on by a fatal illness that he purposely contracted to improve his art. Mann leaves open the possibility that the devil was never anything but a projection of the composer's desire to make great art by experiencing suffering and fatal catastrophe.

Mann maintained into the twenties his concern with overcoming art's status as an autonomous sphere, separate from society's everyday existence. Such a status threatened to make art irrelevant, especially when a society suffered the kind of severe economic and political crises that Germany experienced after World War I. But Mann abandoned the amorphous metaphysical notions that led artists to seek an identity as the cultural directors of nationalistic enthusiasm. Instead, he recognized that art, society, and politics are intimately related and emphasized the necessity for them all to be mediated by an overriding ethical humanism.¹⁶⁶ Peter Gay argues that in his 1924 novel, *Der Zauberberg* (The Magic Mountain), Mann expressed through the character Hans Castorp his realization that humankind is full of internal contradictions but has the freedom to choose not to be swept up in them and destroyed by the extreme oscillations. Reason was important to Mann's new humanism, but reason tended to ignore the messiness of human passions, and it could reinforce rather than break out of the oscillations of a contradictory psychology. More important to Mann's humanism

¹⁶⁶ Reed, 5; Gay, 74.

was love and compassion.¹⁶⁷ This was a far cry from his infatuation with Germany's hysteria a decade earlier. Gay explains that the tuberculosis sanatorium where most of *Der Zauberberg* is set represents Europe on the threshold of World War I: "overripe, weary with peace, ready for the dance of death, openly prosperous and secretly corrupt. . .its ambulatory patients with their ruddy cheeks and vigorous walks concealing and displaying their insidious disease."¹⁶⁸

Mann's rather remarkable reversal also took shape in his support of the democracy and international cooperation that the Weimar government offered Germany's future. His defense of the republic increased in the later twenties even as its popularity plummeted amid the economic depression and the increasingly paranoid and extreme political climate. One month after the National Socialists made substantial gains in the elections of 1930, Mann gave a speech, later published as "Appell an die Vernunft" (Appeal to Reason), in which he emphatically defended the Social Democrats, who had taken the thankless jobs of negotiating the peace and restoring the crest-fallen nation and had actually made astonishing progress given the circumstances. With implicit reference to Hitler, who made avid use of the phrase, Mann declared that no one who spoke of the Weimar leadership as the *Novemberverbrechern* (November criminals) deserved to be called a German.¹⁶⁹

That speech marked the beginning of the period of Mann's career when he engaged the connection between National Socialism and German history and traditions. He did so in significantly different ways in speeches and essays from 1930 to 1945, in the novel *Doktor Faustus*, which he began in 1943 and published in 1947,

¹⁶⁷ Gay, 126-7.

¹⁶⁸ Gay, 124.

¹⁶⁹ Thomas Mann, "Appell an die Vernunft," speech of 17 Oct. 1930, Beethovensaal, Berlin, printed in *Achtung Europa!: Aufsätze zur Zeit* (Stockholm: Bermann-Fischer, 1938), 62-3.

and in the book he published two years later under the title *Die Entstehung des Doktor Faustus* (The Origin of Doctor Faustus), which is an account of his life, interactions, and intellectual pre-occupations during the writing of the novel.

The incongruities of politics, arguments, and perspectives between these three kinds of sources have led some researchers to accuse Mann of being disingenuous or at least inconsistent. The clear stand taken by Mann in his public, political works is often handled ironically in his novel. However, if we examine how Mann used irony to add both ethical and esthetic nuance and objective distance to his more straightforward political pronouncements, the different kinds of sources appear more supplementary. The novel shows the psychology and social forces that went into the German catastrophe from multiple perspectives and illustrates the personal difficulty Mann had in working through the complex issues raised for a lover of the German romantic tradition. The essays and speeches show that Mann was able to resolve his turmoil at least enough to take a clear political stand, but they hide the nuance of the novel in a self-irony that can be difficult to comprehend without the kind of intersource analysis that I am using here. Comparing the novel and the political writings, one can see, for example, how sections of Mann's speeches are repeated verbatim in the novel in the voice of Serenus, the liberal humanist, whose own repulsion with the Nazis is constantly undermined by his pathetic fascination with the demonic elements of German culture. Certainly Mann was pursuing a subtle and complex form of self-criticism.

In order to discuss Mann's views on how National Socialism developed, I am going to use the major historiographical issues in the subject as a framework. This is somewhat artificial in that these issues did not exist as discrete historiographical questions when Mann was writing, but they provide a way to organize his ideas and

make them easily accessible to other historians. Antony Polonsky summarizes three main issues involved in the German question: the extent to which National Socialism was totalitarian, was modern, and was rooted in German traditions.¹⁷⁰ Burleigh and Wippermann give an excellent historiographical review of these issues and their relation to Cold War politics in the first chapter of their 1991 book, *The Racial State*. They point out that German exiles took up the question of the Germanness of Nazism even before the war broke out.¹⁷¹ Mann certainly fit this description. The question of the Germanness of the Hitler revolution occupied him most. The questions about its modernity and its political nature were simpler to him and occupied him less and less as the Nazi era moved into the war era, and he saw his early suspicion of the movement's self-destructive spirit confirmed in its fatal drive toward catastrophe.

DOKTOR FAUSTUS AND THE GOOD GERMAN

Mann struggled least with the issue of whether National Socialism was one totalitarian dictatorship among others or a unique popular German political movement. He sided with the latter opinion, regarding it as a *völkisch* movement that was fueled by mass hysteria and took shape in estheticized politics.¹⁷² In a moment of reflection on the events around him, Serenus remarks how Germans sought in Nazism a return to the *völkisch* hysteria, the "altertümlich-neurotische Unterteufheit," (old-world, neurotic devilishness) of the latter middle ages.¹⁷³ Later he remarks that the Germans drank from the cup offered by the Nazis out of a need for religious intoxication. In the

¹⁷⁰ Antony Polonsky, "Foreword" in Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Wippermann, *The Racial State: Germany, 1933-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), xiii-xiv.

¹⁷¹ Burleigh and Wippermann, 11.

¹⁷² Mann's views on Nazi politics are very similar to those put forward by Mosse in *The Nationalization of the Masses*.

¹⁷³ Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, 58.

essay "Bruder Hitler" (Brother Hitler) written in 1937 but not published until well into the war, Mann presented Hitler as a mortifying but arresting brother in the romantic esthetic tradition.¹⁷⁴ But Mann's depiction of Nazism as a fundamentally popular phenomenon did not prevent him from also indicting the leadership. In the same passage mentioned above, Serenus calls the National Socialist leadership, who mixed the drink for German consumption, sadistic gangsters and deceivers.¹⁷⁵ At another time, he criticizes the leaders for bringing Germans to such a "seelische Lage" (condition of the soul) that they are more self-estranged and beyond healing than ever before.¹⁷⁶

These passages are evidence that Mann saw in Nazism the fusion of a terroristic and propagandistic dictatorship with hysterical mass politics. He sided clearly with those who emphasized its popular elements. Serenus sees all Germany as so compliant in what he considers the atavism of the Third Reich that he calls it hypocrisy for any German to criticize the Allies' aerial destruction of Germany.¹⁷⁷ Indeed, Mann began his protest against the Nazis in 1930 when they were still a legal party in Weimar's parliamentary system and were making frightening advances through the electoral process. In the speech he gave in response to the 1930 elections, Mann depicted the Nazis as the translation of the mass social and economic discontent of the interwar period into an acute political crisis. "Es heißt wohl zuviel verlangen, wenn man von einem wirtschaftlich kranken Volk ein gesundes politisches Denken fordert" (It is probably too much to expect an economically sick people to have

¹⁷⁴ Thomas Mann, "Bruder Hitler," in *Altes und Neues: Kleine Prosa aus fünf Jahrzehnten* (Frankfurt a.M.: S. Fischer, 1953), 625-6.

¹⁷⁵ Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, 271.

¹⁷⁶ Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, 51.

¹⁷⁷ Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, 266-8.

healthy political thoughts).¹⁷⁸ On the question of Nazism's dictatorial nature, Mann clearly favored emphasizing that Nazism was a popular phenomenon.

Mann's position on the question of Nazism's modernity developed similarly, but the change was more drastic and pronounced. In the early thirties, he emphasized the extent to which the Hitler revolution fit into a modern interwar context. As the regime lived on and the war began, Mann started to look for more distant cultural and psychological antecedents. By the time he began *Doktor Faustus*, in 1943 when the darkness of Nazism was utterly undeniable and its doomed fatalism seemed bent on catastrophe, Mann put the modern context on the periphery and emphasized German traditions that dated back to the late middle ages, the Reformation, and nineteenth century romanticism.

In his 1930 speech supporting the Social-Democrats against political polarization, Mann argued that economic and political discontent were driving the swing to the radical, militant Nazis. If only economics were involved, he argued, the Communists would be getting the vote, but Germany's political discontent with the peace arrangement and their new government allowed the National Socialists an entrance to the political mainstream.¹⁷⁹ Mann shared the sense that Germany had been sacrificed by the Versailles treaty and shamed by being demilitarized. He also listed several other aspects of the post-war order that led to Germany's political grievances, including the reparations and the loss of important Western regions, but also the frontier restrictions in the East and the meddling of "Jacobinical" statesmen in Germany's "sensitive minorities question."¹⁸⁰ These last two points reveal the extent to

¹⁷⁸ Mann, "Appell an die Vernunft," in *Achtung Europa!*, 43.

¹⁷⁹ Mann, "Appell an die Vernunft," in *Achtung Europa!*, 43 and 46-7.

¹⁸⁰ Mann, "Appell an die Vernunft," in *Achtung Europa!*, 48-9.

which many of the central elements of National Socialist ideological self-presentation were so close to the political center of the period that even an opponent could agree.

Mann went deeper into his criticism of the post-war order when he argued that while Versailles was meant to protect France and European peace, it was actually putting Germany into an upset and degenerate state of mind that could be very dangerous to the peace.¹⁸¹ He voiced this argument in 1930. At the end of the war, after he had come to the more definitive conclusion that romanticism was central to Nazism, he echoed his earlier thinking and argued that Germany's great romantic spirit engorged itself on the suffering and humiliation of the defeat and the peace and "reduced [itself] to a miserable mass level, the level of a Hitler."¹⁸² While this was an indictment against a German psychology that preceded the modern era, it saved German culture from guilt by association by pointing out that its reprehensible aspects only came to the surface in its "modern nationalistic form".¹⁸³

Serenus explains the geo-political manifestation of this spirit in the interwar period as the desire to break onto the world stage and fulfill Germany's unique destiny to end stagnation and renew culture.¹⁸⁴ In the thirties, Mann argued that Germany was pushed into this kind of thinking by the post-war order, which used Germany as a buffer against Communism. In "Appell an die Vernunft," Mann argued that the European middle-classes were experiencing a political identity crisis because they were simultaneously suffering economically and politically but were alienated from socialism by right wing agitation.¹⁸⁵ As late as 1938, Mann claimed that the European

¹⁸¹ Mann, "Appell an die Vernunft," in *Achtung Europa!*, 68.

¹⁸² Thomas Mann, *Germany and the Germans* (speech, Library of Congress, 29 May 1945; printed, Washington: Library of Congress, 1945), 18.

¹⁸³ Mann, *Germany and the Germans*, 3.

¹⁸⁴ Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, 463-4.

¹⁸⁵ Mann, "Appell an die Vernunft," in *Achtung Europa!*, 58-60.

bourgeoisie were in collusion with fascism, because they saw it as a dam against socialism. This was the real reason behind the appeasement of German expansion in Munich in September 1938.¹⁸⁶ He pointed out that pro-fascist parties in France and England rallied for appeasement and that in both nations the leadership and the media voiced tacit acceptance of the eastward expansion of Germany. To Mann, the European community, acting out of an irrational fear of Bolshevism, was tacitly accepting Nazism's gangsterish barbarity and Hitler's division of the world into two mortally opposed camps, fascism and communism.¹⁸⁷ He even went so far as to say that Hitler was a pawn of pro-fascist English statesmen who forced Hitler to do things their way in order to maintain the appearance of international ethics.¹⁸⁸ "Dieser Friede" (This Peace) was the empty and fleeting thing that the world received from the Munich agreements, while the Nazis got a reputation for success, real territorial gains, and a renewed mandate.¹⁸⁹

Explicit in these writings on the modern geo-political forces that went into Nazism was Mann's assertion that the Hitler revolution was only part of a worldwide wave of primitive mass-democracy.¹⁹⁰ He depicted the extremity of this wave in *Doktor Faustus* through a group of intellectuals called the Kridwiss circle. Through Serenus, Mann gave voice to his distaste for their placement of force, power, and war camaraderie beyond any ethical, rational, or humane mediation.¹⁹¹ But in the same section, Serenus places these ideas in a more broadly modern context by pointing out that rather than initiating the rejection of humane values, the war simply finished a

¹⁸⁶ Thomas Mann, *Dieser Friede* (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1938), 8-10.

¹⁸⁷ Mann, *Dieser Friede*, 12-5.

¹⁸⁸ Mann, *Dieser Friede*, 20.

¹⁸⁹ Mann, *Dieser Friede*, 24-5.

¹⁹⁰ Mann, "Appell an die Vernunft," in *Achtung Europa!*, 53-5.

¹⁹¹ Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, 557-61.

process of relativizing ethics that was well-advanced by modern philosophy and science.¹⁹² Serenus's criticism seems odd, however, given that the Kridwissers ideas of science and philosophy circulate almost entirely within a universe of Teutonic vitalism and pseudo-scientific speculation. Furthermore, Serenus appears fascinated by the group and often joins in their conversations, while Adrian finds them entirely distasteful. In Serenus's inadequate criticism of the Kridwissers, Mann may have been pointing out the shortcomings of the grudgingly liberal and humanitarian stand that he and Meinecke had taken in reaction to Germany's political ferocity. At the same time, Adrian's disdain for the group, may have been Mann's way of expressing that the romantic esthetic that the composer represented was not necessarily bound up with the morbid, political romanticism of groups like the Kridwissers. Indeed, it is Serenus, the embarrassingly fascinated observer, who is most clearly convinced of a demonic connection between his artist friend and Germany's destructive politics.

Serenus argues that modern intellectual developments made religion seem increasingly anachronistic, and that in trying to keep pace with these developments, religion gave up its focus on faith and mystery, reducing itself to a cultural and ethical function of modern thought.¹⁹³ The result was that modern society was left in an ethical vacuum while its thirst for mystery and faith went unsated. This opened up the possibility for the demonic, hysterical, and irrational to be greeted as a revitalizer of life. Interestingly, Serenus also proposes that the newest advances in the sciences also became conduits for the irrational to enter society. In discussing Adrian's musical composition inspired by new astronomical theories, Serenus argues that new revelations about the vastness of space and the age of the universe assault human

¹⁹² Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, 557.

¹⁹³ Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, 142-3.

understanding with the knowledge that nature is a meaningless, violent abyss.¹⁹⁴

Serenus's depiction of Nazism as modern echoed a tone that Mann had often taken in his early political speeches. This argument allowed him to juxtapose himself to Nazism as the real bearer of the old German tradition and to remark that a few years of catastrophe were nothing compared to the thousand years of rich cultural activity that preceded them.¹⁹⁵

Mann's defense of German cultural traditions in his political works had, however, become rare by the time he wrote *Doktor Faustus*. In 1930, he had hoped that the brutality and small-mindedness of National Socialism would prove itself to be alien to the German character.¹⁹⁶ In 1938, he assured the world community that the Nazi regime would lose its appeal for the Germans if Hitler brought his nation to the brink of war.¹⁹⁷ He repeatedly voiced his suspicion that Nazism was deeply rooted in German culture and history, but, before the war began, he explored a mixture of modern social and political as well as cultural forces, and he tended to emphasize the modernity of Nazism. In the forties, however, Mann's position swung in favor of more distant antecedents, for though he saw Nazism very much as a product of modern crises, he saw little in it that he could call modern and much that harkened to Germany's past. In 1945, even when he stressed that Nazism was modern, he called it the modern political form of old German cultural traits.

This was the modern nationalistic form of the old German world-seclusiveness and melancholy world-unfitness, which, along with a sort of philistine universalism, cosmopolitanism in a night-cap, so to speak, had made up the German picture. This state of the mind, this unworldly, provincial, German cosmopolitanism, always had something scurrilously spooky,

¹⁹⁴ Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, 417-9.

¹⁹⁵ Bergsten, 8-9.

¹⁹⁶ Mann, "Appell an die Vernunft," in *Achtung Europa!*, 55-7.

¹⁹⁷ Mann, *Dieser Friede*, 22-3.

something hiddenly uncanny about it, a quality of secret demonism that I was particularly able to perceive on account of my personal origin.¹⁹⁸

The personal origin to which Mann was referring in this odd mixture of novelized and autobiographical material was his early life in the north German city of Lübeck, which he depicted as a microcosm of the contradictory character of modern Germany.

Mann described his hometown in such a way as to emphasize the extent to which the psychology and the atmosphere of the late Middle Ages and the Reformation era were a tangible presence in modern Germany.

The exceptionally beautiful City Hall . . . was completed in the very year in which Martin Luther posted his Theses on the portal of the Castle Church at Wittenberg, the beginning of the modern era. But just as Luther, the Reformer, had a good deal of the medieval man about him and wrestled with the Devil all his life, so we who lived in the Protestant city of Lübeck . . . moved in an atmosphere of the Gothic Middle Ages. . . . in the atmosphere itself something had clung of the state of mind of, let's say, the final decades of the fifteenth century, the hysteria of the dying Middle Ages, something of latent spiritual epidemic. It's a strange thing to say about a sensibly sober, modern, commercial city, but it was conceivable that a Children's Crusade might suddenly erupt here, a St. Vitus Dance, an outbreak of religious fanaticism coupled with mystic processions of the people, or the like—in short, an anciently neurotic substratum was perceptible.¹⁹⁹

The same passage is repeated almost identically in *Doktor Faustus*, when Serenus describes his and Adrian's childhood home, Kaisersaschern.²⁰⁰ Later in the book, the narrator reaffirms the extent to which he and Adrian are children of their home and how little the atmosphere changes even when they move to a different city. "Ich sagte mir, daß wir beide uns als rechte Kinder des Winkels deutscher Altertümlichkeit erwiesen, worin wir aufgebracht worden war . . . und wenn ich mich umsaß in unserem neuen Lebenskreis, so fand ich, daß der Schauplatz sich zwar erweitert aber nicht

¹⁹⁸ Mann, *Germany and the Germans*, 3.

¹⁹⁹ Mann, *Germany and the Germans* 3-4.

²⁰⁰ Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, 57-8.

wesentlich verändert hatte" (It seemed to me that we both proved ourselves to be children of the German, old-world atmosphere in which we were raised . . . And when I looked around at our new surroundings, I found that our world had indeed widened but really changed very little).²⁰¹ Serenus's description illustrates Mann's notion that the mood of the late Middle Ages was pervasive in modern Germany.

Serenus goes on to remark that in the Nazi era, Germans sought a return to the *völkisch* hysteria of the latter Middle Ages. He cites the book burning campaigns of the Nazis as an example of this.²⁰² Later in the book, when Adrian and Serenus are living in Munich in the years just following World War I they come into contact with a group of intellectuals, artists, and socialists who gravitate around a figure named Kridwiss. Mann uses the discussions of the Kridwiss circle to depict the fusion of racism, vitalism, the worship of force, and romantic estheticism and fatalism that constituted a major portion of Nazi ideology. Serenus claims to be repulsed by their conversations and remarks how they set back all the modern progress of humanism and individualism.

Es war eine alt-neue, eine revolutionär rückschlägige Welt, in welcher die an die Idee des Individuums gebundenen Werte, sagen wir also: Wahrheit, Freiheit, Recht, Vernunft, . . . auf die weit höhere Instanz der Gewalt, der Autorität, der Glaubensdiktatur bezogen waren, . . . daß es der neuigkeitsvollen Rückversetzung der Menschheit in theokratisch mittelalterliche Zustände und Bedingungen gleichkam.²⁰³

While Mann's rather monolithic and grim depiction of the Middle Ages may be questionable, he made clear the extent to which he saw medieval elements in Nazism.

²⁰¹ Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, 146.

²⁰² Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, 58.

²⁰³ Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, 563. (It was an old-new, a revolutionary reactionary world, in which the values associated with the idea of individualism, such as truth, freedom, justice, reason, . . . were referred to the higher authority of violence, force, and the dictatorship of belief, . . . such that it was equivalent to a novel setting of humankind back into the conditions of the theocratic middle ages).

But Mann singled out not the high middle ages, but rather the nebulous period between the end of the middle ages and the beginning of the modern era. This is a very important point, for Mann pointed to Martin Luther as the figure who bridged Germany's modern and medieval characters and embodied the mixture that was preserved in Mann's Lübeck and Adrian and Serenus's Kaisersaschern. "He represents well-mannered, civilized strength and popular robustness, urbane Demonism, spirit and blood at once, namely art. . . . And no one can deny that Luther was a tremendously great man, great in the most German manner, great and German even in his duality as a liberating and at once reactionary force, a conservative revolutionary."²⁰⁴ Mann went on to praise Luther for advancing the German language, freeing scientific and philosophical questioning from scholastic dogma, bringing new piety and moral conscience to Christianity, and opening the way for democracy with the notion of a direct relationship to God.²⁰⁵ But he also refined into a modern German trait, which Mann calls *Innerlichkeit* (inwardness), the middle ages' self-absorbed retreat from worldliness, the result of which was an anti-political attitude that "not only created and partly fostered the German dualism of boldest [political] speculation on the one hand and political immaturity on the other. But it is also and chiefly typical in a monumental and defiant manner of the purely German sundering of the national impulse and the ideal of political liberty."²⁰⁶ This is a clear statement of Mann's opinion that Germany's modern nationalism had its ultimate roots in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, especially in the uniquely German inwardness that Luther embodied. Throughout the two decades considered in this study, Mann emphasized more and more the historically distant roots of the romantic fatalism that

²⁰⁴ Mann, *Germany and the Germans*, 7.

²⁰⁵ Mann, *Germany and the Germans*, 7-8.

²⁰⁶ Mann, *Germany and the Germans*, 9.

was at the core of Nazism. His position on the historiographical question of Nazism's modernity was to still emphasize the role of modern crises but to depict National Socialism primarily as the culmination of cultural and psychological themes and forces set in motion during the Reformation era.

Mann's position on the extent to which Nazism grew out of German history and traditions is closely related to his opinion on its modernity and developed in a parallel manner. In the 30's, Mann pointed out aspects of Nazism that he saw as particularly German, but he also stressed the geo-political and social elements that situated Nazism as a modern, European problem. By the 40's, Mann emphasized the Germanness of Nazism to the point that he often depicted it as the tragic destiny of an innate German spirit.

In *Doktor Faustus* and *Germany and the Germans*, a speech delivered at the Library of Congress just after the war ended in Europe, he gave an account of Nazism as a mass psychological phenomenon with definite historical origins. Bergsten summarizes the argument Mann made in the 1945 speech:

Als Ursprung der verhängnisvollen Entwicklung betrachtet Mann den „romantischen Krankheits- und Todeskeim“, den er in der Zeit von Deutschlands Übergang vom katholischen Mittelalter zur lutherischen Reformation sucht, und der, wie er meint, seine unheilvolle Frucht im zweiten Weltkrieg getragen hat.²⁰⁷

In the same speech, Mann explained why he chose the story of Faust to depict the catastrophe of Germany's romantic spirit. "And the Devil, Luther's Devil, Faust's Devil, strikes me as a very German figure, and the pact with him, the Satanic

²⁰⁷ Bergsten, 165-6. The quotation is from *Deutschland und die Deutschen* (Stockholm, 1947), 37. In the English edition of the speech that I used, this passage is on page 18. (Mann regarded as the origin of the disastrous development the "romantic germ of illness and death" which he saw coming out of the period between the Catholic middle ages and the Lutheran Reformation and which, in his opinion, bore the unholy fruit of the second world war).

covenant, to win all treasures and power on earth for a time at the cost of the soul's salvation, strikes me as something exceedingly typical of German nature."²⁰⁸ In a crucial chapter in *Doktor Faustus*, the devil visits Adrian to finalize their deal. The devil offers 24 years of esthetic breakthrough in exchange for Adrian's soul. In order to convince Adrian to take the deal, the devil emphasizes that he himself is also a native of Kaisersaschern. "[Wir] sind beide recht zu Hause darin, das reine Kaisersaschern, gut altdeutsche Luft von anno fünfzehnhundert oder so, kurz bevor Dr. Martinus [Luther] kam, der auf so derbem, herzlichen Fuß mit mir stand . . . längst also vor der dreißigjährigen Lustbarkeit. . . . Gute Zeit, verteufelt deutsche Zeit!" (We are both right at home in the pure Kaisersaschern, in the good old German air from about 1500 or thereabouts; just before Dr. Martinus came along, who stood by me with such sturdiness and heartiness . . . just before the 'Thirty Years Fun'. . . . Good times, devilishly, German times!).²⁰⁹

Mann explained that Luther had given German psychology (or, in Mann's terms, the German spirit) its unique stamp of *Innerlichkeit*, inwardness, and its anti-political attitude, evident in Luther's provincialism, anti-intellectualism, and his complete separation of religious emancipation from political emancipation.²¹⁰ "The great historical deed of German inwardness was Luther's Reformation. . . . But it is evident that the devil had his hand even in that deed."²¹¹ The Reformation produced a dualistic psychology that cherished seclusion and difference from the world but believed itself to have something unique to offer the world.

²⁰⁸ Mann, *Germany and the Germans*, 5.

²⁰⁹ Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, 358.

²¹⁰ Mann, *Germany and the Germans*, 6-9.

²¹¹ Mann, *Germany and the Germans*, 15.

Mann agreed that the German character did indeed have much to offer. "The Germans are the people of the romantic counter-revolution against the philosophical intellectualism and rationalism of enlightenment—a revolt of music against literature, of mysticism against clarity. . . . In the history of ideas the merits of the German romantic counter-Revolution are invaluable."²¹² He named a number of those areas in which it was invaluable, including the study of history and psychology and saving esthetics and poetry from the shallowness of utilitarian civilization.²¹³ But that was only the great side of Germany's romantic spirit. The internally contradictory spirit also had a morbid, suffering side.

But it cannot be denied that even in its loveliest, most ethereal aspects where the popular mates with the sublime it bears in its heart the germ of morbidity, as the rose bears the worm. . . . This is its confusing paradox: while it is the revolutionary representative of the irrational forces of life against abstract reason and dull humanitarianism, it possesses a deep affinity to death by virtue of its very surrender to the irrational and to the past.²¹⁴

This dualistic character made a sharp turn into its morbid side in German nationalism, which focused on making politics reflect rather than restrict the nation's spirit so that Germany could take its unique place in the geo-political community without compromising its Germanness to the alien sphere of politics.²¹⁵ As Bergsten argues, "Ihre Isolierung führe indessen einen gewissen Dünkel mit sich, die im Verein mit ihrem Hochmut und ihrer „Weltscheu“ die Kontaktversuche in Aggressivität verwandele" (Their isolation gives rise to a certain intolerance, which, combined with their arrogance and misanthropy transforms their attempts at contact into

²¹² Mann, *Germany and the Germans*, 15-16.

²¹³ Mann, *Germany and the Germans*, 17.

²¹⁴ Mann, *Germany and the Germans*, 17.

²¹⁵ See Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses*, chs. 1 and 2 for the esthetic approach to politics in German nationalism.

aggression).²¹⁶ Mann explained that even the concept of liberty was turned into something aggressive in German nationalism. "The German concept of liberty was always directed outward, it meant the right to be German, only German and nothing else and nothing beyond that."²¹⁷ Luther was the first major step toward Germany's modern political catastrophe.

In the intervening centuries, however, the German character gained further definition. Mann saw nineteenth century romanticism as the full expression of the inwardness already deeply ingrained in German psychology. Romanticism expressed inwardness in "a certain dark richness and piousness—I might say: antiquarianism—of soul that feels very close to the chthonian, irrational, and demonic forces of life, that is to say, the true sources of life."²¹⁸ The romantic genius embodied this inwardness and the contradictory nature of the German spirit, for romantics defined genius as the intermixture of the noble and harmonious with the demonic and irrational. Serenus describes Adrian's genius in this manner in the first chapter of *Doktor Faustus*.²¹⁹ This conception of genius led generations of intellectuals enamored with morbid romanticism, including Mann, to equate genius and sickness, and even to view sickness as an inspiration to genius.²²⁰ By embodying his deep involvement with this esthetic in the character of Adrian and presenting his humanism in the character of Serenus, Mann simultaneously explores multiple critical discourses. The two characters each show the other's limits. Through Serenus's narrative Mann criticizes the fatalistic esthetic and its disastrous extension into the realms of politics and

²¹⁶ Bergsten, 164. Translation from the English version of Bergsten (University of Chicago, 1969), 128.

²¹⁷ Mann, *Germany and the Germans*, 10.

²¹⁸ Mann, *Germany and the Germans*, 15.

²¹⁹ Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, 11-12.

²²⁰ For more information on these forms of romanticism see George L. Mosse, *The Culture of Western Europe*, chs. 14 and 18-22; and Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*.

society, but Mann also allows the reader to see Serenus critically and find the limits of his criticism. Through the character of Adrian, Mann suggests how the romantic does not necessarily lead to destructive politics and in some cases even preserves humanity and caring in a way that Serenus, the humanist and rationalist, has difficulty grasping because of his fixation on the demonic elements in romanticism.

Beethoven, who is widely regarded to have suffered deafness and mental collapse from a syphilis infection, represented to later generations of romantics as a prototype of the sick genius. Beethoven plays an important role in the musical education of Adrian, the composer in *Doktor Faustus*. Through lectures given by Adrian's instructor, Wendell Kretschmar, Mann introduced the romantic themes of suffering genius and esthetic crisis upon which Adrian expands later in the book. One lecture considers Beethoven's struggle with writing a fugue. Kretschmar argues that the fugue belonged to a liturgical era of music that was long gone when Beethoven was composing.²²¹ As a single artist in a profane era, Beethoven was emancipated from the canons and traditions of the liturgical age, but for exactly this reason, he had to take on the complex structure of the fugue all on his own. Kretschmar depicts the difficulty Beethoven had with tying his creative impulses down to the fugue's unrelenting canon. When some friends came to check on his slow and tortured progress he looked "als komme er aus einem Kampf auf Leben und Tod mit allen feindlichen Geistern des Kontrapunkts" (as if he had come out of battle of life and death with all the hostile spirits of counter-point).²²²

Beethoven's struggle with the fugue illustrates Mann's conception of the modern artist's dilemma. The separation of art into an autonomous sphere of modern

²²¹ Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, 93-4.

²²² Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, 91.

culture opened up freedom and possibilities, but it also isolated artists from society and made their work seem extraneous. Kretschmar argues that Beethoven overcame this situation. He rejected the wallowing subjectivity of the self-conscious artist, who can only produce personal musings against worn out conventions, and began to use the possibilities within convention to break through to something new. This innovation allowed him to work through and break down the worn out conventions to produce a new objective approach to music; new conventions, or, Kretschmar explains, a whole new myth.²²³ Beethoven is both the model of the successful profane genius but also the herald of a rebirth of myth through music. Kretschmar declares that art's emancipation from a cultic to a cultural function may be only temporary, for artists such as Wagner exemplify the extent to which music is moving toward a new cultic function for society.²²⁴

In "Leiden und Größe Richard Wagners" (The Suffering and Greatness of Richard Wagner), the 1933 speech that resulted in Mann's exile from Germany, Mann explained that romantics held a common notion of reinvigorating society by restoring art's cultic function of expressing collective myths.²²⁵ Wagner was the paradigmatic example of this. Mann depicted Wagner as a typical afflicted genius who struggled to make his art overcome narcissistic sentimentality and become something meaningful or even vital to society.²²⁶ Mann argued that Wagner was highly successful in this regard. He overcame the distinction between high and low culture by writing music that was accessible to the layman but appealed to the refined ear.²²⁷ Serenus and

²²³ Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, 82-3.

²²⁴ Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, 93-4.

²²⁵ Thomas Mann, "Leiden und Größe Richard Wagners," in *Gesammelte Werke*, Band IX (Oldenburg: S. Fischer, 1960), 365.

²²⁶ Mann, "Leiden und Größe Richard Wagners," in *Gesammelte Werke*, Band IX, 388-393.

²²⁷ Mann, "Leiden und Größe Richard Wagners," in *Gesammelte Werke*, Band IX, 381-2.

Adrian make a similar statement in *Doktor Faustus*, and Adrian declares that breaking through art's isolation so that it can speak to the whole people is his own goal.²²⁸ This breakthrough to a new cultic function for art was one of the main intellectual ingredients of Nazism that Mann saw coming from romanticism. Even though he defended Wagner from the particular use to which the Nazis were putting him, he criticized Wagner for believing that the arts needed to be combined and subordinated to collective myths in order to be meaningful.²²⁹

Through the figures of Wagner and Beethoven, Mann depicted the romantic notions of sick genius, artistic crisis, and breakthrough that he saw as crucial cultural steps in Germany's development toward National Socialism. These romantic elements along with the inwardness and anti-political attitude that originated in the Lutheran Reformation were the unique pieces of Germany's cultural traditions that Mann saw in National Socialism. Adrian Leverkühn's esthetics illustrates how these elements came together in a self-destructive psychology. Throughout *Doktor Faustus*, Adrian encounters and rejects the youth movement, the racism, the historicism, and the worship of force that also contributed to Nazi ideology. His avoidance of them frees the romantic tradition that he represents from association with the small-minded and mean aspects of Nazism, but it also emphasizes Mann's assertion that the German romantic spirit in itself contained a Faustian desire for inspiration that became a striving for catastrophe. Adrian's ideas about esthetics mirror the esthetic themes upon which National Socialist ideology was based.

Adrian becomes interested in music in his mid teens. He is initially fascinated with chords that have no tone in themselves but only in relation to other tones. The

²²⁸ Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, 493-4.

²²⁹ Mann, "Leiden und Größe Richard Wagners," in *Gesammelte Werke*, Band IX, 373-4.

way Adrian explains his discovery is an illustration of the openness and the lack of form with which the modern artist must wrestle. "Beziehung ist alles. Und willst du da näher bei Namen nennen, so ist ihr Name »Zweideutigkeit«. . . . Daß Musik die Zweideutigkeit ist als System" (Relationship is everything. And if you want a more specific name, that name is ambiguity. . . . Music is ambiguity as system).²³⁰ Adrian later laments this lack of order and definition in modern music, which leaves it stagnating in warm sentimentality.²³¹ Like many romantics, Adrian sees music's problems originating in the end of the liturgical ordering of society, which had given music both a canon and an integral social function. He is impressed with his instructor's suggestion that the profane era may only be temporary, and that music may lead the way to a new cultic epoch by rediscovering a new liturgical role for itself. Both Adrian and his teacher hold Wagner up as an example of this direction in music.²³² To Adrian, tying music to liturgical form and a cultic function is the way to overcome its subjectivity and formlessness. He argues that freedom is trapped in a dialectic in which it despairs of its own openness and seeks fulfillment in some objective restraint.²³³ To give his own creative freedom such restraint, Adrian develops a composing method that he calls *der strenge Satz* (the strict style) which Mann modeled on Arnold Schönberg's twelve-tone system. Adrian explains that his style unites the diversity of the entire chromatic scale in one theme, around which he constructs the whole musical work.²³⁴ This idea of form and content is also reflected in the montage technique that Mann used to write the novel, piecing together an elaborate and totally original work from the raw material of German culture.

²³⁰ Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, 73-4.

²³¹ Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, 111.

²³² Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, 95.

²³³ Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, 295.

²³⁴ Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, 297-300.

Serenus explains that Adrian's esthetics is focused on the idea of restoring worn out traditions and ending cultural stagnation by fusing traditional esthetics with modern innovations, and he remarks that this makes Adrian's art similar to twentieth century German nationalism.²³⁵ German nationalists derided the freedom and formlessness of the bourgeois, liberal values that were the basis of most nationalisms, and they sought to use the state to give constructive order to the nation's will. They also imagined that the successful organization of the nation would result in the integration of all aspects of society and culture in a new cultic consciousness.²³⁶ Both Adrian's esthetics and National Socialism aimed at ending the present, stagnant epoch and leading the way to a revitalized and active one. In language clearly intended to reflect the speech of German cultural nationalists, the devil exhorted Adrian to lead the cultural revolution that would break through to a new age. "Du wirst führen, du wirst der Zukunft den Marsch schlagen . . . die Zeit selber, die Kulturepoche, will sagen, die Epoche der Kultur und ihres Kultus wirst du durchbrechen" (You will lead. You will lead the march into the future. . . . You will break through the times themselves, the cultural epoch, or rather, the epoch of culture, this cult of culture, itself).²³⁷

But for both Adrian and the nation, the desire for a breakthrough and cultural renewal was dashed on Germany's internally contradictory character. The twist of German inwardness turned their attempts to reach out for something great into a horrible lashing out at fate, the world, and themselves. Adrian sadly illustrates the self-destructive side of this. In his desire for groundbreaking inspiration, he purposely infects himself with syphilis. He has absolutely no taste for the violent and despairing political culture surrounding him and shows real love and ethical resoluteness, but

²³⁵ Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, 301.

²³⁶ Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses*, chs. 1 and 2.

²³⁷ Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, 376.

Mann clearly intends for readers to see a connection between Adrian's self-destruction for art and Germany's catastrophe. Serenus explains: "Ja, wir sind ein gänzlich verschiedenes, dem Nüchtern-Üblichen widersprechendes Volk von mächtig tragischer Seele, und unsere Liebe gehört dem Schicksal, jedem Schicksal, wenn es nur eines ist, sei es auch der den Himmel mit Götterdämmerungsrote entzündende Untergang!" (Yes, we are a very different people. A people who contradict the sober and ordinary. We are of mightily tragic soul and our love belongs to fate, any fate, even if it is one that burns heaven in the flaming death of the gods).²³⁸

What could be a better expression of the nation's romantic spirit, its tragic love of fate, than for it to destroy itself even as it grasped for greatness? By the end of the war, Mann believed that Nazism was not only rooted in Germany's romantic psychology but was the very culmination of it. Near the end of *Doktor Faustus*, Serenus, reflecting on Adrian's and Germany's parallel catastrophes, calls Nazism the "Figur gewaltigsten Verkörperungen des Deutschtums" (the figure of the most powerful embodiment of Germanness), and remarks that it was "sein letzter und äußerster Versuch, die selbsteigene politische Form zu finden" (its last and utmost attempt to find a political form suited to its inner needs).²³⁹ Mann clearly saw Nazism as the tragic embodiment of Germany's traditions and psychology. He argued that there was no distinction between good Germans and bad Germans, and that all were bound up in the nation's guilt.²⁴⁰

²³⁸ Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, 269.

²³⁹ Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, 731.

²⁴⁰ Mann, *Germany and the Germans*, 18-19.

WILLING CAPTIVE OF A FATAL ESTHETIC

Mann's position on the German question can inform our understanding of Nazism but can also create a distorted image. His exploration of the role of Germany's romantic psychology and traditions in National Socialism provides a good explanation of the fatalism with which so many Germans championed, accepted, or endured Nazism. At the same time, however, Mann did an injustice to the complexity of Nazism's origins and, more importantly, to his nation and his tradition. By making Nazism the culmination of a German psychology that originated in the Lutheran Reformation, Mann cast the ghastly shadow of Nazism far into the German past, contributing to the stigma against German culture and history that has persisted since the war.

In addition, Mann complied with Nazism's own presentation of itself as the modern bearer of Germany's traditions. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, German nationalists had invented a national tradition that looked to the Reformation and romanticism for antecedents. Mann failed to grasp the extent to which this was a modern invention and instead saw the Reformation and romanticism as destined from the outset to contribute to German nationalism. Furthermore, Mann continued to depict Nazism as the embodiment of the sick genius, for it contained all the contradictory elements of the German psychology. By continuing to depict genius and greatness as intimately and irretrievably linked to the demonic and suffering, and by maintaining the romantic notion that irrational and sublime forces are the true bases of life, Mann made the German catastrophe an inevitable counter-part to preceding German greatness. In his stand against Nazism, he stepped out of this dualistic romantic mentality and recognized the need for recourse to rationality and humanism, but his depiction of the German catastrophe retained the romantic esthetics that

contributed to Nazism's appearance as the embodiment of a great and suffering German spirit.

CHAPTER V

AFTERWORD

My three subjects exemplify how even intellectuals trying to be critical of Nazism, and in the case of Meinecke and Mann trying to be liberal and humane, reflected a fatalistic mood in interwar German culture. Despite their political differences with Nazism, they aided its appeal and lent it an aura of inevitability. All three described the German nation and modernity in ways that suggested the necessity of a tragically fatal end. Their works were facets of a pervasive self-destructive discourse that was at least as important to Nazism as its forward-looking goals. Their discourses suggest that this understanding of Germany and history was so pervasive that even critics repeated the necessity of a German catastrophe.

Spengler's part in this is easiest to discern. His vision of Western decline mixed with his celebration of war and the state was volatile. Spengler approached history from the perspective of the German idealist tradition. He saw history as a dramatic stage on which nations battled to fulfill their individual, instinctive destinies. Within the context of his history of global decline into formless civilization, the historical drama became a necessary tragedy. A nation that strove to fulfill its destiny as a forceful and unique *Kulturstaat* automatically set itself in aggressive opposition to the declining modern age. The devotion of its people to the national ideal was expressed in their celebration of the tragic consequences of their hopeless opposition to history's inevitable decline. Spengler proposed that a tragically great nation like Germany should accept the inevitable catastrophe and rush into it willingly as fatal destiny, rather than suffer humiliating, aching decay. Germany's striving to be a great

power in history and its opposition to the inauthentic modern age would at least be evident in a tragic downfall.

The fatalistic implications of Spengler's representations of Germany and history are far more prominent in his writings than any gestures he made toward some notion of a positive future for Germany. His work both exemplified and reiterated the political and cultural despair of the interwar period. His immensely popular *Untergang des Abendlandes* was a landmark work in the fatalistic discourses that made a catastrophe appear inevitable and welcome to many frustrated and hopeless Germans in the twenties and thirties. Spengler was so closely associated by his contemporaries with the Nazis' brand of aggressive, idealist nationalism, that his criticism of Nazism, *Jahre der Entscheidung*, was received with much surprise, especially by the party leadership, who had considered him an intellectual forebearer.

Far from stepping back from his fatalistic view of history and the German spirit, however, Spengler criticized the Nazis primarily because he feared they would not be able to lead the Germans to fulfill their tragic destiny. Rather than warn Germans that the Nazis would lead the nation into disaster, Spengler wrote *Jahre der Entscheidung* because he feared that the party would not heroically blaze a path into inevitable catastrophe. The uncanny resemblance between Spengler's prescriptions and the development of Nazi policy after 1933 suggests that his fatalistic discourse reflected and reinforced a pervasive mood in interwar culture and helped to reify a pernicious set of assumptions about the German spirit and the illegitimacy of the modern age.

Meinecke's *Die Deutsche Katastrophe* shows a very different side of the same fatalistic discourses that are prominent in Spengler's criticism of National Socialism. While Spengler's critical engagement with Nazism in the early thirties was a political

act, Meinecke wrote his analysis of Nazism immediately after the war as a way to make historical sense of the catastrophe for his contemporaries. Nevertheless, he reiterated the same fatalistic mood and assumptions that pervaded interwar discussions of German politics and culture. Meinecke reads very much like a tortured and guilty Spengler. He tended to agree with Spengler on the inauthenticity of modern society, politics, and culture. He also regarded the military and war as the central activities of nation and culture. Meinecke tried to reconcile these views with a liberal and humane acceptance of modern socio-politics and ethics, but his uncritical repetition of Spenglerian notions of modern decline and the tragic spirit of Germany made Nazism appear to have been an inevitable catastrophe.

Meinecke decried modern society, politics, and ethics as inauthentic. He argued that modernity had caused the loss of ideals that united the nation and gave it inner direction. But the ideal that Meinecke held in highest regard was individual sacrifice to the military needs of the nation. In a much subtler manner than Spengler, Meinecke formulated the same fatalistic impasse—the self-respecting *Kulturstaat* in mortal conflict with an inauthentic age.

Unwilling and unable to critically grasp the fatalistic implications of his ideas and how they were bound up with the cultural context of National Socialism, Meinecke resorted to depicting National Socialism as a symptom of modern decline. When he did broach the relationship between Nazism and the militaristic and idealist traditions that he held dear, he put off real analysis with a form of esthetic apologetics. Any pernicious elements in German culture were the necessary, tragic counter-parts of its great achievements and its high ideals. Rather than ameliorate German guilt, however, Meinecke's representation of an inherently tragic German character only reiterated the notion that a catastrophe was its inevitable end.

Mann's analysis of Nazism was very different from Meinecke's and Spengler's and is the most difficult to grasp critically. Mann purposely blurred the boundary between his life, his art, and his politics in order to create an elaborate and self-critical picture of the cultural context of National Socialism. In *Doktor Faustus* Mann clearly showed how fatalistic assumptions about German culture pervaded Germany in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The way Mann handled these discourses as discrete constructs of modern German culture, rather than as manifestations of an inherently tragic German spirit, distinguishes Mann from the other two critics discussed in this thesis.

Mann's sophisticated understanding of Germany's fatalistic self-representation did not, however, mean that he refrained from participating in that representation. To the contrary, Mann constructed an intricate montage of German culture that made Nazism appear to be its unifying idea and culmination. On the one hand, this was Mann's way of exploring how the German past had been retooled and reinterpreted in the early twentieth century. On the other hand, Mann was truly a romantic. He upheld the notion of a tragic German character precisely because he believed the intermixture of greatness and suffering was essential to good art. By inserting himself into his novelistic cultural criticism of National Socialism, Mann showed the limits of his political criticism and admitted how his romantic tradition allowed him to see the German catastrophe as an arresting esthetic phenomenon. Unwilling to leave his esthetic behind, he produced an elaborate expression of its role in the German catastrophe. While his representation of German history gives readers a critical understanding of many of the fatalistic assumptions about the German character that affected the nation's cultural and political development, his esthetic treatment of the

entire phenomenon reiterates the notion that a catastrophe was the necessary swan song of an inherently romantic and suffering nation.

In their own unique ways, Spengler, Meinecke, and Mann each reiterated a fatalistic mood that pervaded interwar German culture. While they each wrote a critical work on National Socialism, they reinforced widely held assumptions about modern inauthenticity and an inherently tragic German spirit that made a national catastrophe appear inevitable.

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