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Was the Third Reich a modern creation? Some remarks on the essence and practice of National Socialism

Abstract

This article is an attempt at answering the question of whether German National Socialism was a modern creation or whether it represented a sinister, Janus-faced totalitarian expression of the modernization process. Another problem considered is whether it was a revolutionary or “reactionary” phenomenon. Not only Western researchers have increasingly viewed the Third Reich as a stage in the modernization process and an alternative form of occidental rationalism. From this perspective, the Nazi movement—not excluding the Final Solution—would not represent a return to barbarism, but rather a dark variant of the European modernizing trend. National Socialism was one of the developmental possibilities of modernity, it emerged, however, under the conditions of a modernization crisis, the expansion of parliamentarism, and capitalist economic relations. National Socialism was put forward as a systemic antithesis to the French Revolution and the ideological legacy of the post-revolutionary era. This text is intended as a reflective outline and does not claim to offer an exhaustive reading of the subject.

Keywords: National Socialism, Third Reich, postmodernism, modernization, Social Darwinism

1. Scientific discussion about the nature of National Socialism

This overview attempts to reflect on the question of whether German National Socialism was modern, an emanation of modernity, or perhaps it represented a sinister, Janus-faced totalitarian expression of the modernization process. The scholarly discussion surrounding this issue has occupied historians and other

scholars since the mid-1960s.¹ The debate was sparked by two key books: one, published in 1966, by American historian David Schoenbaum on Hitler's social revolution, and another, published in 1965, by German sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf on society and democracy in Germany. These authors explicitly referred to concepts they viewed as complementary in explaining the negative phenomenon of National Socialism. They implied that a social revolution took place in the Third Reich. Dahrendorf noted a "brutal break with tradition and push into modernity in Nazi Germany" ("brutaler Bruch mit der Tradition und Stoß in die Modernität"). He argued that National Socialism radically transformed the political mentalities of the Germans, stating, "The concept of the comrade of the *Volks* forbids the return of idea of the subject; therein lies its specifically modern face."² In contrast, Schoenbaum characterized that process as a "revolution of ends and means." He argued that while the aims of National Socialism were thoroughly anti-Enlightenment and illiberal, modern means were purposefully employed to achieve them. He claimed, "The revolution of ends was ideological—war against bourgeois and industrial society. The revolution of means was its reciprocal. It was bourgeois and industrial since in an industrial age, even a war against industrial society must be fought with industrial means and bourgeois are necessary to fight the bourgeoisie."³

The discussion continued in the following decades with varied intensification. In the 1980s, an important derivative of the "Historikerstreit" (1986–1987)⁴ involved reflections as to whether National Socialism was a peculiar expression of modernity and the problem of historicization of National Socialism. This included placing the Third Reich within the broader scope of German history not as something exceptional, but as part of a longer historical trajectory. The paradigm's author was Munich historian Martin Broszat, one of the most eminent experts on the Third Reich and the so-called polycracy of the Nazi state.⁵ During this decade, the discussion initiated by Dahrendorf and Schoenbaum evolved into a polemic whether the Third Reich represented "good" or "bad" modernity. German historian Hans Mommsen described National Socialism as "feigned modernization" (*vorgetäuschte Modernisierung*). Like Jewish historian Saul Friedländer,

¹ See W. Wichert, *Narodowy socjalizm w historiografii Republiki Federalnej Niemiec w latach 1986–2016*, Szczecin–Warszawa 2018, p. 74 ff.; A. Schildt, "NS-Regime, Modernisierung und Moderne," *Tel Aviver Jahrbuch für deutsche Geschichte* 23, 1994, p. 4 ff.

² R. Dahrendorf, *Gesellschaft und Demokratie in Deutschland*, München 1965, pp. 432, 448.

³ See D. Schoenbaum, *Hitler's Social Revolution: Class and Status in Nazi Germany 1933–1939*, New York 1967, p. XXII; W. Wichert, "National Socialism in the historiography of the Federal Republic of Germany, 1945–2005," [in:] *Reconstructing Historical Memories*, eds. R. Mason, E. Zeiny, Bangi 2018, pp. 29–30.

⁴ See *Historikerstreit. Die Dokumentation der Kontroverse um die Einzigartigkeit der nationalsozialistischen Judenvernichtung*, ed. E.R. Pieper, München–Zürich 1987.

⁵ See M. Broszat, S. Friedländer, "Um die 'Historisierung des Nationalsozialismus.' Ein Briefwechsel," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 36, 1988, no. 2, pp. 339–372.

Mommsen emphasized the importance of ideological and racist factors in analyzing society in the Third Reich.⁶ In this spirit, Hamburg researcher Detlev Peukert, who died prematurely in 1990, interpreted criminal policies as manifestations of “pathologies and seismic fractures within modernity itself.”⁷ However, a more positive view of the interdependence of National Socialism and modernity was articulated in Rainer Zitelmann’s publications. This Berlin political scientist asserted that the modernization of German society in the years 1933–1945 was both intentional and a crucial goal of the Nazi elite. In his view, Adolf Hitler in the long-term perspective aimed to destroy traditional values and class distinctions within German society. The Führer’s desire was to create a moderately egalitarian, meritocratic society for “Aryan” Germans. Therefore, Zitelmann argued that “modernization” should be regarded as a “value-free” category, not *ex definitione* linked to terms like “progress,” “democracy,” or “humanitarianism.”⁸

Hitler’s biographer Ian Kershaw, on the other hand, did not see the Third Reich as a leap into modernity. If Nazism was revolutionary, it above all sought a revolution in consciousness. This consciousness was intended to define existence in the Third Reich, echoing a travesty of the Marxist maxim.⁹ The German national community (*Volksgemeinschaft*) was indeed to be created by revolution, but this revolution was to occur in the mental sphere rather than the social sphere.¹⁰ Contrary to Kershaw’s suggestion, the two are not incompatible, as the revolution in the mental sphere was carried out by very modern means, such as propaganda, radio, and emerging political marketing methods (*vide* Hitler’s mass oratorical techniques,¹¹ Nazi election campaigns, and the grandiose rallies of the NSDAP).

In 2005, Berlin historian Götz Aly published the famous book *Hitlers Volksstaat: Raub, Rassenkrieg und nationaler Sozialismus* (published in English as *Hitler’s Beneficiaries: Plunder, Racial War, and the Nazi Welfare State*)¹², in which the author explored the relationship between the Nazi state and its atrocities, contributing to the modernization debate. In examining the roots of the regime’s crimes, especially the origins of the Holocaust, Aly analyzed the

⁶ H. Mommsen, “Narodowy socjalizm jako pozorowana modernizacja,” [in:] *Nazizm, Trzecia Rzesza a procesy modernizacji*, transl. M. Tomczak, ed. H. Orłowski, Poznań 2000, pp. 296–318.

⁷ D.J.K. Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany: Conformity, Opposition, and Racism in Everyday Life*, transl. R. Deveson, New Haven–London 1987, p. 16.

⁸ See R. Zitelmann, “Narodowy socjalizm i moderna. Bilans tymczasowy,” [in:] *Nazizm, Trzecia Rzesza a procesy modernizacji*, transl. M. Tomczak, ed. H. Orłowski, Poznań 2000, pp. 30–31.

⁹ R. Bavaj, *Die Ambivalenz der Moderne im Nationalsozialismus. Eine Bilanz der Forschung*, München 2003, p. 18.

¹⁰ I. Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation*, London 1993, p. 131 ff.

¹¹ See J. Kopperschmidt, J.G. Pankau, *Hitler der Redner*, München 2003.

¹² G. Aly, *Państwo Hitlera*, transl. W. Łygaś, Gdańsk 2006.

political-economic factors and the instrumental role of the “brown” welfare state. The author posited that these elements were essential for binding the complex polycratic political system of the Third Reich and ensuring mass support from the German public. The significance of “Hitler’s People’s State” for scientific debate on National Socialism was evidenced by the polemics between German and Anglo-Saxon historians regarding Aly’s main theses, known as “the new historians’ dispute.”¹³

2. Modernization theories

A Polish Germanist, Hubert Orłowski, noticed that the modernizing interpretation of the National Socialism phenomenon emerged from two significant historical perspectives. Firstly, Max Weber’s concept of occidental rationality, which refers to the strategy of purposeful rational actions of individuals and societies of modern Western Europe. Secondly, the skepticism regarding the explanation of the regime’s institutions and mechanisms solely through the lens of racist and authoritarian ideology, neglecting the social aspects typical of a welfare state. Thus, this interpretation was not only another reconstruction of the essence of National Socialism as a compact ideological system; it also entailed a shift in understanding the events in the Third Reich, as well as the periods before and after its rise and fall, through the framework of modernization theory.

In the analysis of modernization and National Socialism, the central controversy is whether the Nazi regime, despite its anti-modernizing ideology, instigated a revolution of modernity in Germany or whether its actions were merely reactionary or responsive to the currents of modernity. This raises a question of why German history took such a disastrous turn that, at a certain point, the Weberian spirit of capitalism became a foundation for the rise and development of National Socialism, and whether this system should be classified as a revolutionary or conservative phenomenon. Scholars increasingly view the Nazi movement and the Third Reich as one potential variant of the modernization process, representing a darker manifestation of the occidental rationalism that had permeated Europe for two or three centuries. The modernization paradigm was linked to the Enlightenment and the bourgeois Protestant ethos, which in Nazi Germany was expected to foster a modernized and rationalized society. This contributed to the establishment of new bureaucratic pseudo-state institutions in the Third Reich aimed at total nation mobilization, the escalation of terror, and the implementation of Social Darwinism, which was subsequently accompanied by the use of advanced technology in genocidal policies. According to this interpretation,

¹³ W. Wichert, *Narodowy socjalizm w historiografii Republiki Federalnej Niemiec w latach 1986–2016*, p. 425 ff.

National Socialism was not a regression to barbarism or a departure from rationality, but rather a darker alternative possibility.¹⁴

In the backdrop of this discussion is the fundamental question of what modernity and modernization truly entail. On one hand, there is a value-laden description saying that modernity is a good thing, because it embraces Enlightenment and liberalism, and is oriented towards continuous progress. On the other hand, a functionalist model presents certain aspects of modernity primarily through the achievements of material civilization and technological or infrastructural development, with relatively less emphasis on the political agenda accompanying these phenomena. Furthermore, the modernizing interpretation of the Third Reich is more difficult to assimilate, not only for a Polish audience. This is mainly because of the conceptual, methodological, and terminological confusion surrounding the terms modernism (*Moderne*), modernity (*Modernität*), and modernization (*Modernisierung*), which exist across disciplines such as social and economic history, sociology, political science, and cultural studies. Therefore, the determinants of modernization and its methodologies differ significantly, often leading to a “reductionist” consideration of these categories, sometimes tinged with “historiosophical cynicism,” *nota bene* partly unintentionally, especially in the interpretation of the Nazi movement and its horrific consequences, such as the Holocaust.¹⁵

In this context, it is also valid to question the desirability of creating an idealized model of modernization, linking this concept to the change of direction: inclusion, dynamization, and increased adaptability, as well as conceptualizing various developmental processes and “independent socio-political transformations of a structural and sequential nature.” It seems that the German historian Jens Alber was right in distinguishing four dimensions of social development: economic development (industrialization and rising *per capita* incomes), political development (the formation of states and nations, increased state interference, easier access to the elite, and growing participation), changes in the social structure (progressive social mobilization involving the erosion of traditional ties and assigned roles due to urbanization, educational expansion, the development of communication networks, and the growing importance of achievements as criteria for determining social status), and cultural development (rationalization, secularization, and the shift from particularistic to universal orientations). Given

¹⁴ H. Orłowski, “Nazizm, Trzecia Rzesza a procesy modernizacji,” [in:] *Nazizm, Trzecia Rzesza a procesy modernizacji*, pp. 13–15; H. Orłowski, “Pułapki paradygmatu modernizacji. Wokół najnowszych dyskusji nad nazizmem i Trzecią Rzeszą,” *Studia nad Faszyzmem i Zbrodniami Hitlerowskimi* 19, 1996, p. 69.

¹⁵ See H. Orłowski, “Nazizm, Trzecia Rzesza a procesy modernizacji,” p. 14; W. Wichert, *Narodowy socjalizm w historiografii Republiki Federalnej Niemiec w latach 1986–2016*, p. 211; H.U. Gumbrecht, “Modern, Modernität, Moderne,” [in:] *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, eds. O. Brunner, W. Conze, R. Koselleck, vol. 4: *Mi-Pre*, Stuttgart 1978, p. 96 ff.

these determinants, Alber argues that deep social reconstruction requires more time than the National Socialists had during their twelve years in power.¹⁶

3. Ambiguities of the modernization *à la* Nazi

Nevertheless, it can be argued that National Socialism was not merely an irrational version of an agrarian utopia or a nostalgic yearning for a return to the ancient Germanic forests, although some individuals did espouse such sentiments.¹⁷ The German Reich was a modern country in the functional sense, characterized by a network of motorways and a comprehensive program of environmental protection and ecology—an aspect long embedded in German culture and ideology, exemplified by the fascination with the Germanic forest and landscape architecture. The regime promoted animal rights, tested biodynamic agriculture, and encouraged healthy food, entertainment, and mass tourism for underprivileged citizens. It also prioritized hygiene and occupational safety, advertised Coca-Cola, produced “cars for the people” (*Volkswagen*), developed aviation (including Zeppelins, Junkers, and the Tempelhof airport), and implemented technical modernization through technocratic record-keeping and population management (for example, with the help of IBM). Additionally, the Nazis supported radio broadcasting as a modern propaganda tool. The Third Reich introduced anti-smoking and anti-alcohol campaigns, provided extensive medical assistance to children (e.g., caries prevention), preventive X-ray examinations for lung cancer, and respite care for young mothers, including the world’s first nationwide breast cancer screening. Efforts were made to rationalize work processes (along with the lines of Fordism) and to organize health and welfare services. Furthermore, many of the basic principles of the European Union’s agrarian policy, joint taxation of spouses, traffic regulations, and tax thresholds originated from this period. National Socialist politicians established the foundations for the pension rules that have been in force in Germany since 1957.¹⁸ These themes continue to be associated with modernity today.

¹⁶ J. Alber, “Narodowy socjalizm a modernizacja,” [in:] *Nazizm, Trzecia Rzesza a procesy modernizacji*, pp. 234–235, 239–240; W. Wichert, *Narodowy socjalizm w historiografii Republiki Federalnej Niemiec w latach 1986–2016*, p. 247.

¹⁷ See G. Kucharczyk, *III Rzesza Niemiecka. Nowoczesność i nienawiść*, Kraków 2022, pp. 10–22, 248–261.

¹⁸ See G. Aly, *Państwo Hitlera*, p. 20; G. Kucharczyk, *III Rzesza Niemiecka*, p. 190 ff.; H. Spode, A. Steinecke, “Die NS-Gemeinschaft ‘Kraft durch Freude’—ein Volk auf Reisen?,” [in:] *Zur Sonne, zur Freiheit! Beiträge zur Tourismusgeschichte*, ed. H. Spode, Berlin 1991, pp. 79 ff.; Ch. Sachße, F. Tennstedt, “Der Wohlfahrtsstaat im Nationalsozialismus,” *Zeitschrift für Sozialreform* 38, 1992, no. 3, pp. 129–148; W. König, *Volkswagen, Volksempfänger, Volksgemeinschaft. ‘Volksprodukte’ im Dritten Reich. Vom Scheitern einer nationalsozialistischen Konsumgesellschaft*, Paderborn–München–Wien–Zürich 2004.

The Nazis perceived themselves as a youthful, dynamic, and modern revolutionary movement. They aimed to create a modern infrastructure in Germany where speed, efficiency, and new means of transport were to play a key role. “The Nazis did not so much impede as rather accelerate the dynamics of the industrial revolution. They uprooted hundreds of thousands of people from their traditional regional, social, and confessional ties. They accelerated social change to an unimaginable degree, even though, after all, they wanted the permanence of the ‘thousand-year Reich.’ The National Socialist rebellion against modernism constituted a revolution against revolution. The National Socialist saviors and liberators were, despite their defensive and backward-looking aims and characteristics, figures of modernity. They were children of technical civilization, more consistent than others in their use of the possibilities of technology, appealed to the fascination of technology and mass communication, drenched themselves in an aura of youth and celebrity, convincingly embodying the collectivist-militarist response to the pan-European crisis of the liberal-democratic system.”¹⁹ National Socialism undeniably aspired to be something new, an alternative to the “old, crumpled world.” It presented itself as a youthful and anti-system movement, which contributed to its considerable electoral popularity between 1930 and 1932, especially among students, scholars, and academics (such as Carl Schmitt, Martin Heidegger, Konrad Lorenz, Werner Heisenberg, Karl Haushofer, etc.) as well as people from the cultural sphere (including Leni Riefenstahl, Richard Strauss, Wilhelm Furtwängler, etc.). No other country in Europe at that time offered such career opportunities for artists and scientists as the Third Reich, along with unlimited funds for research and artistic projects. It undoubtedly attracted outstanding individuals.

At the same time, the Third Reich was an inherently criminal state. In this regime, all the means that constitute modernity served profoundly evil ends rooted in an ideology steeped in racial hatred. National Socialism was a patchwork, an amalgam of various elements and concepts that had existed long before Adolf Hitler’s rise to power and had functioned within German political culture.²⁰ For instance, the program and declarations of the so-called Volkist movement, or German ultra-socialism at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries,²¹ i.e., anti-Semitism, anti-Slavism, anti-Polonism, anti-Catholicism, Pan-Germanism, and a longing for an old Germania untainted by Christianity—are all found within National Socialism. These elements were interconnected by the modern aspiration to create a cross-class *Volksgemeinschaft*, aiming to evoke and catalyze mental and identity changes through totalitarian social engineering. The goal was

¹⁹ H.-U. Thamer, *Verführung und Gewalt. Deutschland 1933–1945*, Berlin 1986, p. 771.

²⁰ See M. Broszat, *Der Nationalsozialismus. Weltanschauung, Programm und Wirklichkeit*, Stuttgart 1960, p. 16 ff.

²¹ See G.L. Mosse, *Kryzys ideologii niemieckiej. Rodowód intelektualny Trzeciej Rzeszy*, transl. T. Evert, Warszawa 1972, p. 15 ff.

not just to alter external social structures, but also to psychologically align and ideologically re-educate every racial comrade, fostering a sense of belonging to the people's community and eroding individual identities tied to class, region, faith, and occupation, etc.²²

German historian Norbert Frei pointed out that the Nazi era created new, previously non-existent opportunities for social advancement for certain groups and individuals who were either deprived of privilege or felt undervalued. From this perspective, it is easier to understand why the regime's supporters often included young people and cadres, particularly within the influential NSDAP, which recruited largely from the new middle class, who protested against the rigidity of social structures. Such capable and highly motivated individuals reached managerial and strategic positions within the Third Reich's armaments factories, its highly effective propaganda machine, and key sites of sterilization and euthanasia operations, and in the preparation and implementation of the Holocaust. They were also involved in developing imperialist plans for the exploitation and extermination of Slavic peoples, managing the war economy—especially during the “Speer era”—and constructing extensive projects for post-war social policy, anticipating in detail the post-war processes.²³ In the shadow of the “Final Solution,” the first generation of Nazi experts began to diverge from the path of the “old fighters” (*Alte Kämpfer*). The young technocrats of the “unconditionality generation”—dynamic representatives of the middle class who seized the opportunities created by the regime—envisioned a post-war order based on the Nazi worldview, but grounded in science.²⁴ This envisioned order promised greater “rationality” and efficiency than the regime itself, which had quasi-revolutionary origins. Improved governance techniques were intended to consolidate and enhance the efficiency of the Nazi state at a higher level. To achieve this, it was necessary to overcome an era defined by the undeveloped *café* ideas and private obsessions of figures like Adolf Hitler or Heinrich Himmler. The outlines of these projects are clear in terms of social and economic policy; at the same time, however, it is evident how serious the intention was to pursue the native Nazi “German road” between capitalism and communism. These plans, far from being merely dysfunctional side effects of the regime's reactionary and atavistic policies, can be viewed as precursors to attempts to shape the project of “modernity” according to the specific form of the Nazi racial order.²⁵

²² F. Janka, *Die braune Gesellschaft. Ein Volk wird formatiert*, Stuttgart 1997, pp. 240, 252.

²³ See M. Broszat, “Na rzecz uhistorycznienia narodowego socjalizmu,” [in:] *Historikerstreit. Spór o miejsce III Rzeszy w historii Niemiec*, ed. M. Łukasiewicz, London 1990, pp. 62–63; W. Wichert, *Narodowy socjalizm w historiografii Republiki Federalnej Niemiec w latach 1986–2016*, pp. 192–193.

²⁴ See M. Wildt, *Generation des Unbedingten. Das Führungskorps des Reichssicherheitshauptamtes*, Hamburg 2003.

²⁵ N. Frei, *Państwo wodzowskie. Rządy narodowosocjalistyczne w latach 1933–1945*, transl. R. Marszałek, Warszawa 2000, pp. 185–187.

4. Pre-postmodernism and racial egalitarianism

The various, sometimes seemingly contradictory elements of modernity were integrated into the ideology and practice of National Socialism in a patchwork manner, reflecting certain aspects of a kind of pre-postmodernism and racial egalitarianism. National Socialism represented a knot or weave in the spirit of “Hegelian slyness of reason” rather than Cartesian rationality, making seamless use of all available resources, including those of modernity, to establish itself as socially credible. This approach extended to the realms of law and social psychology. For instance, the “healthy folk’s common sense” (*gesundes Volksempfinden*) characteristic of National Socialism, the rehabilitation of subjective feeling, direct knowledge and instinct as paths to norms and truth, and the rejection of reason, aligns it more closely with postmodernism. The “Germanic-Nordic” individual was expected to intuitively know what was necessary for his life and that of his loved ones, without reflection or conscious mediation.²⁶ In this context, life is depicted as a constant evolution, a perpetual Darwinist struggle, a turbulent series of events and situations that cannot be foreseen by any legislative power. For this reason, German judges after 1933 were encouraged to practice “analogy,” which represented an emancipation from the positive law itself. The Nazis believed life is movement, which is unconscious, dynamic and derived from pure blood, and moldable because it is in motion and in a state of flux.²⁷

It is also important to emphasize Nazism’s fluid, proto-modernist attitude toward the German-Prussian tradition, selectively choosing elements that suited its agenda to legitimize power, especially during the early phase of Hitler’s rule (*vide* “Potsdam Day” on March 21, 1933).²⁸ Over time, this tradition was more frequently set aside, and when revisited, it was only in relation to selected aspects. National Socialism embraced historical figures from the Prussian tradition that Hitler and the Nazis favored, such as Frederick II, often within the context of the so-called miracle of the House of Brandenburg. In the Third Reich, this was to happen in a new version—the *Wunderwaffe*. At the same time, themes they disliked were omitted, for instance the Stein/Hardenberg-era reforms in Prussia, especially the 1812 edict emancipating the Jews. Additionally, we can mention a selective approach to Christianity, particularly that of Alfred Rosenberg, one of the main Nazi ideologues. He and other doctrinaires in the Third Reich wanted to extract aspects of the religion that suited the “new man” meant to build the racially pure Millennial Reich—e.g., the modern portrayal of Jesus Christ drawn from the tradition of so-called critical Protestant German theology (the quest for the

²⁶ J. Chapoutot, *Nazistowska rewolucja kulturalna*, transl. U. Kropiwek, Kraków 2021, p. 163.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 164; J. Chapoutot, *The Law of Blood: Thinking and Acting as a Nazi*, transl. M. Richmond Mouillot, Cambridge, MA–London 2018, p. 133.

²⁸ See K. Scheel, 1933. *Der Tag von Potsdam*, Berlin 1996, p. 39 ff.; S. Salmonowicz, *Prusy. Dzieje państwa i społeczeństwa*, Poznań 1987, pp. 566–567.

historical Jesus to strip him of his divinity). The Nazis believed that the historical Jesus was an Aryan, the son of a Germanic legionary. In doing so, they were inadvertently echoing Talmudic Christian legends from the Middle Ages.²⁹ This may have stemmed from the fact that, apart from representatives of the “unconditionality generation,” many Nazis were often dilettantes—some well-read, like Hitler himself—but ultimately autodidacts lacking a thorough humanistic education. As the history of various currents of postmodernism suggests, this background can facilitate a creative approach to modernity.

In general, postmodernists argued that German philosophy had rightly replaced truth with myths, asserting that only the Nazis had misunderstood and misinterpreted philosophers such as Martin Heidegger and Friedrich Nietzsche, giving their ideas a criminal dimension. The postmodernists offered their own pluralistic interpretation of myth, which Jean-François Lyotard called a “grand narrative/metanarrative.” By opposing traditional narratives, primarily mythical and fairy-tale, it aimed to fuse various fields of knowledge and science while establishing criteria for societal functioning.³⁰ There is a significant difference between the two approaches: the Nazis believed in a collective and intolerant myth that rejected all other myths within the German nation. They dismissed the objective laws and universal truths of the Enlightenment and, following Nietzsche—the universal moral norms of Christian civilization in favor of the primacy of racial particularism within the national community. In Nazism, the theoretically hostile ideologies of socialism (specifically the non-Marxist one) and nationalism were reconciled seamlessly in the name of a higher goal. Thus, the “brown” totalitarian state was founded on the racial myth of the *Volksgemeinschaft*. In contrast, the postmodernists recognized that, since there is no truth as correspondence between concepts, names, and facts, different myths (“grand narratives”) can coexist within a given society and time, compatible only in that objective truth is seen as an obsolete concept. This perspective explains why most postmodernists leaned toward left-wing liberalism and social democracy, advocating a vision of a pluralistic society where everything is relative.³¹

Nonetheless, regarding the “postmodern” aspects of the Third Reich, American publicist and writer Jonah Goldberg, in his bestselling book on “liberal fascism,” noted that Nazism emphasized many, including populist, issues characteristic of later varieties of the New Left: the primacy of race, the rejection of rationalism and Christianity, the emphasis on organic and holistic principles—

²⁹ See G. Kucharczyk, *III Rzesza Niemiecka*, p. 89 ff.

³⁰ See J.-F. Lyotard, *Kondycja ponowoczesna. Raport o stanie wiedzy*, transl. M. Kowalska, J. Migasiński, Warszawa 1997.

³¹ See W. Golonka, “Co zabija cywilizację Zachodu?,” *Do Rzeczy*, June 6, 2022, <https://dorzeczy.pl/opinie/310768/zabojcy-zachodu-prof-wielomski-o-swojej-nowej-ksiazce.html> (accessed: October 20, 2023); A. Wielomski, *Zabójcy Zachodu. Prawica i lewica nietzscheańsko-heideggerystyczna*, Warszawa 2022, p. 287 ff.

including environmental protection, healthy food, and physical exercise—and, above all, the need to “transcend” and deconstruct the notion of class.³² Related to the last point is the mentioned egalitarian interpretation of the Third Reich phenomenon, namely the Nazi glorification of labor productivity. This corresponded to the ever-increasing demands of the war economy, which had begun before 1939, and to the consistently proclaimed principles of Social Darwinism. According to Robert Ley, head of the German Labor Front (DAF), “community means selection” through constant competition, with the aim of raising the socio-occupational status of working people. At the same time, it sought to promote Germanic self-made individuals across various social, political, and economic spheres, in order to erode class, regional, and confessional barriers and identities within the framework of the *Volksgemeinschaft* racial ideology.³³

As a side note regarding the Social Darwinist components of National Socialism, it should also be mentioned that the origins of what was then considered progressive racism and eugenics go back much further than 1933 and include territories beyond Germany. Euthanasia and the forced sterilization of so-called “low-value” people were also key aspects of modernity in the first half of the 20th century. It was even regarded as an expression of a scientific approach, much like racism itself, which was considered progressive and scientific not only in Germany. It is noteworthy that the progressive movement in the USA at the beginning of the 20th century, associated with figures such as President Thomas Woodrow Wilson, Nobel Peace Prize laureate, and John D. Rockefeller, viewed the issue of eliminating those whom they considered imbeciles or a burden on society (“the unfit”) as quite modern and legitimate. This is particularly evident in the legislation of various US states that allowed for the sterilization of so-called hereditarily burdened persons or those deemed racially inferior (including black people, Jews, and Indians).³⁴ Nowhere, however, did these criminal concepts find such fertile ground for development as in the Third Reich, whose basic mental and ideological roots, as well as attitudes toward modernization, can be traced back to the German Empire of the Hohenzollerns.

5. Repercussions of the German *Sonderweg*

The era of the Second Reich and German history prior to the unification in 1871 provide an important genetic substrate for the development of a distinctly

³² J. Goldberg, *Liberal Fascism: The Secret History of the American Left, from Mussolini to the Politics of Meaning*, New York–London 2009, p. 67.

³³ See J.-U. Guettel, “Work(ers) under the Swastika,” [in:] *A Companion to Nazi Germany*, eds. S. Baranowski, A. Nolzen, C.-Ch.W. Szejnmann, Medford 2018, p. 119; E. Hobsbawm, *Wiek skrajności. Spojrzenie na krótkie dwudzieste stulecie*, transl. J. Kalinowska-Król, M. Król, Warszawa 1999, p. 114.

³⁴ See G. Kucharczyk, *III Rzesza Niemiecka*, pp. 204–210.

German modernization project, as articulated by the paradigm of the “separate road” (*Sonderweg*).³⁵ This concept highlighted a unique unevenness in the formation of the state and the German nation, contrasting sharply with the development models of contemporary industrial states (especially France and Great Britain), which were regarded as exemplary for their integration of economic and technical modernization with political democratization. A characteristic feature of this development was the approximately 40-year delay in industrialization within the German territories. This delay stemmed primarily from the etatist economic policies of Prussia and Austria, which inhibited the economic initiative of the middle classes. Equally significant were the negative attitudes of the political elites toward democratization and the principle of the sovereignty of the people, as exemplified by the failure of the March Revolution in 1848 and the establishment of a monarchical constitutional system that favored the executive over the legislature following German unification in 1871. After the unification, “industrialization in Germany took place within the shell of a traditional autocratic state,” based on values and ideologies derived from a pre-industrial society. The German policies that led to the outbreak of the First World War were the result of the tension between economic and social modernization on one hand and the country’s political backwardness on the other. Conversely, the Great War represented a further stage in the unification of Germany, serving, to some extent, as an incubator for the *Volksgemeinschaft*. Major wars typically lead to etatization and centralization, with the state consolidating control over critical aspects of social and economic life, thereby enforcing an undemocratic unification of many facets of social and political life. This was also true in Kaiser Wilhelm II’s wartime authoritarian Germany. The following step in this trajectory was the establishment of the Weimar Republic (1919), a crucial phase on the path toward creating a unitary state. Ultimately, it can be argued that in the long run, the fatal separation of German history from the West resulted in the emergence of National Socialism and Hitler’s dictatorship.³⁶

Germany was characterized by violence, yet was also a modern country in terms of science and culture (suffice to say that Berlin was the center of world cinematography long before Hollywood rose to prominence), and economy even

³⁵ See H.-U. Thamer, *Verführung und Gewalt*, p. 40 ff.; H. Schulze, “Die ‘Deutsche Katastrophe’ erklären. Von Nutzen und Nachteil historischer Erklärungsmodelle,” [in:] *Ist der Nationalsozialismus Geschichte? Zu Historisierung und Historikerstreit*, ed. D. Diner, Frankfurt a.M. 1987, p. 89 ff.; G. Eley, *Wilhelmismus, Nationalismus, Faschismus. Zur historischen Kontinuität in Deutschland*, Münster 1991, p. 15 ff.; J. Kocka, “Deutsche Geschichte vor Hitler. Zur Diskussion über den deutschen Sonderweg,” [in:] J. Kocka, *Geschichte und Aufklärung. Aufsätze*, Göttingen 1989, pp. 101–113; *Sonderweg. Spory o „niemiecką drogę odrębną”*, ed. H. Orłowski, transl. J. Kałużny, Poznań 2008.

³⁶ See W. Wichert, *Narodowy socjalizm w historiografii Republiki Federalnej Niemiec w latach 1986–2016*, pp. 118–119; G. Iggers, *Historiografia XX wieku. Przegląd kierunków badawczych*, transl. A. Gadzała, Warszawa 2010, p. 55.

before Hitler came to power. *Nota bene*, after 1933, Germany was one of the first countries, along with the USA, to test the principles of the then-progressive Keynesianism in order to stimulate economic growth (*vide* public works, Hjalmar Schacht's Mefo bills) through demand and the expansion of the modern armaments industry, which included the development of the novel Blitzkrieg tactics. During the war, the Third Reich used clearing practices to develop a modern system for draining occupied territories—in order to prevent internal discontent by shifting the war's costs onto the occupied nations.³⁷ In this context, we can also discuss the neo-colonialism of the Nazi "European integration" under the hegemony of the Reich, as well as a rather "flexible" economic approach toward the Western and Eastern occupied states (the latter being treated far more harshly). Hitler believed that the "living space" (*Lebensraum*) gained in the East would provide a reservoir of raw materials and energy, as well as a vast market necessary for domestic industrial expansion. His ideas in this regard were not merely an expression of the anti-modern, utopian ideology of reagrarization. For instance, he rejected the re-settlement of urban dwellers as peasants in the countryside. While he did plan for peasant settlement in the East, this was not intended to transform German society into an agrarian community, as proposed by the theorists of the classical autarky idea, such as Ferdinand Fried or Werner Sombart. The aim of this policy was to eliminate disparities between agriculture and industry in order to create a relatively autarkic Greater European economic order (*Großraumwirtschaft*). For Hitler, a steady increase in the living standards of the German people, and consequently in consumption, was a quasi-natural necessity in this project. He was convinced that Russian raw materials would enable the dynamic development of industrial production, ensuring that the Third Reich would eventually catch up with and surpass the highly industrialized United States, whose levels of technology, rationalization, and motorization (Fordism) he viewed as exemplary. Therefore, he was fundamentally not opposed to technical progress and industrialization.³⁸

These considerations help answer the question posed in the article's title. Indeed, German National Socialism was an amalgam of various elements of modernity, drawing its vital forces from the society and country that were *par excellence* modern, albeit with the specificities of the German *Sonderweg*. To fully understand this, it is necessary to view the phenomenon of modernity not only as a value-laden criterion, despite its predominantly positive connotations in our contemporary world. History provides numerous instances in which societies,

³⁷ See G. Aly, *Państwo Hitlera*, p. 126 ff.

³⁸ See R. Zitelmann, "Narodowy socjalizm i moderna. Bilans tymczasowy," pp. 272–273; "Zur Begründung des 'Lebensraum'-Motivs in Hitlers Weltanschauung," [in:] *Der Zweite Weltkrieg. Analysen, Grundzüge, Forschungsbilanz*, ed. W. Michalka, München 1989, pp. 551–567; A. Tooze, *Cena zniszczenia. Wzrost i załamanie nazistowskiej gospodarki*, transl. D. Jednorowski, Oświęcim 2016; W. Wichert, *Narodowy socjalizm w historiografii Republiki Federalnej Niemiec w latach 1986–2016*, pp. 229, 280.

states, or certain historical phenomena that considered themselves modern, pursued policies exploiting modernity to spread hatred and commit mass crimes. A classic example is the French Revolution, which led to the first genocide in modern European history—the war in the Vendée (1793–1796), in which between 170,000 and 600,000 people were killed in the suppression of popular uprisings in western France were exterminated in the name of modernity, defined at that time as a one, indivisible Republic.³⁹ There is also the stark warning from the events that unfolded under the supposedly scientific and progressive Marxist communist ideology in the USSR. It is therefore necessary to reflect on the relationship between modernity, hatred, and crime in order to move beyond the conventional perceptions of modernity as a solely positive phenomenon.

6. National Socialism and the Enlightenment rationality

Even according to the founders of modern neo-Marxism from the so-called Frankfurt School, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, Enlightenment rationality (the Kantian and Cartesian rationality), with its axiological fundamentalism and the absolutization (emancipation) of reason's value, paradoxically led to National Socialism's exploitation of the achievements of that era. Initially rooted in a "striving for the truth" approach, this rationality was cloaked in the guise of progressive scientific institutions, dismissing a tradition that overlooks the progress of knowledge, rationality, and functionality. This allowed the Nazi regime to use modern scientific methods (anthropology, racist biology, or eugenics) to identify the so-called bearers of social ambivalence and subsequently eliminate them in order to establish a new socio-racial reality. In this context, Adorno and Horkheimer explicitly addressed the Jews, viewing the annihilation of European Jews, epitomized by Auschwitz, as a breakdown of civilization and an exceptional event. They argued that the Enlightenment's maximalist goals imbued modernity with a dark core.⁴⁰ Rationality, seemingly distant from the concentration camps and death factories, became the sole criterion for legitimizing certain political decisions, leading paradoxically to a collective madness that saw nothing wrong with the murder of millions of people.

A similar view was later articulated by Polish-Jewish sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman. He stated that "the Holocaust appeared and was implemented in our modern, rationalist society at a high level of development of our civilization, at the peak of the achievements of human culture, and if only for that

³⁹ See G. Kucharczyk, *III Rzesza Niemiecka*, p. 18; R. Secher, *Ludobójstwo francusko-francuskie. Wanda — departament zemsty*, transl. M. Miszalski, Warszawa 2003.

⁴⁰ See M. Horkheimer, T.W. Adorno, *Dialektyka oświecenia. Fragmenty filozoficzne*, transl. M. Łukasiewicz, Warszawa 2010; W. Wichert, *Narodowy socjalizm w historiografii Republiki Federalnej Niemiec w latach 1986–2016*, pp. 61–62.

reason it is a problem of this society, this civilization and this culture [read post-Enlightenment].” The Holocaust was the consequence of an attempt to create a perfectly ordered, weeded, and meticulously controlled society, as well as “an extraordinary accumulation of a number of factors, individually quite ordinary and normal, and the responsibility for such an accumulation must be attributed to the modern state with its monopoly on the means of violence and its far-reaching ambitions towards social engineering.”⁴¹ This is a troubling argument for uncritical proponents of the Enlightenment rationality who naively believe that violence can be eradicated from public life through civilized institutions. This was also the stance of postmodernism’s progenitor, French philosopher Michel Foucault, who argued that civilization consists of the state’s monopoly on violence and that its exclusion from social space is a step toward progress.⁴² The more modernity, the less violence. However, the modern drive to establish criteria by which only scientific positions are deemed decisive in, for example, determining the social suitability of certain groups ultimately failed, resulting in genocides and mass atrocities (not only in Germany).

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is worthwhile to reference American historian Peter Fritzsche’s insightful diagnosis of the relationship between National Socialism and modernity. He stated that

the Nazis saw the world as a totally mobilized, pitiless landscape. [...] At the same time, however, the Nazis presupposed the ability to renovate the world. Grand imperial designs and well-ordered racial hierarchies would lay the foundations for previously unimagined German prosperity. The surprising contingencies of history had configured both the unpredictable terrain of danger and the very tractable zone of design. The features of modernism described both places. Defining itself in the machine-age terms of crisis and renovation, National Socialism constructed a totalitarian version of the modern.⁴³ [...] In the end, as we know, the regime self-destructed. The total mobilization Nazism envisaged is no longer a credible response to the perils and possibilities of the twentieth century. Hopefully, we live more easily with indeterminacy and understand more clearly the costs of managing contingency.⁴⁴

Nonetheless, according to Fritzsche, “the complicity of Nazism in the premises of modernism is haunting.”⁴⁵ For this reason, this topic remains worthy of reflection and is by no means solely the domain of Clio’s adepts.

⁴¹ Z. Bauman, *Nowoczesność i zagłada*, transl. F. Jaszuński, Warszawa 1992, pp. 13, 17. See also D.J.K. Peukert, “Geneza ‘rozwiązania ostatecznego’ wyprowadzona z ducha nauki,” [in:] *Nazizm, Trzecia Rzesza a procesy modernizacji*, pp. 150–166.

⁴² See M. Foucault, *Trzeba bronić społeczeństwa*, transl. M. Kowalska, Warszawa 1998; M. Foucault, *Nadzorować i karać*, transl. T. Komendant, Warszawa 1993.

⁴³ See R. Zitelmann, “Totalitarna strona moderny,” [in:] *Nazizm, Trzecia Rzesza a procesy modernizacji*, pp. 319–342.

⁴⁴ P. Fritzsche, “Nazi Modern,” *Modernism/Modernity* 3, 1996, no. 1, p. 17.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

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