

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

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THE EARLY LIFE AND WORK  
OF ERNST KANTOROWICZ

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## INTRODUCTION

The Nazi revolution of 1933 had its intellectual "stormbirds" - writers whose pre-revolutionary works in retrospect seem to have argued the upheavals which were to come, to foreshadow the calamities which would follow them.<sup>1</sup> Writers such as Moeller van den Bruck, Ernst Jünger, Oswald Spengler and Stefan George were no promoters of National Socialism in Germany. But their writings of the first three decades of this century, imbued with attitudes of cultural pessimism and political romanticism, helped to undermine the fragile Weimar democracy.<sup>2</sup> They put potentially subversive notions into circulation and they stirred the air with theories for radical change. They helped create a climate which made Hitler's revolution thinkable. Though their writings had profound, indeed dangerous political implications, many of the "stormbirds" of the Nazis were frankly apolitical, or politically naive men. In their hostility to Weimar and their longing for an authoritarian

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<sup>1</sup>The concept of "stormbirds" of revolutions was used by Eugen Rosenstock-Hussey in Die Europäischen Revolutionen, (Stuttgart: 1951).

<sup>2</sup>See J. Flemming, "Konservatismus als nationalrevolutionäre Bewegung," in Dirk Stegmann, Deutscher Konservatismus in 19 and 20. Jahrhundert, (Bonn, 1983); Eberhard Rhein Mohler, Die Konservative Revolution in Deutschland, (1950); Klemens von Klemperer, Germany's New Conservatism, (Princeton, 1957); Fritz Stern, The Politics of Cultural Despair, (New York, 1965); and Walter Struve, Elites against Democracy, (Princeton, 1973).

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Führer for Germany, they had little inkling of the disastrous developments that their brand of thinking would help usher in. They were swept up in, and contributed to, an intellectual and political tide which would bring a dictator to power in Germany. It was a tide that they were unable to control.

Perhaps, as Kurt Sontheimer has suggested, the anti-democratic writers of Weimar are important, not so much for what they promoted, but in the negative sense, for their failure to apply their intellectual energy to buttressing the Weimar democracy.<sup>3</sup> The degree to which the ideas circulated by these writers, as opposed to material circumstances, contributed to the collapse of Weimar can never be quantitatively measured. But their diverse yet persuasive calls for a spiritual revival and the rejection of materialism, for a deeper sense of community sustained by traditional values, and for an heroic leader who could command the obedience of the people -- all this pointed to a longing in the German people, a longing which the Nazis claimed they could satisfy.

During the late Weimar years at the German universities, these radically conservative thinkers were much in vogue and many students saw in their writings an intellectual underpinning for National Socialism. If the Weimar intellectuals who had called for a conservative

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<sup>3</sup>Kurt Sontheimer, Antidemokratisches Denken in der Weimarer Republik, (Munich, 1962).

revolution, for a new Führer for Germany, lived through the 1930s and 1940s, they were confronted with the violent and tumultuous legacy of their ideas. Their response to the Hitler regime can be fascinating and instructive.

This essay examines the life and work of one such stormbird of the Nazis, the German historian Ernst Kantorowicz, up to the forty-third year of his life, 1938, the year that he emigrated from Germany. Kantorowicz's early life, and his first book, a biography of the medieval emperor Frederick the Second, must be placed in the context of Germany's intellectual revolt against the Weimar democracy. A disciple of the poet Stefan George and deep admirer of Nietzsche, Kantorowicz acutely felt a malaise in modern Germany -- its diminution of man, its spiritual bankruptcy.

In Frederick the Second Kantorowicz offered his antidote -- a semi-religious conviction of the people in Germany's exalted historical destiny, and a god-like hero, a new Führer to lead them. Written very much in the vein of history practiced by the Stefan George Circle, to which Kantorowicz belonged, the book extolled what Allan Bloom has called "the politics of irrational commitment."<sup>4</sup> But the new Führer who came to power in 1933 claiming that he would restore Germany to greatness, who garnered the irrational

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<sup>4</sup>Allan Bloom, The Closing of the American Mind, (New York, 1987).

commitment of most Germans, was irreconcilably hostile to Kantorowicz for perverse reasons of race. Kantorowicz, a Jew, was unwittingly an intellectual forerunner of the Nazis.

What happens to such stormbirds after the storm breaks and leaves in its wake a gross distortion of what had been envisioned? After Hitler's seizure of power, Kantorowicz, a professor at the University of Frankfurt until 1934, offered two lectures, "The Secret Germany" and "The German Papacy," in which he sought to separate clearly his vision for Germany from that of the Nazi regime, and lay a sort of intellectual foundation for resistance to Hitler. Although the Nazis' abuse of Kantorowicz's and other radical conservatives' Weimar writings may discredit those writings, an assertion such as Norman Cantor's that "beyond doubt, Kantorowicz was a Nazi," betrays a misunderstanding of a highly ambiguous and complex situation.<sup>5</sup>

Understanding Weimar radical conservative intellectuals necessitates going beyond merely regarding them as more-or-less proto-fascist. One must trace their lives and ideas through the Nazi period and examine their response to Hitler's regime. Indeed one of the ironies of the period is the link between the Weimar radical conservatives who abetted Hitler's rise to power, and the resistance against

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<sup>5</sup>Norman Cantor, Twentieth-Century Culture From Modernism to Deconstruction, (New York, 1988).

Hitler which culminated in the July 20, 1944 attempt on his life. This essay does not claim to be a biography of Kantorowicz. Rather it is a journey of the mind, with three wayside stops: Kantorowicz's portentous book Frederick the Second (1927), and his essays "The Secret Germany" and "The German Papacy," both written after Hitler's seizure of power in 1933. Kantorowicz's experience can hardly be called typical, but because his intellectual life was so profoundly affected by the upheavals of the time, he provides a unique perspective from which to reflect upon the recent German past.

## YOUTH

Ernst Kantorowicz was born on May 5, 1895, in Posen, a city about 150 miles east of Berlin, and at that time the capital of the Prussian province of Posen. Today Posen is the Polish city of Poznan. Scion of a rich distilling family -- "Schnapps Kantorowicz," was imbibed throughout the German Reich -- Ernst Kantorowicz enjoyed all the advantages of his family's social position. He received a first-class education at Royal Auguste Victoria Gymnasium in Posen. It was a classical education -- he learned Latin and Ancient Greek, as well as French. The English governess who cared for him during his childhood taught him her native tongue.

Kantorowicz was Jewish from a Sephardic family, the name Kantorowicz meaning literally "son of the cantor" in Polish. There is nothing to suggest that he came from a particularly religious family. He viewed himself primarily as German and regarded his Jewishness as a matter of rather marginal significance. Like Franz Kafka, Kantorowicz was born very much an outsider -- a German-speaking Jew in a predominantly Polish-speaking Catholic province. But he seems to have felt none of the acute alienation that Kafka felt -- rather Kantorowicz all the more tenaciously identified with Germanness. In the mixed German-Polish city of Posen, where ethnic passions often flared into open hostility, Kantorowicz most certainly sided with the



Germans.<sup>6</sup> His family had participated in the astounding success of German Jewry during the nineteenth century, and under the Kaisserreich had risen to the haute bourgeoisie. They had reason to be, and indeed were, more patriotic than most non-Jewish Germans.

At eighteen, having earned his Abitur in 1913, Ernst Kantorowicz went on his father's suggestion to Hamburg, "to become acquainted with the world of trade, finance and economics." The father intended that this son enter the family business. But war broke out in August 1914, and Kantorowicz "immediately volunteered and joined the colours and was sent to the front in France in September 1914."<sup>7</sup> He belonged to the elite Posen Field Artillery Regiment, which was mostly made up of well-educated sons of the upper bourgeoisie.<sup>8</sup>

The tradition of Posen's Jews serving in the Prussian army dated back to the Napoleonic Wars. By the turn of the century, some Jews from this regiment could even become members of the prestigious Reserve Officer Corps.<sup>9</sup> Kantorowicz rose from corporal to non-commissioned officer during 1915, and received the Iron Cross, second class. He

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<sup>6</sup> See Richard Blanke, Prussian Poland in the German Empire, (New York, 1981), pp.230-67, for information on Posen.

<sup>7</sup> From Ernst Kantorowicz's 1938 Curriculum Vitae.

<sup>8</sup> Eckhart Grunewald, Ernst Kantorowicz und Stefan George, (Wiesbaden, 1982), p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

never, however, became a commissioned officer, an honor which an upper-class Christian with a similarly strong education undoubtedly would have received.

Kantorowicz fought in the bloody battles around Verdun and was wounded in July, 1916. Upon recovery, in January 1917, he was sent to the Russian front and one month later transferred to Turkey. Here he worked under his brother-in-law, the economist Arthur Salz, who was planning the German construction of a railroad line in Turkey. He had learned some Turkish while recovering in the hospital, and served as a German-Turkish interpreter.<sup>10</sup> Later he became an aide to General Kress von Kressenstein in Turkey. The Young Turks, a Turkish nationalist political movement, made a strong impression on Kantorowicz during the year he was in Turkey.<sup>11</sup> His admiration for this activist elite, which set itself apart from the amorphous masses, foreshadowed Kantorowicz's later involvement with another elitist society, the Stefan George Circle.

In May 1918, Kantorowicz was transferred back to the French front. According to his friend C.M. Bowra, he had had an affair with the mistress of the German general Liman von Sanders, and the general, in retaliation, sent him back

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>11</sup> Yakov Malkiel, "Ernst Kantorowicz," in On Four Modern Humanists, ed. by Arthur Evans, Jr., (Princeton, 1970), p. 155.

to Verdun.<sup>12</sup> By now, Kantorowicz had decided to study philosophy in Berlin after the war. After the armistice, he returned home, only to find that revolutionary Polish nationalists were claiming Posen's annexation to Poland. He entered the fray by joining a Freikorps unit, Heimatschutz-Ost, to combat the Poles.<sup>13</sup> Kantorowicz went to Berlin in early 1919, only to find that city in revolutionary tumult. Newly matriculated at the university, Kantorowicz took to the streets again in January 1919 in a Freikorps unit to fight against the Spartacist Revolution. Little is known about Kantorowicz's participation in the fighting in Berlin. Many Freikorps units excluded Jews, but it is quite possible that Kantorowicz joined a small unit, perhaps made up of his old Posen comrades.

Convinced that the Berlin scene was not conducive to his academic progress, Kantorowicz resolved to take up his studies in Munich, and moved there in May 1919 -- at about the same time that Defense Minister Noske ordered 20,000 troops into Munich to overthrow Eugen Leviné's Räterepublik, which was established in the Bavarian capital. The government troops were joined by volunteer fighters raised in Bavaria. Ernst Kantorowicz joined the government-organized "Volkswehr" or "Bürgerwehr" (People's Army), made

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<sup>12</sup> C.M. Bowra, Memories, 1898-1939, (London, 1966), p. 288.

<sup>13</sup> Grünewald, p. 27.

up of officers, non-commissioned officers, students and civilians. The Volkswehr had formed on May 1, 1919, in outrage over the Leviné government's shooting of imprisoned members of the völkisch, anti-semitic Thule Society.<sup>14</sup> The irregular coalition of government forces and civilian rightists crushed the Räterepublik; Kantorowicz was wounded in one skirmish. He later ironically referred to his arrival in the Bavarian capital as the day he "took Munich."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>15</sup> I learned this in a conversation with Dr. William A. Chaney, a friend and student of Kantorowicz's at the University of California-Berkeley during the 1940's.

THE DISILLUSION OF THE INTELLECT

Kantorowicz matriculated at the university in Munich as a student of Nationalökonomie, a discipline which combines the study of economics and national politics and history. German universities, and Munich was no exception, offered one of the finest educations to be had in the world in 1919. In classics, philosophy, history, engineering and in virtually all of the natural sciences, German universities could boast of outstanding faculties. A dynamism, both intellectual and political, characterized German universities -- perhaps more than in any other country. It was a time of great discovery and of passionate politicization.

It was also a time of what has been termed "cultural despair."<sup>16</sup> Germany was a defeated nation in 1919, and for a proud people the defeat was painfully ignominious. The greatest achievements of the German intellect seemed to be futile projected against the disintegration of the German national polity. The student body which Kantorowicz joined and the professorate to whom they turned for answers suffered from a disillusion of the intellect. A common set of assumptions and values which seemed a necessary foundation for a stable polity, and gave meaning and coherence to intellectual pursuits, appeared lost.

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<sup>16</sup> Stern, The Politics of Cultural Despair.

Much has been written about the political and social dislocation in Germany immediately following the First World War. Kantorowicz's generation had been decimated in the carnage of the war. Practically every student had a friend or relative who had died in Germany's losing cause. The lower and middle classes suffered under the material conditions of the time: joblessness and food shortages. For the elite of German society, which included the professorate, the malaise was less material than intellectual and spiritual. They witnessed the passing of old Europe. Their culture, the nationally-oriented, stratified, bourgeois culture of the nineteenth-century, seemed bathed in twilight. The political upheavals appeared to them the onset of the decline and fall which some intellectuals had prophesied in the decades before. They saw their positions of preeminence endangered by the rise of mass society in post-war Germany and interpreted this as national and cultural decay.

There was an overwhelming feeling at the universities and in society at large that fundamental change was needed, that Germany could undergo a national rebirth if its people could bury nineteenth-century bourgeois liberalism and commit themselves, mind and soul and body, to a new creed of political salvation.<sup>17</sup> Kantorowicz took up his

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<sup>17</sup> Hans Mommsen, "Die deutschen Eliten und der Mythos des nationalen Aufbruchs von 1933," in Merkur 38, (January 1987), pp. 97-102.

studies in a university system which was an arena of competing political ideologies. On the left, socialism and Bolshevism claimed to offer a new utopia which would include the burgeoning masses of urban industrial workers. On the right, a welter of political groups defined themselves as anti-Bolshevik and promised national revival and a new sense of community based on shared blood, on traditional German values.

A large group of university professors and students rejected the materialism of the communist parties while at the same time they were unattracted to the rather vulgar parties on the extreme right. They tried to explain the national malaise in cultural, not political, terms and accordingly sought a cultural antidote to Germany's woes. For them, revival had to take place on a spiritual level before a political transformation could take place. Most of these intellectuals have been justly termed "neo-conservatives" because they averred the inverse of Marx: they believed that consciousness determines the political reality, not vice versa, as Marx held.<sup>18</sup> They sought revolution not within Germany, but within the Germans.

The radical conservative scholars came to doubt the tenets of scientific objectivity which characterized nineteenth-century intellectual endeavor. German society, they believed, needed myths, not science, by which to live.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

One had to commit irrationally to a political creed, to an ideology. This total commitment to ideology was in part an outgrowth of the value relativism that had taken root in German intellectual life since Nietzsche.<sup>19</sup> Many German students of Kantorowicz's generation and the scholars who taught them were profoundly influenced by Nietzsche.

For these intellectuals, Nietzsche had smashed the notion of a transcendental truth, and absolute good or evil. No ideology, leftist or rightist, could be rationally or objectively proven preferable to any other. Doubting their ability to uncover a transcendental truth, these scholars became mired in extreme subjectivity. "The truth" became "our truth" or "their truth." Lacking a higher vocation -- the pursuit of absolute values -- scholars resigned themselves to the pursuit of their own values, their own ideologies. The lofty goals of scientific objectivity gave way to a highly ideologized professorate and student body, intent not on discovering the truth, but on propagating their truth.

No revelations which might ease this disillusion of the intellect were on hand in post-war Germany, but some scholars had the wisdom to recognize that the value relativism and competing ideologies which this disillusionment bred had dangerous implications. Max Weber, one of the greatest minds in Germany at this time, was

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<sup>19</sup> Bloom, p. 143.



profoundly disturbed by the ideological partisanship, which he viewed as a serious threat to German academic life. Weber came out of teaching retirement in 1918, just two years before his death, to address what he viewed as a crisis in the German universities. He lectured and wrote extensively on university matters, imploring academicians to overcome both complaisance and narrow partisanship. He exhorted scholars to strive for the ideal of scientific impartiality, however shaken and distant that ideal might have seemed.

Nowhere did Weber more profoundly state his conviction on this subject than in his lecture "Science as Vocation," delivered in Munich in 1918. Weber pleaded in this lecture for professors to keep politics out of their classrooms, arguing that personal value judgments impair a full understanding of the facts. Weber recognized that the students to whom he spoke sought more than the things that his science could provide, such as technology to control or calculate the external world, training for the mind.<sup>20</sup> He spoke to an audience which craved answers to the problems of the inner life, answers to questions which religion had addressed in an earlier era: "Why am I here and how shall I lead my life?" Weber's speech was stirring in that he knew that the science he extolled was powerless to provide the

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<sup>20</sup> See Max Weber, On Universities, trans. and ed. by Edward Shils, (Chicago, 1973).

religious certainty that his audience craved, and at the same time he recognized, more than his youthful audience, the perils of constructing a new religion.

Kantorowicz did not "take Munich" in time to hear Weber's address, but he did enroll in a course taught by Weber in summer semester, 1919. If the twenty-five year-old Kantorowicz knew of "Science as a Vocation,"<sup>and</sup> Weber's admonitions against infusing scholarship with ideology, he probably disagreed. Kantorowicz had fought gun in hand during the preceding five years for what he thought were the best interests of the German Reich. He was too passionately engaged with the political upheavals of his day to conceive of divorcing his political and cultural Weltanschauung from his studies. Kantorowicz believed in the engagement of the academic in revitalizing the German nation. Like the radical conservatives, he perceived the need of a cultural transformation, and believed that this transformation could be led and inspired by university intellectuals. For German students in the 1920s, Nietzsche, with his call for irrational commitment, and Weber, with his exhortation for scientific impartiality, presented two distinct, if not polar, intellectual alternatives. As shall be seen, Ernst Kantorowicz as a young man was clearly drawn to Nietzsche's star.