

CONCLUSION

This first half of Kantorowicz's life ends in tragedy. On foreign shores he stood in 1938, rejected and then persecuted by a nation to which he had been passionately, indeed almost religiously devoted. Like Germany's twentieth-century history, fissured by the upheavals of the two world wars, Kantorowicz's own story is one of a double revolution in consciousness. The first revolution followed on the heels of World War One when Kantorowicz as a university student became enchanted with Stefan George's dream of a New Reich, and in his work Frederick the Second called for a great Führer to overthrow the decadence of Weimar and lead this New Reich. The second revolution was in 1933 when to his horror Kantorowicz witnessed the rise of a new Führer, a Führer chillingly reminiscent of his Frederick the Second, and realized that this Führer would not found anything akin to George's New Reich, but would ultimately destroy Europe. The object of his criticism was no longer Weimar and its shortcomings, but the undisguised evil of the Nazi regime.

The ambiguities in Kantorowicz's thought during the Weimar years echoed a deeper ambiguity in the political culture of the German elites -- that contradictory desire for an authoritarianism and a profound sense of community, which must be grounded in religiosity, and the knowledge that they lived in an unreligious age, an age in which the

gods had died, as Nietzsche phrased it. The attempts of Kantorowicz and the George Circle to create a new religiosity were first co-opted by Hitler, then perverted and shattered by him.

Kantorowicz's story is one of shattered dreams -- the shattered dream of Germany's imperial mission in history, the shattered dream of the permanence of the German-Jewish symbiosis, which Kantorowicz himself embodied. If Kantorowicz inwardly doubted the completeness of the German Jewish symbiosis, he outwardly manifested it. Before 1933, as his early career illustrates, a German-Jew, far from being immune to the restless dream of German imperial *grande ur*, could have the same political and cultural yearnings as his non-Jewish countrymen, and tragically in Kantorowicz's case, unwittingly contribute to a movement which would ultimately spawn the seeds of the destruction of European Jewry.

The essential problem with Kantorowicz's notion of a messiah to save Germany was the absolute amorality of power to be wielded by such a new Fuhrer. Like Kantorowicz's Frederick, the Fuhrer's own will would be the highest arbiter of good and evil, he would "become the state." This notion of the new Fuhrer, omnipotent in a moral vacuum, reflected the extreme value relativism, the nihilism, with which all German intellectuals of Kantorowicz's generation had to cope. Kantorowicz, like so many of his countrymen,

judged power, and the ends it served, only in terms of the existential greatness of the leader wielding that power. In the end Kantorowicz's political irrationalism was inherently self-defeating because the belief that Germans must in toto commit themselves to the semi-divine will of a Fuhrer was essentially an exaggerated manifestation of the relativism he despised. Kantorowicz sought to flee relativism, but his antidote of positing all values in the person of the leader was in itself a most dangerous form of value relativism.

He realized this too late. There was much he regretted about his book Frederick the Second and its political legacy. After the Second World War, Kantorowicz strenuously resisted the republication of his early monograph. He said to Edgar Salin in 1952:

That the book, written in the exuberance of the twenties, with all its hopes in the victory of the Secret Germany and in the renewal of the German people through their view of their greatest Emperor -- that this book has no place today and might even arouse new nationalism.¹⁵²

In 1963, nearing death and convinced that an East German publishing house intended to print an unauthorized edition of Frederick the Second, Kantorowicz consented to a new edition.¹⁵³ Shortly thereafter, he received a letter from a certain Hans Speidel in Germany, praising the announcement of a new edition of Frederick the Second, a "work about the great Staufer which always moved us deeply." Kantorowicz,

¹⁵² Kantorowicz to Salin. Quoted in Grünewald, p. 158.

¹⁵³ Grünewald, pp. 159-67.

who feared that the book might arouse the sentiments of decades past wrote of Speidel's letter to Ursula Kupper, Frederick the Second's new publisher:

This is exactly the reason that I held back so long on a new edition. One should allow a book that Himmler laid on his bedtable and Goring presented with a dedication to Mussolini, to be fully forgotten....Probably the fortunately-hanged Mr. Eichmann would have been equally as glad (without wanting to somehow throw the two in the same kettle). Just because of this sort of praise I hesitated so long, apparently not long enough.¹⁵⁴

Kantorowicz was understandably bitter about Frederick the Second, or better, the misuse of Frederick the Second. Perhaps he did not realize, however, ^{that} Speidel, who had been Chief of Staff in Erwin Rommel's Army Group B, was, despite his initial loyalty to Hitler, involved in the 1944 plot to kill the Fuhrer.¹⁵⁵

It is a complex and ironic case that the neoconservative movement of the Weimar years, of which Kantorowicz was clearly a part, both presaged National Socialism and helped it attain power, and yet ultimately inspired the most effective resistance to Hitler's tyranny. As Hans Mommsen has written, by at least 1935, there was among neoconservatives "a sobering after it became clear how much the reality of National Socialism diverged from the original version of a true break from partisan and special-interest politics. Here began the conservative resistance

154 Quoted in Ibid.

155 Ibid.

that led to the 20th of July.¹⁵⁶ Though Kantorowicz had lived in the United States for five years by the time the plot to kill Hitler was hatched, and was not intimately involved (Adam von Trott zu Solz on visit to California in 1941 had informed him of the plot), his lectures "The Secret Germany" (Das Geheime Deutschland) and "The German Papacy" provide insight into the philosophical underpinnings of the group involved in the plot.

The links between the Weimar neoconservatives, and the George Circle in particular, and the July 20th plotters were intimate. The leader of the plot, Claus Graf Schenk von Stauffenberg, and his brother Berthold who was closely involved, had like Kantorowicz belonged to the George Circle in Heidelberg in the 1920s and imbibed the same heady Georgean views on history and politics. Other members of the resistance, Adam von Trott zu Solz, Theodor Haubach, Adolf Reichwein, Fritz Graf von der Schulenberg, Helmut Graf von Moltke and Karl-Hans Fritzsche (whose early enthusiasm for Hitler was discussed above, see p. 67), were also deeply influenced by Stefan George. Claus von Stauffenberg actually encouraged the men involved in the plot to refer to this movement as das geheime Deutschland.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ Mommsen, p. 99.

¹⁵⁷ Joachim Kramarz, Claus Graf Stauffenberg, (Frankfurt, 1965), p. 24f.

This subject of a George poem written in the 1920s, this imaginary community about which Kantorowicz lectured in 1933, in a sense took on true life and force in the resistance. In a totalitarian society, the notion of das geheime Deutschland allowed the resisters to contextualize themselves historically, to fight against atomization. It added a metaphysical weight to their hate of Hitler. It served as a transcendental and ethical allegiance which bridged over political differences and formed bonds of trust among the resisters. Before a firing squad after his unsuccessful attempt on Hitler's life, Claus von Stauffenberg's last words supposedly were "Es lebe unser geheimes Deutschland!" ("Long live our secret Germany !")¹⁵⁸ Perhaps Kantorowicz's Jewish birth prevented him not from "ascending to the highest circles of the Nazi regime," as Norman Cantor has suggested,¹⁵⁹ but from joining the innermost circles of the plot to kill Hitler.

Kantorowicz's break from Germany and from his earlier dreams was quite complete. After the war, he rarely returned to Germany and had little contact with his old friends from the George Circle. He lost much to the Nazis, including the life of his cousin Gertrude Kantorowicz. A talented art historian and poet, she died in the

¹⁵⁸ See Kramarz, ibid., and Dieter Ehlers Technik und Moral einer Verschwörung, (Frankfurt, 1964), pp. 54f.

¹⁵⁹ Cantor, Twentieth-Century Culture.

concentration camp at Theresienstadt in 1944. Ernst tried, to no avail, to get her out of Germany in the 1940s. Her letters and poems, written from Theresienstadt, now preserved at the Leo Baeck Institute, are a lasting memento to her courage in the face of inhumanity. After the unimaginable horrors of the Holocaust came to light, Ernst's bitterness toward Germany hardened into profound hate. He once told a student of his that "as far as he was concerned they (the allies) could put a tent over Germany and turn on the gas."¹⁶⁰ Among German-Jewish exiles, Kantorowicz was not alone in his all-consuming malevolence toward Germany and his belief in the collective guilt of the Germans.¹⁶¹

But as much as Kantorowicz's life seems so radically cloven in two, the brilliance of his scholarship and the radiance of his humanity deeply impressed those who knew him on both sides of the Atlantic. His friend, the theologian Paul Tillich, was known to refer to "Eka" as "der erhabene Geist," roughly translated, the sublime intellect.¹⁶² At the University of California-Berkeley, where he taught until 1952, until he was fired amidst the "Loyalty Oath Controversy," and at the Institute for Advanced Studies at Princeton, where he resided until his death in 1963, Ernst Kantorowicz inspired students of history and those of wide-

¹⁶⁰ This was related to me by William Chaney.

¹⁶¹ See Stern, Dreams and Delusions, p. 49.

¹⁶² This was related to me by William Chaney.

ranging disciplines. At Berkeley, his cosmic and unusual observations and his deep understanding of the medieval mind inspired a circle of young poets, Jack Spicer and Robert Duncan, for example.¹⁶³ At Princeton, George Kennan described Kantorowicz's criticism of a draft of his book Russia Leaves the War as "searching, useful and unforgettable."¹⁶⁴ Kantorowicz possessed a very Germanic, metaphysical train of thought and a profound understanding of myth, in part derived from his experience in the George Circle, which was both alien and exciting to his American students. His student and friend Ralph Gieseey writes that

conversations with "EKa" were unusually well-remembered events, whether they were witty or serious, and usually they were both. Nor can those who were near him in the last year of his life forget his fortitude, almost nonchalance, when he knew he was going to die....These things can be summed up in the term humanitas.¹⁶⁵

Kantorowicz's attachment to Stefan George's ideas, his intellectual resistance to National Socialism, the nobility of his bearing in the United States, all point to his unswerving pursuit of humanitas, the sovereignty of the individual. In refusing to sign an oath of loyalty to Hitler in 1934 and in refusing to sign an oath of loyalty to the California Board of Regents in 1952, Kantorowicz fought

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ George F. Kennan, Memoirs 1950-1963, (New York, 1972), p. 16.

¹⁶⁵ Ralph Gieseey, "Ernst A. Kantorowicz," unpublished essay at the Leo Baeck Archive, p. 17.

tenaciously on two continents for the autonomy of the individual conscience. As he wrote in his unpublished article "Humanities and History:"

The humanities, when re-established at the end of the Middle Ages in the 13th and 14th centuries took effect as an antidote against medieval theology, that is the knowledge not of the variety of man and human society but of God and of a unified type of man and a unified society. Humanities to-day are an antidote against "political theology," a pseudo-theology (of the state) which is likewise not interested in the variety of man and human society, but is interested, almost exclusively, in establishing a uniform type of man (Nordic Nazi) and a uniform pattern of human society (New Order -- NSDAP "Vaterland"). Modern political theology considers the knowledge of, and the respect to, other types of man and other patterns of society undesirable and "unpatriotic." The humanities are tolerated within modern political theology in a similar way as they were within medieval theology: as a quarry from which evidence for the desired one-type-man and one-pattern society is collected.¹⁶⁶

Throughout his life, during Weimar, during the Nazi period and in the United States, Kantorowicz extolled "other types of men and other patterns of society." In Germany and America he was on the other side of the prejudices of the mainstream, and far from knuckling under to common prejudice, he upheld his beliefs and his right and duty to disagree. He championed individual sovereignty in the face of forced conformity.

As Vergil said to Dante towards the end of the Purgatorio: te sopra te corono e mitrio (I do crown and

¹⁶⁶ Ernst Kantorowicz, "History and the Humanities," unpublished essay at the Leo Baeck Archive.

mitre thee over thyself). It is a line about which Kantorowicz wrote many times and a declaration which fits his own life.

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