

Introduction

The Age of Catastrophe

Exile and the Struggle for the Humanist Soul of Europe

Scribere est agere (to write is to act).

—Sir William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the
Laws of England*, 1765–1769

On February 22, 1942, Stefan Zweig, the exiled Austrian Jewish novelist, playwright, journalist, and biographer, committed suicide in Brazil. As he explained in his suicide letter, “the world of my own language sank and was lost to me and my spiritual homeland, Europe, destroyed itself.”¹ Days later, Klaus Mann, another exile and Thomas Mann’s son, explained that Zweig “could not bear the gruesome spectacle of a world bursting asunder.”²

“The decades from the outbreak of the First World War to the aftermath of the Second,” wrote Eric Hobsbawm, “was an Age of Catastrophe,” or *historia calamitatum*. “For forty years it stumbles from one calamity to

1. See Matti Friedman, “70 years later, a handwritten note recalls the end of a literary life,” <http://www.haaretz.com/jewish-world/israeli-library-uploads-suicide-letter-of-jewish-writer-stefan-zweig-1.414312>.

2. Klaus Mann, *The Turning Point* (New York: L. B. Fischer, 1942), 356–57. Note Christopher Browning’s use of 1942 as the transition point of the Holocaust in his book *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), xiii: “In mid-March 1942 some 75 to 80 percent of all victims of the Holocaust were still alive, while 20 to 25 percent had perished. A mere eleven months later, in mid-February 1943, the percentages were exactly the reverse.”

another. There were times when even intelligent conservatives would not take bets on its survival. . . . While the economy tottered, the institutions of liberal democracy virtually disappeared between 1917 and 1942 from all but a fringe of Europe and parts of North America and Australia.”³ In Hannah Arendt’s summation, “two world wars” took place “in one generation, separated by an uninterrupted chain of local wars and revolutions”; hence, the “subterranean stream of Western history has finally come to the surface and usurped the dignity of that tradition.”⁴ According to Ernst Cassirer, “In the last thirty years, in the period between the first and second World Wars, we have . . . passed through a severe crisis of our political and social life.” His generation experienced “a radical change in the form of political thought . . . the appearance of a new power: the power of mythical thought.”⁵ Another exile from Nazi Germany, the philosopher Karl Löwith argued that “the world is still as it was in the time of Alaric,”⁶ the first king of the barbaric Germans who led to the sack of Rome in 410. Georg Lukács called it “the age of absolute sinfulness.”⁷ By the same token, the English philosopher and historian R. G. Collingwood wrote in 1942 about “the incessant tempests through which we have precariously lived for close to thirty years.”⁸ English poet, novelist, and essayist Stephen Spender wrote in 1945 that these years, especially World War II, “brought nearly all those things which we hold firm and sacred into danger and collapse: truth and humanity, reason and right. We lived in a possessed world. For many of us the result was not unexpected when the insanity of a day broke out into delirium in which this poor European humanity

3. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: History of the World, 1914–1991* (New York: Pantheon, 1994), 6–7.

4. Hannah Arendt, “Preface to the First Edition” (1950), *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harvest Books, 1976), vii, ix.

5. Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967 [1946]), 3.

6. Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1949), 191.

7. Georg Lukács, “Preface” (1962), *The Theory of the Novel: A Historic-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature* (London: Merlin, 1971 [1920]), 18.

8. R. G. Collingwood, *The New Leviathan: Or Man, Society, Civilization, and Barbarism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1942), lx.

sank back, fanatical, stupefied and mad.”⁹ French Jewish historian Marc Bloch (1886–1944), cofounder of the highly influential *Annales* School of French social history, joined the French Resistance in 1942 in “a world assailed by the most appalling barbarism”¹⁰ and died fighting in 1944. A year after the end of the war, young Albert Camus sailed to the United States in 1946, watching from the deck of the S.S. *Oregon* “the very edge of a wounded” Europe. The topic of his lecture at Columbia University was “The Crisis of Humankind.”¹¹ Indeed World War II was an epistemological watershed in modern Western humanist civilization.

If 1942 appeared to be the nadir of civilization, that cultural low point was made flesh by what was happening on the battlefield. It was the year of the Battle of Stalingrad, the most crucial struggle of World War II, a great epistemological watershed in which European humanist civilization faced its gravest existential moment. Many contemporaries shared “a general conviction that *Stalingrad* signifies a *turning-point* in the war.”¹²

In the eyes of contemporaries as well as historians, 1942 was the most crucial year of World War II because of three decisive battles on three different fronts. The Battle of Midway in the Pacific took place between June 4 and June 7, the First Battle of El Alamein in Egypt from July 1 to July 27, and the Battle of Stalingrad, Russia, between August 1942 and February 1943. These battles eventually turned the tide of the war in favor of the Allies, but in Istanbul, Auerbach could not know what the outcome would be, let alone whether the German army would reach Turkey from the south via Egypt or the north after conquering Russia. On May 8, 1942, for instance, the German army withstood a Soviet counteroffensive near Kharkov and inflicted heavy losses. The Wehrmacht was on the move and winning in Russia: it reached the Donets, recaptured the Crimea, and took Sevastopol by mid-June. Voronezh was taken while the bulk of the German forces moved toward the oil fields and the Caucasus. At the same time, Friedrich Paulus’s Sixth Army advanced along the Don

9. Stephen Spender, *European Witness* (New York: Renal & Hitchcock, 1946), 231.

10. Marc Bloch, *Strange Defeat: A Statement of Evidence Written in 1940* (New York: Octagon, 1969 [1949]), 177–78.

11. Camus as quoted in Elizabeth Zerofsky, “Camus Again,” *The New Yorker*, May 16, 2016, 36.

12. Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich at War, 1939–1945* (New York: Allen Lane, 2008), 421, emphasis original.

in the direction of Stalingrad. The German army clearly had the upper hand.¹³

It also seemed invincible in North Africa. Panzer Army Africa (Panzerarmee Afrika) under Field Marshal Erwin Rommel (1891–1944) started the second phase of its advance toward Egypt, and from February to May 1942, the front line settled down near Tobruk. Rommel thought his army would soon “secure the oilfields of the Middle East, Persia, and even Baku on the Caspian Sea.”¹⁴ He attacked in June, defeating the Allies and reaching the El Alamein line just one hundred kilometers from Alexandria and the vital Suez Canal. The British army prepared to make its last stand.¹⁵

The year 1942 brought European humanist civilization to the brink of extinction. Wehrmacht victories in Russia and North Africa portended disaster, yet they also prompted German intellectual exiles to conceive works that took aim at Nazi barbarism and profoundly transformed the content and form of modern intellectual history. In clear contrast to Zweig, these authors stood up against the horrors of Nazi Germany, and their *Kulturkampf* changed the subject matter, methods, and analysis of political, economic, sociological, anthropological, literary, philosophical, and ethical discourse.



The Pen Confronts the Sword draws attention, for the first time, to the shared motives behind four remarkable texts, all begun in 1942 by exiled scholars

13. See Saul Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939–1945* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 331. For a description of the atrocities the German army inflicted on Russia, see Evans, *Third Reich at War*; and Jonathan Littell, *The Kindly Ones* (*Les Bienveillantes*, 2006; New York: Harper, 2009). For terrible eyewitness accounts, see Ilya Ehrenburg and Vasily Grossman, *The Black Book: The Ruthless Murder of Jews by German-Fascist Invaders throughout the Temporarily-Occupied Regions of the Soviet Union and in the Death Camps of Poland during the War of 1941–1945*, trans. John Glad and James S. Levine (New York: Holocaust Publications, 1981); and Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2012). On the atrocities in Poland, see Göran Rosenberg, *A Short Stop on the Road from Auschwitz* (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers Förlag, 2012).

14. Evans, *Third Reich at War*, 467.

15. See Andrew Roberts, *The Storm of War: A New History of the Second World War* (London: Allen Lane, 2009), chaps. 4 and 9; and Rick Atkinson, *An Army at Dawn: The War in North Africa, 1942–1943* (New York: Henry Holt, 2002).

confronting Nazi barbarism.¹⁶ The list is impressive: Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus* (1947); Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (1946); Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946); and Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944).¹⁷ Each identified a specific danger in Nazi ideology and mustered new theories, new approaches, new sources, and a new energy to combat it. While scholars have examined these authors' individual legacies, no one has drawn them together for comparative analysis or isolated this watershed moment in their careers. The sense of urgency in their works demands attention. They all raised their pen against Nazi barbarism, believing exactly like Sir William Blackstone, the English jurist and judge, who wrote in his *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765–1769), “*Scribere est agere*” (to write is to act).

A book's title reveals intention and meaning. Change the title, and you've wrested it from the history that bore it; you're drifting away from the author's understanding of its intention, content, and form. Accordingly, the titles of these books reflect, directly or indirectly, the trauma the authors experienced as their culture turned toward myth and unreason. In literature, Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* renders Nazi Germany as the new incarnation of the old German legend of amoral arrogance and ambition, equating Germany's covenant with Nazism with a contract with the devil

16. To this list one should add other works written against Nazi barbarism, such as R. G. Collingwood's *The New Leviathan: Or Man, Society, Civilization, and Barbarism* (1942), Franz Neumann's *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism* (1942), Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945), Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (1950), Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), and Hans Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance* (1955), to name only a few.

17. Another important work, which is not included in my study, is *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (1947), by Siegfried Kracauer (1889–1966), the German writer, journalist, sociologist, cultural critic, and film theorist, who has sometimes been associated with the Frankfurt School of critical theory. In 1942 Kracauer began his study, which traces the birth of Nazism from the cinema of the Weimar Republic. In this work he argued that *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, a 1920 German silent horror film about an insane hypnotist who uses a somnambulist (sleepwalker) to commit murders, can be considered as an allegory for German social attitudes in the period following World War I. More specifically, he maintained that the character of Caligari represents a tyrannical figure, to whom the only alternative is social chaos represented by the fairground. The author would like to thank Dr. Ofer Ashkenazi for this important information about Kracauer.

and predicting the same apocalyptic destruction.¹⁸ In political philosophy, Cassirer denounced the Aryan racist mythos of *Blut und Boden* (blood and soil)—the major slogan of Nazi racial ideology, which grounded ethnicity in a toxic mythology of blood, folk, and homeland (*Heimat*)—which led to systematic terrorization and extermination of people deemed alien and condemned philosophers, such as Oswald Spengler (1880–1936) and Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), for supporting the German culture of pessimism, fatalism, and paranoia, or the destructive “myth of the state.” In philology, Auerbach struggled against the rejection of the Old Testament and Jewish influence on European humanist civilization, history, and culture, taking up the ancient Greek debate about the value of art that imitates or reproduces reality to elevate *mimesis* over myth and ordinary human dignity over specious superheroes. Finally, in sociology, Horkheimer and Adorno illuminated how the “dialectic of enlightenment” was driven by a myth of power, first over nature, then over other people, and led to the subjugation—indeed, destruction—of the powerless by the powerful.

Times of crisis, great danger, and risk always elicit responses that are later canonized. As Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886) wrote: “War, Heraclitus tells us, is the father of all things. Out of the conflict of opposing forces, in the great moment of danger, disaster, resurgence, and deliverance, new developments proceed most decisively.”¹⁹ Thus, Saint Augustine’s *City of God* was written as a defense of, and apologia for, the Christians and Christianity, at a moment of great crisis when they were blamed for the Visigoths’ destruction of Rome in 410. Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy* (1308–1320) bears the scars of its author’s sad, devastating experience of exile; in it, he fought many who drove him from his beloved Florence, condemning some to eternal damnation. Crisis and interpretation, exile and interpretation, are inextricable in Western intellectual history.

The Pen Confronts the Sword asks readers to attend far more sensitively to the shared motives running under the remarkable texts I examine. Trauma always scars the texts it leaves behind, and unprecedented political trauma scars them deeply—however skillfully their authors bury the scars beneath layers of erudition. Deeply scarred by unprecedented political trauma, they wrote a defense of Western civilization that would outlast the “Thousand-Year Reich.”

18. I use the German title, *Doktor Faustus*, throughout to reference the old German legend; in Mann’s novel, Nazi Germany is the new incarnation of this legend.

19. Leopold von Ranke, “Universal Tendencies” (1833), in *Leopold von Ranke, The Secret of World History: Selected Writings on the Art and Science of History*, ed. Roger Wines (New York: Fordham University Press, 1981), 150.

I chose these five refugee intellectuals not only because of their impact, but because the works they wrote in exile during this critical year were intended for polemical uses contemporary readers scarcely imagine. They represent their best efforts to wage *Kulturkampf*, cultural war, against Nazi lies, distortions, tyranny, and barbarism. In Horkheimer and Adorno's words, they all took up "the cause of the remnant of freedom, of tendencies toward real humanity, even though they seem powerless in face of the great historical trend."²⁰ Of course, not everyone who wrote against Nazism in 1942 was an exile. For example, R. G. Collingwood's *The New Leviathan* also reacted to World War II and the Nazi and fascist threat to Western civilization. However, exilic displacement is the obvious common denominator among the authors considered here. Had they not gone into exile, their outspoken critique would not have been loud or lasting, as they were born into Jewish families and/or married to Jews. From a distance, they witnessed the destruction of family, friends, their whole cultural milieu, their values, their world. They could not keep silent.

Pessimism about the fate of humanist civilization in Western Europe pervades the books they began in 1942, when *no one could predict the war's outcome*. Their writings all support the *crisis mode of historical thought*, the view that harrowing moments, or major turning points, direct the course of history—and not toward progress, but decline. Walter Benjamin expressed this idea beautifully in "Theses on the Philosophy of History," describing thus the "Angel of History": "His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet."²¹

Above all, they were united in struggle against the atavistic Nazi *Kultur* of myths, heroes, and legends, which glorified the racist, chauvinistic, homophobic "Community of Blood and Fate of the German people" and rejected European civilization. Its exiled guardians were appalled by their society's flight from reason and reality. They shared Mann's intrinsic connection of Nazi Germany to Satanism and Horkheimer and Adorno's assertion that "despite the fascist lies," the "concept of homeland is opposed to myth."²²

Given their agonizing times, all contested Nazi distortion and the return of myth and irrationalism in modern history. Mann's apocalyptic

20. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr and trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002 [1944]), xi.

21. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 257–58.

22. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 60.

reading of German history connected Luther and the Reformation to the smoking ruins of German cities and the gates of the concentration camps: “What was found there and elsewhere surpassed in frightfulness all expectation and all conception. In Germany,” he adds crisply, this hell “was called ‘the National State.’”²³ Cassirer traced the rise of nineteenth-century political myths to modern totalitarianism: “In the last thirty years, in the period between the first and second World Wars. . . . We experienced a radical change in the form of political thought . . . the appearance of a new power: the power of mythical thought.”²⁴ Auerbach championed the rise of the rational representation of reality, starting with the Old Testament, as a flight from irrationalism and mythic thought, yet he discerned a decline in early twentieth-century works by Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust, and James Joyce. These modern writers’ work, he argued, constituted “a mirror of the decline of our world.”²⁵ Horkheimer and Adorno looked to the failure of the Enlightenment. Their ultimate goal was to reveal why humanity is sinking into “a new kind of barbarism” and to demonstrate a cultural progress turned “into its opposite.”²⁶ In sum, all these exiled writers viewed history as a Golgotha of hope, or “hope for the hopeless,” in Walter Benjamin’s ironic words.²⁷

Elective Affinities

Apart from the overarching common theme of *Kulturkampf* against Nazi barbarism, or the chauvinist, racist, and anti-Semitic premises of Aryan philology, based on *völkisch* mysticism and Nazi historiography, the works of Mann, Cassirer, Auerbach, Horkheimer, and Adorno share

23. Thomas Mann, *The Story of a Novel: The Genesis of Doctor Faustus* (New York: Knopf, 1961 [1949]), 115.

24. Cassirer, *Myth of the State*, 3.

25. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 551.

26. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xiv, viii.

27. “Only for the sake of the hopeless ones have we been given hope,” in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, I, 1913–1926 (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1996), 356. It is the concluding sentence of his essay on “Goethe’s Elective Affinities,” in the translation by Stanley Corngold. Herbert Marcuse translated it as “It is only for the sake of those without hope that hope is given to us” in *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 257. The original reads: “Nur um der Hoffnungslosen willen ist uns die Hoffnung gegeben.”

other important themes, giving them unity and coherence as a group. Ultimately, these men all read Western intellectual history with German eyes in terms of the crisis of German ideology²⁸ in their times, and each responded in his field of expertise. Mann attacked the barbarization of German literature and historiography. Cassirer delineated the rise of the modern myth of the state, which led to the modern Nazi totalitarian state. Auerbach connected the decline of the West to the dissolution of the realist representation of reality, and Horkheimer and Adorno explained how the Enlightenment's enslavement of nature led to the enslavement and, worse, murder of human beings in the Holocaust and Nazi concentration camps.

Except for Mann, who traced the singular course of German history from the Protestant Reformation to Nazi barbarism and pointed to the intrinsic and inseparable connections between these two periods, the other authors deal with the whole of Western civilization, from classical Greece to Nazi barbarism in the twentieth century. Cassirer begins with the golden age of political thought, from the pre-Socratic Greek philosophers who inaugurated the rational theory of the state to Plato's concept of the Legal State, or the state as the administrator of justice. Auerbach begins *Mimesis* with a chapter, "Odysseus' Scar," in which he opposes reality to myth, rationality to the flight from reason, or the "Jewish-Israelitish realm of reality" to "Homer's realism" and classical Greek myths, legends, and heroes.²⁹ In contrast to Cassirer, his aim is to undermine the unique status Greek culture enjoyed in Nazi and Aryan Germany, instead claiming the Old Testament's superiority and priority in creating and forming Western culture's understanding of reality and humanity in a head-on attack.³⁰ Horkheimer and Adorno also begin with Odysseus, but they count the *Odyssey* as "bourgeois prehistory" and boldly argue that "the hero of the adventures turns out to be *the prototype of the bourgeois individual*." In contrast to Auerbach's identification of Homeric poems with myths and the barbaric age, Horkheimer and Adorno claim that until Homer, "true humanity has flourished only in conjunction with the barbaric element," but his epics reflect "a world charged with meaning" that "reveals itself as

28. George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964).

29. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 16, 23.

30. See Avihu Zakai, *Erich Auerbach and the Crisis of German Philology: The Humanist Tradition in Peril* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2016), especially the chapter "Odysseus' Scar," 96–106.

an achievement of *classifying reason, which destroys myth by virtue of the same rational order which is used to reflect it.*³¹

They all adhered to the crisis mode of historical thought, or crisis history, the view that history proceeds in a series of crises, or well-defined, decisive turning points. Mann claimed that “the themes of the book” *Doctor Faustus* are “crisis themes,” the “whole cultural crisis in addition to the crisis of music.” In form, it “was to be some demonic intoxication and its liberating, but catastrophic effects.”³² Mann’s reading of German history traces a path from Luther to Nazi barbarism, and his *Doctor Faustus* is a great apocalyptic, eschatological novel, directed and structured by Satan’s prophecy, in which Faust’s rise and fall are aligned with, and inextricable from, the Nazi catastrophe.

Cassirer’s *The Myth of the State* traces the rise and triumph of the myth of the state during the nineteenth century and its full-blown expression in Nazi Germany, where “[m]ythical thought . . . starts to rise again and to pervade the whole of man’s cultural and social life.”³³ In politics, Cassirer wrote, “we are always living on a volcanic soil and must be prepared for sudden convulsions and eruptions.” The eruption took place during his lifetime. Hence, in the “Conclusions,” he comes to a sad recognition: “What we have learned in the hard school of our modern political life is the fact that human culture is by no means the firmly established thing that we once supposed it to be.”³⁴

Auerbach wrote in *Mimesis* that the dissolution of the representation of reality prefigured “the decline of our world.”³⁵ More specifically, as he wrote to Benjamin in 1937: “the contemporary world situation is nothing other than the cunning of providence to lead us along a bloody and circuitous route,” which, he thought, was evident “already in Germany and Italy, especially in the horrifying inauthenticity of ‘Bluebopropaganda’ [*Blut und Boden*—Blood and Soil, the major slogan of Nazi racialist propaganda].”³⁶

31. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 46, 35, 59, 35–36, emphasis added.

32. Mann, *Story of a Novel*, 55, 64, 17.

33. Cassirer, *Myth of the State*, 297–98.

34. *Ibid.*, 280.

35. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 551.

36. Auerbach to Benjamin, 3 January 1937, in Martin Elsky, Martin Vialon, and Robert Stein, eds., “Scholarship in Times of Extremes: Letters of Erich Auerbach (1933–46) on the Fiftieth Anniversary of His Death,” *PMLA* 122 (January 2007): 751.

In the same vein of pessimism and despair, Horkheimer and Adorno wrote, “The present time is without turning points. A turn of events is always for the better. But when, as today, calamity is at its height, the heavens open and hurl their fire on those who are lost in any case.”³⁷ They argue that the origins of fascism and Nazism, symbolized by the flight from reason, should be located in the Enlightenment and capitalist, bourgeois society. For them all, crisis, not progress, or the glorious Enlightenment vision of human advance, is the marrow of the historical process.

Given that the works begun in 1942 are based on the crisis mode of historical thought, no wonder they are all very pessimistic and emphasize the decline of Western humanist civilization. *Doctor Faustus* ends with the protagonist’s death and the destruction of Nazi Germany. Cassirer gloomily acknowledges the “disintegration and the sudden collapse of our social and political life in the last decades” or “these last thirty years,” which “have been a period of continuous war.”³⁸ *Mimesis*’s final chapter comments on the dissolution of realism in modern literature with Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust, and James Joyce, or the “the complicated *process of dissolution* which led to fragmentation of the exterior action, to reflection of consciousness, and to stratification of time,” and aligns it with the decline of the West.³⁹ Horkheimer and Adorno, who lost all confidence in human rationality and modernity during the dark years of World War II, sadly lament that their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* “demonstrates tendencies which turn cultural progress into its opposite”; hence, their goal was “to explain why humanity instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism.”⁴⁰

37. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 182. Compare Karl Löwith, another exile from Nazi Germany, who wrote: “The problem of history as a whole is unanswerable within its own perspective. Historical processes as such do not bear the least evidence of a comprehensive and ultimate meaning. History as such has no outcome. There never has been and never will be an immanent solution to the problem of history, for man’s historical experience is one of steady failure. . . . *The world is still as it was in the time of Alaric*; only our means of opposing and destruction (as well as of reconstruction) are considerably improved and are adorned with hypocrisy.” See Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 191.

38. Ernst Cassirer, “Judaism and the Modern Political Myth” (1944), in *Symbol, Myth, and Culture: Essays and Lectures of Ernst Cassirer, 1935–1945*, ed. Donald Philip Verene (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 240–41.

39. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 552–53, emphasis original.

40. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xiii, xiv.

Another important theme closely connecting these works is the mutual acknowledgment and affirmation of Jewish life and culture. Except for Mann, they all belonged to what George L. Mosse calls “German Jews beyond Judaism,” people who searched “for a personal identity beyond religion and nationality.”⁴¹ Because the trauma of Nazism, forced exile, and the rising knowledge of Holocaust atrocities radically transformed their views, they came to the defense of Judaism directly or indirectly. Since the Aryan myth of blood was inextricable from anti-Semitism, they all came to the defense of Judaism and Jewish history and rejected anti-Semitism. The Judaic turn in their works may be attributed, in part, to the fact that at the end of 1941 and in the summer of 1942 the terrible news of the massacre of European Jews, later termed the Holocaust, reached England and the United States.

In his address at the Library of Congress on November 17, 1942, Mann told the audience: “some people were inclined to regard” his book *Joseph and His Brothers* (*Joseph und seine Brüder*), a four-part novel written over the course of sixteen years (1926–1943), “as a Jewish book, even merely a novel for the Jews.” In response, he pointed to “the growing vulgar anti-Semitism which is an essential part of the Fascist mob-myth, and which commits the brutish denial of the fact that Judaism and Hellenism are the two principal pillars upon which our occidental civilization rests. To write a novel of the Jewish spirit was timely, just because it seems untimely.”⁴²

Cassirer turned to Jewish issues late in his life. He first dealt with them briefly in *An Essay on Man* (1944), where he provided a strong defense of Jewish thought and praised the Old Testament as one source of Western humanism, freedom, and the rise of the ethical standpoint of religious consciousness. Writing about “our own European civilization,” he stressed that “the great prophets of Israel no longer spoke merely to their nations. Their God was a god of Justice and His message was not restricted to a special group.” The ultimate message of this “prophetic religion” was “its ethical meaning.”⁴³ Later, in the face of the growing awareness of the

41. George L. Mosse, *German Jews beyond Judaism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 2.

42. Mann, “The Theme of the Joseph Novels,” 1942, in *Thomas Mann’s Addresses Delivered at the Library of Congress, 1942–1949* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1963), 11–12. See also Hermann Kurzke, *Thomas Mann: Life as a Work of Art. A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002 [1999]), 414.

43. Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to A Philosophy of Human Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), 103.

Holocaust, he wrote: “What the *modern Jew* had to defend in this combat [against Nazism] was not only his physical existence or the preservation of the Jewish race. Much more was at stake. *We had to represent all those ethical ideals that had been brought into being by Judaism and found their way into general human culture, into the life of all civilized nations.*”⁴⁴

Cassirer’s essay “Judaism and the Modern Political Myth” (1944) addressed head-on Germany’s unique anti-Semitism and its fatal consequences. It entangles a clear defense of Judaism with his longtime theory of myth, or the struggle between myth and reason. In the context of the political crisis that ushered in the Nazi Revolution’s “devilization” of German state and society,⁴⁵ Cassirer referred directly in the essay’s last paragraphs to the tragic fate of Jews in the Nazis’ haunted, possessed imagination, which associated them with Satan: “In the mythical pandemonium we always find maleficent spirits that are opposed to the beneficent spirits. There is always a secret or open revolt of Satan against God. In the German pandemonium this role was assigned to the Jew.” However, the “German form of persecution was something that never had existed before,” he argued. “What was proclaimed here was a mortal combat—a life and death struggle which could only end with the complete extermination of the Jews.”⁴⁶

Auerbach turned to Jewish issues only after the Nazi Revolution, when he strove to provide an *apologia* for the Old Testament’s validity and credibility. It draws on the Christian figural interpretation of history—the view that Old Testament events and persons are *figures*, or prefigurations, of events and persons in the New Testament—to prove that the Old Testament is inseparable from the New Testament and inextricably linked to Western culture and civilization as a whole, contrary to the racist and anti-Semitic claims of Aryan philology, *völkisch* mysticism, and Nazi historiography. This contention serves as the cornerstone of his discussion in *Mimesis* of “the representation of reality in Western literature” in an impressive array of literary works spanning three thousand years: “figural interpretation” serves “as the basis on which the world could be ordered, interpreted, and represented as a reality and as a whole”; hence, “the picture of man living in reality which the Christian” figural interpretation “had produced.”⁴⁷ Auerbach argues that with its rise in the first century, Christianity’s adoption

44. Cassirer, “Judaism and the Modern Political Myth,” 241, emphasis added.

45. *Ibid.*, 238.

46. *Ibid.*, 239.

47. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 231, 248.

of the figural interpretation was made “within the Jewish religious frame.” In this broad interpretative context, he asserts that “Paul and the Church Fathers reinterpreted the entire Jewish tradition as a succession of figures prognosticating the appearance of Christ, and assigned the Roman Empire its proper place in the divine plan of salvation.” Figural interpretation led to the utmost historicization of the Old Testament. Auerbach concludes: “the reality of the Old Testament presents itself as complete truth with a claim to sole authority,” which forces it “to a constant interpretative change in its own content; for millennia it undergoes an incessant and active development with the life of man in Europe.”⁴⁸ Thus asserting the Old Testament’s authority, validity, and credibility against the premises of Aryan philology.

Finally, Horkheimer and Adorno devote their last chapter to anti-Semitism and the Jewish problem, which, they contend, reveals the central significance of the “ambivalent relationship of enlightenment to power.” Examined in these terms, they boldly claim that “only the liberation of thought from power, the abolition of violence, could realize the idea which has been unrealized until now: the Jew is a human being.” In the transformation from an anti-Semitic to a human society, “the Jewish question would indeed prove the turning-point of history.”⁴⁹

They first address Judaism in chapter 3, “Juliette, Or Enlightenment and Morality,” where they praise it for leading to the flight from myth: “The demise of idolatry follows necessarily from the ban on mythology pronounced by Jewish monotheism.”⁵⁰ Like Auerbach and Cassirer, Horkheimer and Adorno believe Jewish culture and thought were crucial for the civilizing process that abandoned myth and embraced rational thought. They reiterate much of Mann, Cassirer, and Auerbach’s arguments in defense of Judaism and accept and defend its universal humanist message as a crucial contribution to European civilization. For example, they argue that its prohibitions were a vehicle for enlightenment and progress because religious sacrifice became rational. Most important for our concerns here, they saw the “Jewish Question” and anti-Semitism as embodiments of the dialectical intertwining of enlightenment and power, or the myth of power.

The marrow of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is the contention that the overall humanization process, based on flight from myth, power, and domination toward rationalism, is inextricable from the “Jewish Ques-

48. *Ibid.*, 16.

49. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 36, 165.

50. *Ibid.*, 89.

tion.” The Jewish question and anti-Semitism are inextricable from history: “Only the *liberating of thought from power*, the abolition of violence, could realize the idea which has been unrealized until now: *that the Jew is a human being*. This would be a step away from the anti-Semitic society, which drives both Jews and others into sickness, and toward the human one. Such a step would fulfill the fascist lie by contradicting it: *the Jewish question would indeed prove the turning point of history*.”⁵¹

The reform of society is a precondition for any possible solution of the Jewish question; abolishing the quest for power and control inherent in enlightenment will *ipso facto* transform attitudes toward the Jews and lead to a more just society. Horkheimer and Adorno provide an important modification of Marx’s dictum—“the emancipation of the Jews is the emancipation of mankind from Judaism”⁵²—claiming rather that emancipation from enlightenment’s myth of power will emancipate the Jews and everyone else. Marx emphasized “the emancipation of mankind from Judaism,” while Horkheimer and Adorno stressed the emancipation of society from power and dominance.

Elective Aversions

Along with the essential convergences between the four books, such as the myth of blood and the crisis mode of historical thought, the authors differed on such significant subjects as historicism, the Enlightenment, and Hegel, to name only a few. Auerbach embraced historicism enthusiastically, declaring it “the Copernican discovery in the cultural sciences.”⁵³ Fellow exile Hans Baron, historian of the early Italian Renaissance, agreed. He was taught by the luminaries of German historicism at the University of Berlin, Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923) and Friedrich Meinecke (1862–1954), and rejected, like Auerbach, the Nazi ideology of history based on *Blutsgemeinschaft*, *Volkseele*, and *Volksggeist*, to emphasize “the percepts of historicism which had re-established the Judeo-Christian foundations of European culture in Greek and Roman antiquity as well as the Near East.”⁵⁴ In Baron’s words:

51. *Ibid.*, 165, emphasis original.

52. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/On_the_Jewish_Question.

53. Eric Auerbach, *Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993 [1965]), 10.

54. Kay Schiller, “Hans Baron’s Humanism,” *Storia della storiografia* 34 (1998): 55.

“Unless we know exactly when, where and under what conditions a work was written . . . we cannot judge the author’s intention” or “the relationship of his work to the actual life of his time.”⁵⁵

In clear contrast, Walter Benjamin’s “catastrophic antihistoricism explicitly challenged the nineteenth century’s triumphant philosophy of progress” and “redemption.”⁵⁶ Ernst Cassirer, too, denounced “our historicism,” blaming it for misreading, among others, Machiavelli and Machiavellianism: “Since the time of Herder and Hegel we have been told that it was a mistake to regard Machiavelli’s *Prince* as a systematic book—as a *theory* of politics.” Many German idealist philosophers followed Hegel, including Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814), who “praised Machiavelli’s political realism and tried to exculpate him from all moral blame.” In sum, if, “in the literature of the seventeenth century Machiavelli has been described as an incarnation of the devil; and then, in a curious hyperbole, the devil himself was sometimes styled a Machiavellian and tinged with Machiavelism,” then, two hundred years later, “there was the complete reversal of this judgment. The devilization of Machiavelli was superseded by a sort of deification,” especially in Germany.⁵⁷

The same negative views of historicism pervaded Popper’s thought. He declared that Hegel’s historicism “encouraged” and “contributed to” totalitarian philosophizing and political practice, and almost “all the more important ideas of modern totalitarianism are directly inherited from Hegel.” Hence, he advocated “harsh words” for counterfeit Hegel as well as Plato and Marx, if our “civilization is to survive.”⁵⁸ For Leo Strauss, totalitarianism was rooted, in part, in historicism, which reduced “our ultimate principles” to “arbitrary” and “blind preference,” amounting to a kind of “madness.”⁵⁹

55. Hans Baron, *From Petrarch to Leonardo Bruni: Studies in Humanistic and Political Literature* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1968), 2. On Baron’s life and work, see David Weinstein and Avihu Zakai, *Jewish Exiles and European Thought in the Shadow of the Third Reich: Baron, Popper, Strauss, Auerbach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

56. Anson Rabinbach, *In the Shadow of Catastrophe: German Intellectuals between Apocalypse and Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 8.

57. Cassirer, *Myth of the State*, 123–24, emphasis original.

58. Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002 [1945]), 584–87, 315, xxxiii. On Popper’s life and thought, see Weinstein and Zakai, *Jewish Exiles*.

59. Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 4. On Strauss’s life and work, see Weinstein and Zakai, *Jewish Exiles*.

Our authors also held contrasting views of the Enlightenment. Cassirer highly praised it as the revival of Stoic ideas about natural rights and human equality and dignity, a principle that “proved to be a *turning point* in the history of ethical, political and religious thought”; namely, “the conception of the *fundamental equality of men*.”⁶⁰ Horkheimer and Adorno saw in it the source or foundation of social domination realized in fascism and Nazism, boldly claiming that “[w]ith the spread of the bourgeois commodity economy the dark horizon of myth is illuminated by the sun of calculating reason, beneath whose ice rays the seeds of the new barbarism are germinating.”⁶¹ Against Cassirer, who believed that Enlightenment rationalism was a bulwark against myth, Horkheimer and Adorno held that “[m]yth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology”; hence, the “Enlightenment’s mythic terror springs from a horror of myth.”⁶²

Auerbach was also suspicious about the Enlightenment, claiming, for example, that “Voltaire’s style in propaganda,”⁶³ which consists “in overilluminating one small part of an extensive complex, while everything else which might explain, derive, and possibly counterbalance the thing emphasized is left in the dark,”⁶⁴ resembled Nazi propaganda against the Jews. Whenever “a specific form of life or a social group has run its course, or has only lost favor and support, every injustice which the propagandists perpetrate against it is half consciously felt to be what it actually is, yet people welcome it with sadistic delight,” and the result is “an ocean of filth and blood.”⁶⁵

There is also a great divide about Hegel. Auerbach was greatly influenced by his historicism, aesthetics, and philosophy of history⁶⁶ and closely followed his view that reality is knowable, in clear contrast to Kant. This belief is the cornerstone of *Mimesis*; namely, that writers in different periods describe the historical reality in which they live. He believed,

60. Cassirer, *Myth of the State*, 100, emphasis original.

61. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 25.

62. *Ibid.*, xviii, 22.

63. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 411.

64. *Ibid.*, 402–03.

65. *Ibid.*, 404.

66. See Avihu Zakai, “Constructing and Representing Reality: Hegel and the Making of Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis*” *Digital Philology: A Journal of Medieval Cultures* 4, 1 (Spring 2015): 106–33.

following Hegel, that a word or concept (*Begriff*) is the source of realism because “on the basis of its semantic development a word may grow into a historical situation and give rise to structures that will be effective for many centuries.”⁶⁷

In the realm of aesthetics, more specifically, Auerbach wrote that “Dante’s inhabitants of the three realms” in the *Divine Comedy* lead “a ‘changeless existence.’” He deems Hegel’s “expression in his *Lectures on Aesthetics* [*Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, published posthumously in 1835] . . . one of the most beautiful passages ever written on Dante.” Dante, Hegel wrote, “plunges the living world of human action and endurance and more specifically of individual deeds and destinies” into this “changeless existence.”⁶⁸

Cassirer, Popper, and Strauss, on the other hand, blame Hegel for much of the twentieth century’s miseries. Cassirer claimed that the Hegelian worship of the state “is an entirely new type of absolutism”⁶⁹ with tremendous implications for the rise of the myth of the state and, concomitantly, the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century. Given that the Hegelian system is “the firmest stronghold of political reaction,” he calls Hegel “*the most dangerous enemy of all democratic ideals*”⁷⁰ and advocated abandonment of “the Hegelian view of history” as determined by *Idee* and a return to the belief that “human action again has an open opportunity to determine itself by its own power and through its own answer, knowing full well that the direction and future of civilization are dependent upon this kind of determination.”⁷¹ Like Popper, Cassirer raised his pen against Hegelian historical determinism in favor of human freedom, human autonomy, and the self-direction of human actions in time and history.

Popper claimed the “responsibility of Hegel and the Hegelians for much of what happened in [Nazi] Germany.” He felt obliged “as a philosopher” to expose this politically perilous “pseudo-philosophy.”⁷² Hegel’s

67. Erich Auerbach, “Figura,” in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1973), 76.

68. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 191. For Hegel’s expression, see G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, 2 vols., trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), 2: 1103.

69. Cassirer, *Myth of the State*, 263.

70. *Ibid.*, 251, emphasis added.

71. Ernst Cassirer, *The Logic of the Humanities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), 37–38.

72. Popper, *Open Society*, 584–56.

historicism “encouraged” and “contributed to” totalitarian philosophizing and political practice.⁷³ For Strauss, the political crises of modernity, especially the rise of fascism, were, to a significant extent, a philosophical crisis brought on by historicism. He saw historicism as the single greatest threat to intellectual freedom because, in rejecting “natural right” or “right by nature,” it denies any attempt to address injustice. With regard to Hegel, Strauss argued: “Transcendental standards can be dispensed with if the standard is inherent in the process: ‘the actual and the present is the rational,’”⁷⁴ referring to Hegel’s famous saying: “*What is rational is actual and what is actual is rational*,”⁷⁵ meaning that “reason is an actual (*wirklich*) power in the world working to create the institutions of freedom.”⁷⁶

These differences apply to views of Marx. While Auerbach, Horkheimer, and Adorno, as well as Walter Benjamin, were greatly influenced by the founder of dialectic materialism, Cassirer and Popper strongly denounced him. Auerbach called dialectic materialism the “most inspired and influential attempt to apprehend modern history as a whole in terms of laws.”⁷⁷ Hence, his ultimate goal in *Mimesis* was to describe “the rise of more extensive and socially inferior human groups to the position of subject matter for problematic-existential representation.”⁷⁸ According to Geoffrey H. Hartman, another exile from Nazi Germany and Auerbach’s colleague at Yale, “practicing an urban, undogmatic Marxism,” Auerbach “took the pattern of a unified development characterizing European history more from social and economic realities.”⁷⁹ Consequently, according to Auerbach, some readers thought that the book’s “tendency was socialist.”⁸⁰

Horkheimer and Adorno belonged to the Frankfurt School of social theory and philosophy associated with the Institute for Social Research

73. *Ibid.*, 586–87.

74. Strauss, *Natural Right*, 319.

75. G. W. F. Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. N. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 [1821]), 14, emphasis original.

76. *Ibid.*, 326–27; see also editor’s “Explanatory Notes,” 14.

77. Auerbach, in “Introduction: Purpose and Method,” in *Literary Language*, 21.

78. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 491.

79. Geoffrey H. Hartman, *A Scholar’s Tale: Intellectual Journey of a Displaced Child of Europe* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 169. Marx’s philosophy of history, or historical materialism, is also based on Hegel’s philosophy of history; for him, history is embodied within a larger project, namely, class struggle.

80. See Auerbach, “Appendix: ‘Epilegomena to *Mimesis*,’” in *Mimesis*, 570.

at the Goethe University Frankfurt. The institute was the first Marxist-oriented research center affiliated with a major German university. Following Marx, they were concerned with the conditions that allow social change and the establishment of rational institutions. Though their texts do not directly mention Marx, their theories clearly draw great inspiration from his thought. The same can be said about Walter Benjamin, who used Marxist terms, concepts, and explanations, which greatly irritated his friend Gershom Scholem.⁸¹

In clear contrast, Cassirer argued that we must understand how and why Hegelian philosophy became “one of the greatest *revolutionary* forces in modern political thought”; the philosopher of “the Prussian State became the teacher of Marx and Lenin—the champion of ‘dialectic Marxism’”; and the “Hegelian system” became “one of the explosive forces in the development of political thought during the nineteenth century.”⁸² Likewise, in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Popper traced three “events”—Plato, Hegel, and Marx—in historicism’s “pernicious influence” on philosophy and politics. Both Cassirer and Popper condemned historicism for justifying totalitarianism. Since historicism encouraged political fatalism, it tended to excuse totalitarianism’s evils: “Harsh words” must be spoken about counterfeit liberals, like Hegel, and antiliberals like Plato and Marx, if our “civilization is to survive.”⁸³ These “harsh words” must be said in “memory of the countless” victims of belief in the “Inexorable Laws of Historical Destiny.”⁸⁴

Finally, there is strong difference between the purely humanist ideals of Mann and Cassirer and the socialist, Marxist approach of Auerbach, Horkheimer, and Adorno. Particularly for the latter two there is a strong critique of humanist thought. While Auerbach used the Marxist approach in order to emphasize “the rise” of “socially inferior human groups” to be the subject in modern Western literature,⁸⁵ Horkheimer and Adorno rather employed Thomas Hobbes’s views that might is right, claiming that as in Hobbes, self-preservation is the source and final drive of all human action;

81. See Walter Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, 1932–1940*, ed. Anson Rabinbach et al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); specifically, a 1934 exchange: Scholem to Benjamin, April 19, 107; Benjamin to Scholem, 26 April 26, 108–09; and Benjamin to Scholem, May 6, 110.

82. Cassirer, *Myth of the State*, 251, 253, emphasis original.

83. Popper, *Open Society*, xxxiii.

84. Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997 [1957]), dedication.

85. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 491.

“Spinoza’s proposition: ‘the endeavor of preserving oneself is the first and only basis of virtue,’ contains the true maxim of all Western civilization,” the authors agreed.⁸⁶

Despite their various differences, Mann, Auerbach, Cassirer, Horkheimer, and Adorno shared one important view: fear about the dangerous consequences of the mythos of blood, the source of Nazi barbarism, or the mythical turn in Nazi Germany, which ruined their lives and those of many millions all over the world.

Trauma caused by Nazism and fascism led to the writing of many works that transformed modern intellectual history, many of the most prominent begun in 1942, the nadir of European humanist civilization. Though previously analyzed separately, these works should be analyzed together, since they constitute a collective *Kulturkampf* against Nazi barbarism and all identify the Aryan mythos of blood as its trigger.



Three years after the end of World War II, on March 8, 1948, the American weekly newsmagazine *Time* celebrated its twenty-fifth birthday. Featured on the cover of the anniversary edition was a picture of the famous American Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, captioned “Man’s Story Is Not a Success Story.”⁸⁷ The authors and works discussed here are full proof of this deep pessimism and provide a prismatic glimpse into the dark labyrinth of modern history.

Their works written in 1942 are indeed small solace to the vicissitudes of history’s grief and agony, but they are crucial for them to set the record straight.

86. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 22.

87. See Avihu Zakai, “The Irony of American History: Reinhold Niebuhr and the American Experience.” *La Revue LISA/ LISA e-journal*, World War II Thematic dossier, 2008, 1–21, <http://www.unicaen.fr/mrsh/lisa/publicationsGb.php?p=2&numId=1&it=inTheWar>.