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## THE HAMBURG CIRCLE

### A THOROUGHLY STRUCTURED EXPRESSION OF THE GERMAN CONSERVATIVE REVOLUTION IN THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC

**ABSTRACT** The members of the Hamburg Circle: W. Stapel (the leading figure), H. Bogner, A.E. Günther, G. Günther, are usually attributed to the ‘young conservative’ trend of the *conservative revolution* in the Weimar Republic. The main platform of their expression was the *Deutsches Volkstum*, a monthly published in Hamburg between 1898 and 1938. The activists of the circle opposed the realities of the Weimar Republic, negating the foundations of a democratic and liberal society as it did not express the ‘national will’ of Germans. Their ideal was not exactly in the revival of monarchy but they proposed a national state which was supposed to promote the traditionally structured society. In the area of religious policy, Stapel and his colleagues aimed at a non-secular state with a form of traditionalistic church life in spite of the religious diversity in Germany. Christianity was not perceived from a purely spiritual perspective, but as a doctrine that should be a strong pillar of the state. The Hamburg Circle claimed that to achieve these goals Germans ought to reject liberalism and pacifism, which appeared to be a dangerous consequence of the ideological pressure from assimilated Jewry.

**Keywords:** conservative, revolution, Germany, Hamburg Circle, Weimar Republic

## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study may be summarized as a causal and typological analysis of the political thought created by (and ‘around’) the Hamburg Circle, an important ideological group in the Weimar Republic. I focus on the conditions for the emergence of this ideological trend, its doctrinal background, and more importantly, the main determinants of the Circle’s ideology, as well as its immediate and further consequences. The analysis is based on a selection of important texts that emerged from the group itself, as well as on a limited number of articles written by other authors who were ideologically linked to the thinking of the Hamburg Circle both in the interwar period and several decades later.

The issues of political thought related to the Hamburg Circle were subject of research at various times. In 2001, Ascan Gossler published a study on the *Deutsches Volkstum*, the representative journal of the group.<sup>1</sup> The most important work devoted to the circle is Sebastian Maass’s monograph *Starker Staat und Imperium Teutonicum*, wherein the major aspects of Carl Schmitt and the Hamburg conservatives’ thoughts were discussed.<sup>2</sup> In this regard, Armin Mohler’s cult book (reissued in various configurations) concerning the conservative revolution in Germany is also invaluable. Mohler, an active supporter and activist of the conservative-nationalist reaction in Germany, treated the achievements of the community as part of the category of ‘young conservatism’ (*die Jungkonservativen*).<sup>3</sup> In 1966, Wolfgang Tilgner published a study focused on the ‘national *nomos* theology’ as related to the belief in creationism. In this book, the author addressed the prehistory of the national *nomos* theory in order to discuss the circle’s central brain – Wilhelm Stapel’s theological concept of *nation*.<sup>4</sup> Another useful monograph, brought out in 1967 by Heinrich Keßler, discusses the political writings of Stapel. This work provides a somewhat complimentary study and remains within the field of political science rather than theological considerations.<sup>5</sup>

The main theoretical problems that become apparent after considering the intellectual perception of the Hamburg Circle’s writings are the relations between the nation and the state and the nation and the Church. These issues are inherently linked with the conceptually and historically older clash (or fusion) of state and religion.

<sup>1</sup> A. Gossler, *Publizistik und konservative Revolution: Das „Deutsche Volkstum“ als Organ des Rechtsintellektualismus 1918–1933*, Münster 2001.

<sup>2</sup> S. Maass, *Starker Staat und Imperium Teutonicum: Wilhelm Stapel, Carl Schmitt und der Hamburger Kreis*, Kiel 2011.

<sup>3</sup> See the 6<sup>th</sup>, broadened edition: A. Mohler, K. Weissmann, *Die Konservative Revolution in Deutschland 1918–1932*, Graz 2005, pp. 115–143, 277–291.

<sup>4</sup> W. Tilgner, *Volkstheologie und Schöpfungsglaube: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Kirchenkampfes*, Göttingen 1966.

<sup>5</sup> H. Keßler, *Wilhelm Stapel als politischer Publizist: ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des konservativen Nationalismus zwischen den beiden Weltkriegen*, Nürnberg 1967.

## THE PLACE, TIME, AND PERSONS

The achievements of the Hamburg Circle cannot be viewed in isolation from the broader phenomenon of the Conservative Revolution in Germany. Its appearance can be interpreted in various ways. First, it resulted from a commonly held sense of defeat in World War I, a sense of being punished with no guilt. The outcome of the war was interpreted as a betrayal of the interests of the nation and its state, on whose territory the enemy had not even set foot on the eve of its surrender. The nation was exposed to incomprehensible news: the newly established republic, in place of the former empire, agreed to capitulation and then to the implementation of the provisions of the Treaty of Versailles. The provisions were perceived as excessively harmful in the material sense and humiliating in view of the territorial changes. The military heroes were replaced by petty party leaders who, unable to control the general chaos, only attempted to manage the poverty that resulted from postwar contributions and the lack of a uniform vision of economic policy.

The reality, however, was different. It was the military circles with Erich Ludendorff and Paul von Hindenburg that incited the Kaiser and the nation to enter the war. Officers and priests of Prussian militarism brought the country to a dead end, disgraceful losses on the battlefield, and then relegated the responsibility for their capitulation to the Catholic, left-wing, and liberal politicians of the Weimar Republic, as well as national minorities, mainly the Jews. The emperor was neither overthrown as a result of the revolution nor interned by the troops of the Entente. On the contrary, he voluntarily abdicated, assigning his responsibility for the war to the politicians who had to clean up the mess left by their 'courageous' compatriots.

In fact, the Conservative Revolution was an outbreak of conservative and nationalist sentiments that emerged after the parliamentary and liberal turn in the German political life after WWI. The rightist wave did not appear out of the blue: it had a long list of predecessors who could provide a full set of ideas *à la carte*: the Romantic nationalism of Friedrich L. Jahn and Ernst M. Arndt, Otto von Bismarck's nationalistic imperialism, the concept of a German national church proposed by Paul de Lagarde, early anti-Semitic *Völkisch* movement putting forward the idea of "blood and soil" (*Blut und Boden*), Austrian Ariosophy with such individuals as Guido von List and Jörg Lanz von Liebenfels, Oswald Spengler's cultural pessimism, Houston Stewart Chamberlain's racial theory, etc. However, the interwar Conservative Revolution appeared in different circumstances. The German world was not progressing then. Both Germanic monarchies had been permanently wiped off the political map of Europe, the German people (not without some reasons) were blamed for imperialism and unleashing a war, and the new, democratic state could be regarded as anything but a dynamic and stable economic power.

The spiritual discomfort in Germany and Austria gave birth to various considerations. The thinkers, being aware of the impossibility to recreate traditional monarchies on the one hand and of the nation's dissatisfaction with the liberal and democratic

reality on the other, searched for a kind of a 'third way.' In the humanities, this postulate was expressed clearly by a distinguished Austrian poet, Hugo von Hofmannstahl: *I'm talking about a process we are in the middle of, a synthesis that is so slow and grand – if you can see it from the outside – as it is dark and testing when you are in it. We may call the process slow and grand if we consider that the long period of development from the convulsions of the Age of Enlightenment to us is only a span within it, that it actually begins as an inner countermovement against that mental upheaval of the sixteenth century, which we call in its two aspects the Renaissance and the Reformation. The process I am talking about is nothing more than a conservative revolution on a scale that European history does not know. Its goal is to form a new German reality, in which the whole nation can participate.*<sup>6</sup>

The term 'conservative revolution' was probably used first by Thomas Mann in his article *Russische Anthologie* (Russian anthology) of 1921.<sup>7</sup> At times, the seemingly contradictory idea of revolutionary conservatism is attributed to Dostoevsky, who in *Мой парадокс* (My paradox) wrote about the Russian traditionalists: *we are revolutionaries, so to speak, out of some need of our own, so to speak, even out of conservatism.*<sup>8</sup> Regardless of the actual origin of the notion of conservative revolution, it generally refers to the profusion of ideas that are alternative to the new and dominant principles of political and social life. The latter, most often liberal in terms of understanding human rights and democratic in regard to the political system, are perceived as somehow alien and leading to the destruction of the 'soul' of the nation.

It is certainly worth asking whether the success of 'conservative revolutionary' thought, which is in fact some form of conservative nationalism, constitutes a general, universally applicable principle. Does it make sense to assume that always and in any land under the Sun where the traditional authoritarian *ancien régime* has collapsed and the principle of freedom of thought effectively prevails, it is highly reasonable to expect the emergence of a trend towards reformatting political and social life so that citizens can once again feel their community's destiny and the sweetness of subjugation to an ideological power? Thomas Mann, who was initially considered a representative of the conservative revolution, after some time turned away from its obsessions. He became, first, a preacher of universalism in the area of ethical rules, and second, a democrat, as he recognized that one may become a politician only by assuming democracy as an underlying principle of any political activity. In describing the tragic German problem of incapability of politicizing the social life of his country, he said that: *When (...) I have held that democracy, that politics itself, is foreign and poisonous to the German character; when I have doubted or argued against Germany's calling to politics. I have not done so personally or impersonally – with the laughable purpose of spoiling my nation's will to*

<sup>6</sup> H. von Hofmannstahl, *Das Schrifttum als geistiger Raum der Nation*, lecture conducted in Auditorium Maximum of Universität München, 10 January, München 1927.

<sup>7</sup> T. Mann, *Essays II 1914-1926, Große kommentierte Frankfurter Ausgabe*, Frankfurt am Main 2003, vol. 15.1, p. 341.

<sup>8</sup> Ф.М. Достоевский, *Мой парадокс* (1876), in *Собрание сочинений в 15 томах*, Ленинград/Санкт Петербург 1988-1996, vol. 13, at <<https://rvb.ru/dostoevski/01text/vol13/176.htm>>, 19 April 2021.

*the reality of shaking its belief in the justice of its international claims. I myself confess that I am deeply convinced that the German people will never be able to love political democracy simply because they cannot love politics itself, and that the much decried "authoritarian state" is and remains the one that is proper and becoming to the German people, and the one they basically want. A certain amount of courage is required today to express this conviction. Nevertheless, in doing so, I not only intend no derogation of the German nation in the intellectual or in the moral sense – I mean just the opposite, I also believe that its will to power and worldly greatness (which is less a will than a fate and a world necessity) remains completely uncontested in its legitimacy and its prospects. There are highly "political" nations – nations that are never free of political stimulation and excitement, that still, because of a complete lack of ability in authority and governance, have never accomplished anything on earth and never will. The Poles and the Irish, for example. On the other hand, history has nothing but praise for the organizing and administrative powers of the completely nonpolitical German Nation.<sup>9</sup>*

The most concise analysis of the whole conservative revolution in Germany was provided by Armin Mohler. It divided the revolution into five major groups: the *Völkisch* movement, the Young Conservatives (*die Jungkonservativen*), the National Revolutionaries (*die Nationalrevolutionäre*), the Leaguists (*Die Bündischen*) and the Rural People's Movement (*das Landfolk*). The political writings of the Hamburg Circle belong to the second young conservative trend, in which, apart from that group, one can find such personalities as Carl Schmitt, the guru of today's rightist theoreticians of law, the founder of the never redeemed promise for the German people – the Third Reich concept – Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, Edgar Julius Jung, Heinrich Freiherr von Gleichen, August Winnig, Hermann Ullmann, Ulrich von Brockdorff-Rantzau, Hans von Seeckt, Friedrich Gogarten, Georg Quabbe, Paul Althaus, and Othmar Spann.<sup>10</sup>

The Hamburg Circle generally consisted of four thinkers. However, in some way, various authors who published their texts in the major young conservative and anti-Semitic monthly, *Deutsches Volkstum*, could be considered as contributors to the circle's doctrine. The journal was formally owned by the German National Association of Commercial Employees (*Deutschnationaler Handlungsgehilfen-Verband, DHV*).<sup>11</sup> The association, which primarily acted as an organization focused on supporting petty business, soon developed into an influential union with a large number of members. The organization followed the Christian-social tradition of the Lutheran court preacher and a leading anti-Semitic activist, Adolf Stoecker, who was the founder of the Christian Social Party (*Christlich-soziale Partei*). This party absorbed a number of disillusioned members of the Social Democratic Party and attracted many social democratic voters in the 1880s and 1890s. Politically, the DHV initially leaned primarily on the

<sup>9</sup> T. Mann, *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*, transl. an introduction by W.D. Morris, New York 1987, pp. 16-17.

<sup>10</sup> A. Mohler, K. Weissmann, *Die Konservative Revolution...*, pp. 99-178.

<sup>11</sup> See: I. Hamel, *Völkischer Verband und nationale Gewerkschaft: Der Deutschnationale Handlungsgehilfenverband 1893-1933*, Frankfurt am Main 1967.

conservative-nationalistic German National People's Party (Deutschnationale Volkspartei), and to a lesser extent on the national-liberal German People's Party (Deutsche Volkspartei), the Catholic "Zentrum" Party, the left-liberal German Democratic Party (Deutsche Demokratische Partei), or nationalist splinter groups.

After 1930 the association increasingly came to terms with the new power factor of the NSDAP. In 1933, the DHV was brought into line. On the one hand, the pressure from the NSDAP and the hope of the DHV leadership to secure the existence of the DHV in the National Socialist state through 'adaptation' played a certain role. On the other hand, the DHV was identified with the NSDAP as part of a common folk movement. The dissolution of the Party in 1933 and the absorption of most of the activists by the Nazis put the political affiliation of the journals under the control of DHV into question. Apart from *Deutsches Volkstum*, which appeared in 1917-1938, the DHV also patronized other (some ephemeral, some long-lasting) periodicals: *Deutsche Handels-Wacht*, *Soziale Handelsrundschau*, *Ostmärkische Handelsrundschau*, *Blätter für junge Kaufleute*, *Jahrbuch für deutschnationale Handlungsgehilfen*, *Die Neue Literatur*.

The leading figure of the group was **Wilhelm Stapel (1882-1954)**, son of a watchmaker from Calbe, who had received a relatively eclectic education. In Munich, Göttingen, and Berlin he studied art history, philosophy, and economics to obtain a doctorate in art history under Edmund Husserl in 1911. Before WW1, under the influence of Ferdinand Avenarius and Friedrich Naumann, he was a representative of the liberal option, taking the position of a political editor for the *Stuttgarter Beobachter*. Later, due partially to a personal conflict with Avenarius, his views began to tilt strongly to the right. The world war strengthened this tendency: Stapel was now influenced by the spirit of Fichte's *Speeches to the German Nation*, which had appeared in a similar situation a century earlier.

From 1917 to 1919, Stapel was the managing director of the **Hamburger Volksheim**, founded in 1901 by a group of well-to-do men (mostly with doctorates) with the candidate for the preaching office, Walther Classen, and the senator and owner of the Hamburger, Gummiwerke Dr. Traun, at the helm. Following the example of Toynbee Hall in London, the founders attempted to build a bridge between the educated bourgeoisie and the needy, rebellious workers through a place of personal encounter. However, the Volksheim never became a settlement in the traditional sense. Among the members, it was only Classen who actually settled within the working-class district. The organization underwent many changes. The first, spontaneous period of existence extended from its foundation in 1901 to the beginning of the Weimar Republic in 1920. The second, more structured phase ended in 1929. In the 1930s, especially during the rule of the National Socialists, the association was fully subordinated to the dictates of the NSDAP and took on its propaganda.

The takeover of the leadership in the *Deutsches Volkstum* in Jan 1919 was probably the most important moment in Stapel's career, as he began a permanent cooperation with the **Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt** in Hamburg. This company became the main publisher of the Hamburg Circle's books. Since that time, the coming years saw the



birth of the most classical works of the group, thereby placing its profile within the German young conservative, nationalistic, and anti-Semitic trend. This trend went, however, differently from Nazism. Although at the beginning of the 1930s Stapel tried to comply with the Nazi line of thought, his ecclesiastic inclinations and a very specific attitude to the Jewish question soon became intolerable for the NSDAP, especially for such leading theoreticians of racism as Alfred Rosenberg. Only under the protection offered by Rudolf Hess was Stapel allowed to function until 1938 as the chief editor of the *Deutsches Volkstum*. Ultimately, he was forced to resign.

The other three members of the Hamburg Circle were Albrecht Erich Günther, Gerhard Günther, and Hans Bogner, all deeply immersed in various disciplines of the arts and humanities. The Günthers were sons of Agnes, a well-known German writer, and Rudolf, a Lutheran theologian and a professor in church art. **Albrecht Erich Günther (1893-1942)**, was Stapel's main co-worker in the *Deutsches Volkstum*. However, he also edited two military periodicals: *Die Junge Mannschaft: Blätter der Deutschen Wehrjugend* and *Deutsche Front: Wochenschrift der Nationalen Deutschen*. The interest in militarism remained his preoccupation in some of his later editorial work. A.E. Günther's orientation in the Hamburg Circle was also (and to a much greater extent than in the case of the other members) influenced by the ideas of Arthur Moeller van den Bruck and Heinrich von Gleichen.<sup>12</sup> He joined them in the activities of the June Club (Juniklub), a nationalist think-tank, which functioned in 1919-1924 and brought A.E. Günther closer to the national revolutionary trend.<sup>13</sup>

**Gerhard (actually Max Rudolf Hermann Gerhard) Günther (1889-1976)**, Albrecht Erich's brother, originally followed his father's path, having received a thorough theological education, and owed his second, nationalist, spiritual formation to the experience of war, where he served as a military chaplain. After the end of the war, he initially took a leave of absence and in 1920 resigned from a position at the State Church of Hesse-Kassel at his own request. He went to Hamburg, where he became the managing director of the Hamburg Volksheim and editor of *Das Volksheim: Mitteilungsorgan des Hamburger Volksheims* from 1920 to 1922. In 1920, he began his freelance adventure: until 1933 he worked for the 'Fichte Society of 1914' and cooperated with the so-called 'Fichte University' in Hamburg, where he lectured and led working groups. He also gave lectures for the German National Association of Clerks (Deutschnationale Handlungsgehilfenverband), for the League Youth (Bündische Jugend), and the Reichswehr. Apart from his cooperation with Wilhelm Stapel at the *Deutsches Volkstum*, which was his main journalist activity, Günther was also the editor of the magazine *Glaube und Volk* in 1931-1933, which was published by the Christian-German Movement (Christlich-deutsche Bewegung). This helped him to formulate the character of the Hamburg circle: an attempt to combine conservative, anti-republican attitudes with Christian ideas. The emergence of Nazism as a new statist order was accepted by him nearly unconditionally, as reflected in his book *Das werdende Reich: Reichsgeschichte*

<sup>12</sup> The editor of *Das Gewissen*, the Club's weekly, which was published until 1929.

<sup>13</sup> Comp. S. Maass, *Starker Staat...*, p. 33.

*und Reichsreform*,<sup>14</sup> published in 1932. Moreover, the theologian joined the NSDAP in 1933. However, the coming years revealed the deep incompatibility of the positions represented by the Nazis with the ones of the Hamburg Circle. This led to Günther's resignation from the membership in 1941.

**Hans Bogner (1895-1948)**, the youngest of the Hamburg Circle members, received a thorough education in classical philology. He attained the highest university degrees by 1933. Apart from his participation in the Hamburg Circle and Stapel's *Deutsches Volkstum*, he also cooperated with *Deutscher Rundschau*, which was published by Rudolf Pechel. In 1936-1941, he lectured at Freiburg University and then, between 1941 and 1944 at Strasbourg State University in occupied France.<sup>15</sup> Bogner became an NSDAP member, which eliminated him from state academic life after the war. However, due to his elitism and cultural traditionalism he was also stigmatized by other party members.

## APOCALYPSE NOW

The new reality after WWI was broadly contested as a genuine disaster by the whole conservative revolutionary camp, with the Hamburg Circle being no exception. The beginning of the story, however, lies in the outcome of 'World Slaughterhouse-One.' Mohler correctly stated that it could also be interpreted as a cultural war (*Kulturkrieg*). After the collapse of the paradigm that stemmed from the French Revolution, the German nation was placed into a specific position. The Germans perceived the dominant British and French ideology of 'civilization,' 'Humanity' and 'individual rights' as hostile and found it necessary to stick to 'barbarism,' 'militarism,' 'reaction' and 'autocracy' in order to retain the position of a 'world power.' In this way, the German ideology focused on a kind of compensation: the dominating idea of Liberty was supposed to be objectivized by 'order.' Some of the ideologists (predominantly representing the Pan-German movement and the Völkisch groups) aimed to achieve territorial gains whereas others concentrated on the idea of imperial dominance. As the war was coming to an end, the hope for war gains emerged from the initiative of the German Fatherland Party (*Deutsche Vaterlandspartei*), which tried to unite different rightist camps, mainly the traditional conservative monarchists and the new aggressive nationalists. However, the party was soon labeled as the 'war extension party' (*Kriegsverlängerungspartei*) and lost in the areas of military defeats and the country's worsening economic situation. Finally, the natural conditions for the conservative revolution emerged: the traditional monarchy had almost no supporters left, while the Republic was not welcomed with open arms, either.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> G. Günther, *Das werdende Reich: Reichsgeschichte und Reichsreform*, Hamburg 1932.

<sup>15</sup> According to German regulations, the city (as the whole provinces of Lorraine and Alsace) was not part of the "occupied area" but officially belonged to the German Reich.

<sup>16</sup> A. Mohler, K. Weissmann, *Die Konservative Revolution...*, pp. 59 nn.



The other side of the problem lies in the radicalization of the political and ideological positions before and after WW1. Rolf Peter Sieferle realized the relative balance of the left and right radicals that constructed the political situation in some European states in the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Before WW1, the ideological upbringing led to contradictions. The emancipated ego was accused of the emergence of nihilism and, in the philosophical sense, the coming years brought an attempt to overcome nihilistic tendencies. The European mind was torn by the dichotomy of individualism and communitarianism, subjectivism and realism. It was no wonder that various radical revolutionaries turned to all kinds of extreme ideologies.<sup>17</sup>

However, there was another, quite objective reason for the frustration: Sieferle pointed to the factor of technological civilization, whose development was accelerated by the war (as usually happens during large-scale military conflicts). The problem lies not only in the individual devices that appeared as miracles in the old landscape. It was also connected to the changing image of the life of entire societies. The new organization of the world left no illusions and dictated inexorable, abstract principles: uniformity, terribly dehumanized constructions, coldness, and objectivity.<sup>18</sup>

Last but not least, the Germans and some other nations, which had been brought up in traditional, conservative, and religiously determined societies and states, could doubtlessly begin to feel uneasy in the new situation. The monarchy, which for a couple of decades had been a symbol of a successful sublimation of the finally united people (*Volk*), collapsed. The destruction was welcomed by the revolutionary or at least semi-revolutionary and enraged masses. There was no return to the old ways, but the world offered a range of alternatives: the ideological radicalism of the monarchy and the Church could be replaced by leftist radicalism in the Mexican form or by the Bolshevik experiment. The longing for unanimous leadership and missionary zeal seemed to have been satisfied to a degree.

However, this did not happen. The German people were forced to participate in elections and assume responsibility for the state. The dream of having one leader, whose destiny was determined by God and natural processes, remained a dream. The Weimar Republic opened the Pandora's box of plurality. This seemingly regular choice could also cause a headache, as no party leader was the carrier of the national or religious truth. The spirit of unified sacrifice and service was replaced by rivalry, the political world seemed to turn into a cattle market. The political line of the *Deutsches Volkstum* in the whole Weimar period, especially in its early stage, was definitely anti-democratic and openly hostile toward the new system. The short era of the Republic was described as a time of collapse, mainly due to the emergence of the party life. In his introductory article to the February issue of 1919, Dietrich Ferchau described the previous idealistic and Romantic Germany as a home to various communities (alliances, trends, schools, etc.), none of them, however, had much in common with political parties.<sup>19</sup> What made

<sup>17</sup> R.P. Sieferle, *Die konservative revolution. Fünfbiografische Skizzen*, Berlin 2019, pp. 18-19.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>19</sup> D. Ferchau, "Unsere Parteien", *Deutsches Volkstum*, 1919, 2. Heft, pp. 33 nn.

the Hamburg Circle so aggressive about the election-based liberal democracy? It was probably that political parties in the Republic were perceived as lacking any sense of destiny: they served their own ends rather than the Nation.

## THE NATION

How did the members of the Hamburg Circle understand the essence of the nation? Although the trend it represented is described as a conservative revolution, it is conservative in a specific, nationalistic or even tribal sense. Gerhard Günther, for instance, did not reject voluntary associations (and actually appreciated them), but still believed that the past of the German nation is a history stemming from tribes, which he understood as extended clans.<sup>20</sup>

This 'tribalistic' position was enriched by Stapel's religious anthropology. In 1919, he argued that: *If God wants to reveal himself in and through a person, if he wants to appear human to the human race, he can only do so in the very specific person he has chosen. He has to be a person and therefore belongs to a time and a people. Because there is no such thing as a 'man in general' that is not a person with certain delimited characteristics and a certain local culture. When God revealed himself in Jesus of Nazareth, he appeared in a Jewish man. (It is necessary to find out whether Jesus was not of the Nordic race because Jews were also very likely to have a certain Nordic influence.)*<sup>21</sup> In other words, nationality is sanctioned by a providential factor; it also determines a person's identity in the same way as sex or personal traits. In Stapel's doctrine, a nation exists fully only on the condition of the national will (*Volkswille*). Its aspects are: blood (*Blut*), efficiency (*Leistung*), and majority (*Majorität*). The national will should not be identified with caprice, an individual whim, as it results from an idealistically understood community, the maturation of a common spirit, made aware first by some, and then by the majority. In this sense, the nation (*Volk*) differs from the mass (*Masse*), which characterizes immature egalitarian communities.<sup>22</sup> In this case, Stapel uses a term that was introduced by Oswald Spengler earlier in his *Decline of the West*. The term denoted the community that inhabits the metropolis (*Weltstadt*), a characteristic symptom of *civilization*, the final stage in the development of all Great Cultures. In Stapel's narrative, the *mass* is not controlled by the national will, hence the democracy that could apply to it can only be of a formal nature.

Stapel's nation is not a self-unaware mass, but the subject of humanity (*Menschkeit*), which is by no means a collective of individuals, but rather the sum of nations. A nation is neither accidental nor meaningless: *nor is it, like a being or a state, only a work of human will; it is a naturally grown unit, like a tree, a coral reef, a swarm of bees; (...) a people*

<sup>20</sup> G. Günther, *Deutsches Kriegertum im Wandel der Geschichte*, Hamburg 1934, pp. 27-34.

<sup>21</sup> W. Stapel, "Deutschtum und Christentum", *Deutsches Volkstum*, 1919, pp. 361-367.

<sup>22</sup> Idem, *Die Fiktionen der Weimarer Verfassung. Versuch einer Unterscheidung der Formalen und Funktionalen Demokratie*, Hamburg 1928, pp. 28 nn.

is an individual: something that is in some ways indivisible.<sup>23</sup> Stapel's understanding of the nation has, therefore, only a minimal connection with its biological base. Generally, a nation is presented as a kind of personal entity with its own separate will and intellect, thereby fulfilling the fundamental conditions of a sovereign. Moreover, this sovereign is not purely formal, but rather an outcome of a long-term, complex maturation. After all, the nation is also shaped under the influence of objectivization in the external world, especially when confronted with foreign or even hostile phenomena.

The perception of nations as something different from thoughtless masses does not exhaust Stapel's negative interpretative efforts. He carries out a fairly consistent elimination of misinterpretations of the concept: a nation is not treated by young conservatives in terms of the French-American, civic spirit. For Stapel, a nation is certainly not a group of citizens, as is shown by the example of Switzerland. A German remains German in any country where he or she resides. The state is a phenomenon secondary to the primacy of the nation, it is only an expression of the *political will*. It is the nation, not the state, that constitutes a basic and comprehensive human community. Neither can the nation be treated strictly synchronously, as a group of people living right now. The nation also includes the dead and those yet to be born. Any nation, therefore, has a temporal, diachronic, and evolutionary dimension. Finally, a nation cannot be considered without 'nationalness' (*Volkheit*) – a nation without a national soul would only be a mass of individuals. The differences between nations manifest in individuals in almost all spheres, such as forms of social life and folk customs, art and science, religion or language, whose characteristics are by no means accidental.<sup>24</sup>

A nation is not unified by multiplied individual will only for such a will binds states, societies (*Gesellschaft*) and organizations, but not nations and communities (*Gemeinschaft*). This remark is indirectly related to the fundamental distinction introduced by Ferdinand Tönnies,<sup>25</sup> who pointed to the sociological basis of the doctrine of nationalist groups, not only German nationalists. In Stapel's doctrine, nations are not formed by human institutions, but grow out spontaneously from their own roots. States and organizations are thus bound by coercion, which is not needed in the case of a nation since it maintains integrity by its blood and 'soul.' This soul can sometimes incorporate strangers, as was evidenced by the example of Houston Stewart Chamberlain.

Nations are life-long unities of people with common characteristics which were passed down both spiritually and physically from generation to generation, consequentially developing a common heritage and common cultural goods. Hence, an individual in this structure is only a part of the nation and thus acquires their true meaning.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, states are of secondary importance: they are formal and utilitarian creations that help the nations meet their objectives. Under no circumstances, however, can they rule over a nation. The principle of *cuius regio eius natio* is not only harmful, but essentially ineffective.

<sup>23</sup> Idem, "Antisemitismus", *Deutsches Volkstum*, 1919, pp. 165-166.

<sup>24</sup> Idem, *Volk. Untersuchungen über Volkheit und Volkstum*, Hamburg 1942, pp. 19-22.

<sup>25</sup> F. Tönnies, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, Leipzig 1887.

<sup>26</sup> W. Stapel, *Volk...*, p. 25.

The efforts of the Swiss authorities to form a single nation senselessly try to 'improve nature.' Raising the state beyond its natural measure by parallelizing *Staatsnation* and *Kulturnation* causes harm to people's native communities. As an example of such an erroneous attitude, Stapel pointed to the German authorities' neglect of the fate of Russian-Germans as a result of the absolutization of the principle of state self-determination.<sup>27</sup>

Well-structured laws should result from a proper understanding of nationality. In many of their works, young conservatives point to the *Volkswille*, the will of the nation, as their basic principle. However, Stapel makes, for the sake of greater acuity, another distinction: the one between the will of the people (*Wille de Volkes*) and the national will (*Wille des Volkheit*) as an expression of the will of the nation in the proper sense. Unfortunately, for a long time, Germany, under the influence of French and English schools of rationalist thought, had sometimes continued to identify the will of the nation with the sum of the wills of individuals.<sup>28</sup>

This distinction seems quite fundamental in the narrative used by the Hamburg Circle. The absolutization of the nation as a providentially structured unit did not allow them to accept liberal democracy due to the fact that it left the driving power to the intellects of individuals 'artificially' abstracted from their 'natural' communities, whereas the kind of democracy that was an expression of the swarm's soul could count on spontaneous support. In other words, the statistical German was not a 'real' German, who was in a way 'genetically' integrated into the organism. This organism could, however, contain harmful elements, not based in its natural growth: such as neoplastic tissues and dangerous parasites.

## THE ENEMY

Can a radical doctrine exist without the enemy's vision? The Hamburg Circle was no exception, then, in finding the foe, as it traditionally happens, both within and outside the nation. As far as the internal aspect is concerned, the conservative revolution in Germany, heterogeneous as it was, usually directed its criticism towards a single target. The young conservatives, völkists, and national Bolsheviks unanimously resented constitutionalism, liberalism, and parliamentary democracy to a similar degree. However, not all of these 'ills' were treated as equally poisonous. Hans Bogner claimed that mass democracy alone does not necessarily lead to the mental and physical disintegration of a people. The *actually deadly toxin in our people's body is liberalism*.<sup>29</sup> Liberalism was judged harmful due to its obviously individualistic inclinations: by putting forward the idea of individual human rights, it blurred the *national will*. However, it also involuntarily cooperated with another enemy, which, at first sight, seemed internal but was, in fact, a genetically alien and parasitic excrescence.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., pp. 35-42.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>29</sup> H. Bogner, *Bildung der politischen elite*, Oldenburg 1932, p. 88.

In Stapel's articles and essays (more so than in the other cases of the young conservatives' narrative), a crucial role was played by the analysis of the Jewish question as a significant destabilizing factor in the state and nation. It is systematic in nature and contributes to the narrative whose final word was the rhetoric that justified the Holocaust. In European (including German) political and social thought, during the decades preceding the tragedy, various, often completely opposite concepts of solving the Jewish problem emerged. They generally oscillated around two models: open xenophobic exclusivism and inclusivism (assimilationism). This division remained valid regardless of the radicalism of the solutions. Zionism, the idea of the creation of a separate Jewish state in Europe, an exile to Madagascar, the promotion of mass pogroms, or a friendly tolerance of dissimilarity, in any case remained in the spirit of exclusivity. Meanwhile, the ideas of forced assimilation and banning religious activity, along with projects concerning the peaceful inclusion of Jews in European social life represented inclusivism. Stapel left no doubt as to his position: he believed that the assimilation of Jews was impossible and that any attempts to achieve such an objective could only be harmful to the German people.

This belief was supported by a fairly clear idea of 'Jewishness,' which differed significantly from the position of the Nazis and many other anti-Semitic ideologists of the time, including H.S. Chamberlain. The most important determinant of Stapel's understanding of the problem was the rejection of the racial interpretation of the Jewish world. The Jewish people, similarly to Germans, were not a race, but a historically mature nation.<sup>30</sup> This made the issue more serious, because 'nations' were perceived as the product of a prolonged process and had a well-formed self-awareness. The problem was that the two subjects of self-consciousness were entirely different, despite their co-existence in the same geographical environment.

Different customs, values, and, above all, different spirits of community (*Ge-meingeist*) resulted in the phenomenon of German anti-Semitism. For Stapel, it was a positive, and even inevitable reaction, because it testified to the spiritual strength, alert awareness, and readiness to defend the national ego.<sup>31</sup> In many cases, the Jewish people adopted attitudes and strategies foreign to Germans. Their manner of positioning their nation at the top was to promote cosmopolitanism, portray nationalism as a temporary atavism, and show the path to a common future for the whole of humanity as composed of independent individuals. In doing so, they mislead nations by obscuring the fundamental principle of development: individuation. Stapel claims that, in many cases, there was an obvious attempt to 'enter' the nation that the Jewish minority coexisted with, but these attempts had to be ultimately futile: *No man chooses the nation he wants to belong to, he is implanted into it without the participation of his will. He is part of his nation as a flower is the flower of a tree. God creates people in the world as Germans, Jews, the French, the Japanese, etc. We, humans, can only recognize this natural trait of*

<sup>30</sup> W. Stapel, *Antisemitismus und Antigermanismus. Über das seelische Problem der Symbiose des deutschen und des jüdischen Volkes*, Hamburg 1928, p. 14.

<sup>31</sup> Idem, *Völk...*, pp. 238 nn.

*nature. Woe to those who lean beyond it, because they go against God's will. Happy is the one who rejoices in what he is now because he feels the will of God. All in all, to deny your nationality is godlessness, even hostility to God.*<sup>32</sup>

In this perspective, the most obvious and healthy Jewish attitude should be one of natural hostility or distance towards Germans; in other words, it would be natural for Jews to find an equivalent of anti-Semitism. In fact, according to Stapel, it takes various forms, being a reaction not so much to German anti-Semitism as it is to German diversity and, above all, to the German striving to individuate their own cultural and civilizational patterns. In general, however, the Jewish practice of influencing the German people was different: usually, not fully conscious anti-Germanism takes a camouflaged, and therefore the most dangerous, form. Jews enjoy overrepresentation in press, literature, and other spheres of cultural and intellectual life. However, due to their natural adherence to another nation, they cannot understand the spirit of German creativity even if they want to.

According to Stapel, the Jewish people entered the German social discourse through the language. For them, however, it was only a tool deprived of the national spirit. In order to rise to the heights of their native thoughts, the Jews had to put special emphasis on the content independent from the linguistic form. The actual goal of the Jewish cultural policy was assimilation; this allowed them to enter the general market and to take over the European way of thinking. They took possession of the same newspapers, magazines, literature, and the content of university lectures. Thus, they began the process of alienating the European way of thinking from its roots.<sup>33</sup>

To explain the structure of this process, Stapel primarily tried to explore the very essence of Jewishness, especially in the German context, where Jews constitute a unique whole, which is even more integrated than the German nation. Outwardly, however, it varies: for some, Jewishness is primarily religiously determined, whereas for the so-called *völkische Juden*, what matters more is blood ties. A fully conscious Jew, however, will always state the indissolubility of the nation and religion.<sup>34</sup>

The Jewish political ideal is expressed in the earthly theocracy as the destiny of all mankind. This mindset leads to other fundamental assumptions about political life. One of them is that culture as an interpersonal link will always have a positive connotation for a Jew. War, in turn, will invariably be associated with evil, as it constitutes an unintelligible destruction of the universal world order. That is why earthly justice is the spiritual determinant of the foundation of Jewish ethics. Last but not least, religion is treated politically, which explains the emergence of German rationalist thought with its ideas of progress, pacifism, and liberalism: important carriers of Jewish spirituality.<sup>35</sup>

Stapel distinguished two properties of the milieu of assimilated Jews. One is ambition; according to Stapel, it should not be cherished as it can bring both positive

<sup>32</sup> Idem, "Antisemitismus"..., pp. 167 nn.

<sup>33</sup> Idem, *Die literarische Vorherrschaft der Juden in Deutschland 1918 bis 1933*, Hamburg 1937, pp. 20 nn.

<sup>34</sup> Idem, *Antisemitismus und Antigermanismus...*, p. 80.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 85.



and disastrous effects. In any case, it leads to the presence of Jews in state institutions, such as the army or the police, etc. The other trait of the established Jewry is their strong need for belonging (*Anschlußbedürfnis*), which helps them to achieve subsequent stages of assimilation, but also causes a horizontal growth. A Jew will always bring other Jews with him under all circumstances; this is why universities were conquered.<sup>36</sup>

Interestingly, at the beginning of the existence of the Circle, there was even a certain dialogue with the arguments of the Jewish community. In 1919, a letter by a well-known Jewish writer and pedagogist (Jakob Loewenberg) appeared in the *Deutsches Volkstum*. This was a response to Stapel's famous text on anti-Semitism. Loewenberg, a leading theoretician of assimilationism, argued that Stapel confused the tribal Germanic instincts (*Germanentum*) with Germanism (*Deushtum*). In fact, it is absolutely justified to appreciate the participation of Jewish, Slavic, Latvian, or French Germans. Otherwise, one could logically reject the importance of Ludolf Karl Adelbert von Chamisso, Theodor Fontane, or Hermann Karl Bruno von François in the history of German culture and statehood.<sup>37</sup>

Such arguments, however, were exploited by the young conservative elite in their pursuit of opposing objectives. In the rhetoric of the Hamburg Circle, especially Stapel's and Bogner's, Jews have an extraordinary ability to transform their values into Christian or even general 'human' values. Their attachment to universal legal forms makes the truly traditional social principles functioning within individual nations appear to them as an expression of aggressive and destructive tendencies. A Jew opposes the traditional forms of statehood and social organization because he strives for universal theocracy, or at least for the rational organization of mankind. Hence, the pacifism which is so destructive for European societies: every war will appear to the Jewish universalist as fratricidal. Jews, in the opinion of young conservatives, are generally very active in the field of international relations.<sup>38</sup>

Within Germany, the influence of the Jewish community is characterized by *anti-Germanism* (*Antigermanismus*). It should not be ascribed to either the Zionists, who explicitly wish to cultivate their own national tradition, or to unconditional assimilationists. A true Zionist will always reject interactions with Germans and any other nations, whereas an entirely assimilated Jew actually becomes a German. The real problem lies in the Jews who, on the one hand, maintain their attachment to the Jewish religious community and ideals, yet, on the other, wish to become part of the German political and cultural life. This kind of a Jewish dissenter cannot resist a feeling of irony toward the vital national preoccupations of the German people.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., pp. 92-94.

<sup>37</sup> J. Loewenberg, "Ueber Antisemitismus. Ein offen Brief an Wilhelm Stapel", *Deutsches Volkstum*, 1919, p. 325.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., pp. 94-100. Similar ideas are also presented in H. Bogner's article: "Die Judenfrage in der griechisch-römischen Welt", *Forschungen zu Judenfrage*, 1937, vol. 1, pp. 71-81.

<sup>39</sup> W. Stapel, *Antisemitismus und Antigermanismus*..., p. 89.

Since partially uprooted Jews have no obvious place in their community, they lack a sense of peace. Therefore, they try to change the natural order into one of their own, thus transforming it into the center of their wishful order of things (*Wunschordnung*). This makes every evaluative act ridiculous because it is viewed from the perspective of an individual, not in terms of the community. Hence, the heroic acts of Arndt, Kleist, or Stein cannot appeal to Jewish anti-Germanists, as they stand against the subjectivity of the individual. For the uprooted people, an ideological pursuit is not perceived as gushing blood, but *leaking pus*.<sup>40</sup>

Generally speaking, the members of the Hamburg Circle were predominantly interested in the internal enemy (although the threat from other nations, mainly the cultural and political influence of France and the United States, also played a specific role). In their writings, they tried to convince their compatriots of the necessity to condemn the internal opponent and resort to political banishment. Who was the enemy that brought the most devastating consequences? The publisher of *Deutsches Volkstum* launched cannons primarily against pacifism and pan-Europeanism, which were to be considered a *breach into the German camp*.<sup>41</sup> That is why the Hamburg Circle perceived the political and administrative reality of the Republic as a parody of a genuinely German state: due to its lack of ideology, its neutrality, and liberal approach to any influences, it constituted an ideal environment for the development of a foreign element in the German ecological niche.

## THE STATE

The Hamburg Circle unanimously criticized the realities of the Weimar Republic, but the ideas put forward by the members of the circle were not always identical in this matter. Hans Bogner, who was closest to the notion of the state church, wrote about the idea of the god of a *polis*, i.e. the deity of a specific state, within which we are dealing with an actual theocracy. The *nomos* of the nation (*Völknomos*) then shapes the power elite.<sup>42</sup> Bogner certainly did not call for the reconstruction of henotheism in Germany, but instead insisted on “a strong state, led by an elite growing from its ethnic soil and united around a Christian king.”<sup>43</sup> However, he was aware that the realization of such an ideal was not possible in the unfortunate Weimar era, which may be assessed as one of the worst possible power-creating environments. Hence, his concept leans on the conservative tradition with its constant efforts to implement timeless principles. By being attached to supernatural principles one will, paradoxically, satisfy nature.<sup>44</sup> As Maass rightly pointed out, this view fits in with the key concept of Moeller van der

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 166.

<sup>41</sup> W. Stapel, “Pazifisten sind biologische Pesträger”, *Deutsches Volkstum*, 1932, p. 175.

<sup>42</sup> H. Bogner, *Die verwirklichte Demokratie. Die Lehrender Antike*, Hamburg 1930, p. 218.

<sup>43</sup> Idem, *Die Bildung...*, p. 13.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

Bruck, according to which *German nationalism is the pursuit of the Final Reich* (Endreich). *It is always a never fulfilled promise. It is a perfection that is achievable only in what is imperfect.*<sup>45</sup>

The German state of the 1920s, however, by no means seemed to pursue this perfection. On the contrary, it not only drank the poison of liberalism, but also exposed the nation to the danger of a devastating coup. Moreover, egalitarian statehood could turn into a nationalist, secular tyranny. The optimal way to arrange the state is to take into account its natural pluralism, and thus the hierarchy, as this is the stratification that forms the basis of the Reich.<sup>46</sup> In this case, Bogner's arguments do not go significantly beyond the Aristotelian belief that democratic despotism may create a much more ferocious monster than the one of the *ancien régime*. When Nazism got out of control in 1933, the publicist referred to it in an ambivalent manner: he accepted the authoritarianism of its forms of exercising power but did not believe Hitler could be considered the spiritual representative of the *Volkswille*.<sup>47</sup>

Stapel criticized the democracy of the interwar period for similar reasons. Like the extreme anti-democrat Bogner, he looked favorably upon the monarchy with no absolutization of its values, as the absolute monarchy tended to sever ties with the *national will*. However, Stapel's views on democracy were not so clear-cut, although he was very critical of liberal democracy, which he saw as the product of partyism, and thereby leading to a weakening of the will. He perceived many more positives in the somewhat vaguely defined *conservative democracy*, which allowed the *real* will of the nation to be fully expressed.<sup>48</sup> The nation was the actual sovereign of the state, but the rational legitimacy of this sovereignty, contrary to the Enlightenment tradition, was ruled out in Stapel's understanding of the state.

The spirit of a democratic state, according to Stapel, boils down to a sense of community (*Gemeingeist*), as described by Romantic poets. A well-structured democratic state is only possible when this feeling dominates all spheres of social life, especially the elective bodies, press, and education. Democracy will then become an expression of its basic values: a proud desire for freedom, bravery, faithfulness to the spirit of the fathers and the native land, care for the young generation and the its heritage it was supposed to cultivate, objectivity, the ability to conduct a dialogue with others, ignoring trivial matters, and living for God and neighbors.<sup>49</sup> In this sense, democracy is presented within the opposition between *formal* and *functional*. The former is a purely theoretical construct and does not guarantee any success for the state, which may lack the sense of community. Democracy as an expression of national will is a functional democracy fulfilling its task of integrating and developing the nation. Otherwise, it makes no sense: a community that has not yet reached the 'national stage' would better be structured by a monarchy.

<sup>45</sup> A. Moeller van der Bruck, *Das dritte Reich*, Berlin 1923, p. 260. Comp. S. Maass, *Starker Staat...*, p. 48.

<sup>46</sup> H. Bogner, *Die Bildung...*, p. 25.

<sup>47</sup> S. Maass, *Starker Staat...*, p. 57.

<sup>48</sup> W. Stapel, *Die Fiktionen...*, p. 5 nn.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 112-113.

Stapel explains that in political theory liberal and national democracy should be distinguished as two different phenomena in terms of the explication of the national will. *Liberal democracy* is characterized by the spirit of management. That is why it gives up traditional forms in cases where they do not fulfill the tasks set by politicians. *National democracy*, in turn, is permeated by organic thinking, i.e. the pursuit of wholeness. Abandoning national forms of activity is possible only in extreme cases, when the survival of the nation is at risk. Liberal democracy is logical, whereas the national version is the domain of 'natural thinking' and does not adhere to mathematical rules. Liberal democrats think individually, they express the view of the nation as a loose grouping of independent individuals. Conversely, their opponents present 'national thinking,' with the nation being not so much composed of individuals as *manifested* in them.<sup>50</sup>

It is no wonder, then, that the formalistic democracy established by the Weimarer Maiorität on July 31, 1919 was hardly acceptable for the Hamburg Circle. Albrecht Erich Günther claimed that democratization in the Weimar style was a deliberate action aimed at weakening the Germans by the victorious powers. Similarly, liberalization, supposedly aimed at oppression, made Germany a truly defenseless state.<sup>51</sup>

In terms of constitutional law, the political system did not seem to be the most important issue in the process of shaping the state. As Heinrich Keßler pointed out, Stapel, in his articles in *Deutsches Volkstum* from 1929, advocated for the birth of a new type of statehood, after the civic *Rechtsstaat* – a state based on internal power (*Strenge im Innern*). Such a state was characterized by severity, sternness, and the ability to overcome the liberal narrative (that had prevailed since 1789). It is therefore generally about building an illiberal state that could not only claim objective values, but also institutionalize them. A key task in this context is to distinguish between friend and foe.<sup>52</sup> The kind of state promoted by young conservatives was based primarily on a hierarchy that was grounded in the 'natural inequality' between people and manifested itself in their different achievements. This belief justified the inclination of the Hamburg Circle towards aristocracy, which made its doctrine entirely different from the totalitarianisms of the interwar period. The consequence of this elitism was the concept of international order in which individual nations were supposed to be 'biologically' hierarchized according to their abilities and achievements. The principle of equality, invoked by the fathers of the Versailles order, was treated by Stapel as an illusion. He soberly pointed to the rules of weighted voting in the League of Nations, which were the best evidence of the actual recognition of inequality.<sup>53</sup>

Stapel therefore presented the vision of a Europe whose freedom and prosperity would only be possible under German rule. Theoretically, such a task could also be fulfilled by France, which, however, polluted the continent with the idea of 'human rights' and other deadly germs in the form of opposition to the punishment of homosexuals or

<sup>50</sup> W. Stapel, *Volk...*, pp. 145-146.

<sup>51</sup> A.E. Günther, "Waffen", *Deutsches Volkstum*, 1926, p. 471.

<sup>52</sup> H. Keßler, *Wilhelm Stapel...*, pp. 149-150.

<sup>53</sup> W. Stapel, *Der christliche Staatsmann*, Hamburg 1932, pp. 247-264.

the inability to control the colonial empire, which resulted in the 'Africanization' of Europe.<sup>54</sup> That is why Stapel was unequivocally in favor of a pan-European *Imperium Teutonicum* under German domination. Thanks to a state like that, the *nomoi* of individual nations would be appreciated, regardless of their territorial distribution. Germany was supposed to be the main cultural substrate of the empire, no matter how many ethnic Germans inhabited the European countries. The cultures of the Eastern European nations, where Germans were dispersed, could not be recognized as equal, because they were of a *secondary nature*.<sup>55</sup> This position explains Stapel's keen interest in the problems of his compatriots abroad: despite being a minority in the mathematical sense, they could not be considered a minor element. On the contrary, their dominance was justified not by their numbers, but by their *rank*.<sup>56</sup>

In general, the Hamburg Circle aimed at the creation of a nation-state, a political entity clearly legitimized and in this way entitled to a kind of totality. Yet, the conservative nature of the doctrine of young conservatives led to the limitation of its competences. The planned state had extremely important social tasks to fulfill, also in relation to the Church in the Lutheran approach: it could perfect it in terms of management, help it to maintain its unity, but not ensure the faith itself and shape its doctrinal content. Thus, the idea of *legal* separateness of both spheres was generally endorsed. The State (*Imperium Teutonicum*) and the Creed owed their unity to the German Nation.<sup>57</sup>

## RELIGION: A NATIONAL CHURCH?

Stapel came from a devout Protestant family, but he also studied in places where the Catholic environment predominated. The Günther brothers were the sons of a distinguished Lutheran clergyman, Hans Bogner, who was born in Catholic Bavaria, ended up as a professor in the Evangelical seminary in Stuttgart. German conservatives, in general, had to face the problem of religious divergence in their country; hence, their efforts were directed towards a certain synthesis of Christianity. Stapel was always very far from the idea of nationalizing the church, although some of his ideas could be associated with the concept of German Christians. Stapel perceived the problem of church differently from the theorists of the liberal state: whereas the latter wanted to see it in terms of certain confessional associations (*Reliogionsgesellschaften*), whose task would be to cultivate a type of worldview, he himself proposed a vision of the empowered one "Church of Christ." The thinker sharply criticized the process of excluding the Church from public life, which began intensively in Bismarck's time and became fully expressed in the Weimar Republic. It seemed unacceptable, in the light of his conservative point of view, to promote the equality of all faiths, including atheism,

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., pp. 253, 265-266.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 268.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 255.

<sup>57</sup> W. Stapel, *Die Kirche Christli und der Staat Hitlers*, Hamburg 1933, p. 50.

because such an attitude showed a complete lack of understanding of the essence of the Church. In an act of certain naivety, however, he hoped that Hitler's state would seek to shape a conservative nation and change the unfavorable position of the Church (or rather that of the traditional Churches). He referred to point 24 of the NSDAP program, in which the party declared that it would maintain freedom of religion, but at the same time support "positive Christianity," regardless of a particular religion. For Stapel, it was a step forward, as it meant the state's commitment, not indifference, to religion: the church was removed from the sphere of private worldview and restored to public life.<sup>58</sup>

Stapel also tried to attack the enemies of the Throne and Altar principle, who came, in his opinion, from the womb of Christianity. He criticized the straightforward interpretation of St. John's writings with their demonization of the state. The concept of the earthly state as a demon, according to Stapel, did not remain relevant at the time when Christian states were formed, when the founders of states became the protectors of the Church. The demonization of state, according to Stapel, could also result from other factors, such as the theorists' alienation from their own nation and state. Through the absolutization of its position and absolute independence, the Church transforms over time into a moral organ that determines human guilt.<sup>59</sup> For this reason, Stapel appreciates the Protestant efforts to bring the Church back into the world and to introduce harmony between earth and heaven. This was a peculiar privilege of the German nation, which experienced a religiosity different from the violent intrusion of religion into life. The principle of power thus passed into the principle of order and harmony, illuminating the emerging centuries of the German nation.<sup>60</sup> As it is easy to see, then, Stapel's conception of the church contributes to the apology of the nation, rather than that of the state.

A similar relationship between the State and Church is proposed by Gerhard Günther. His magazine, *Glaube und Volk*, departed from the idea of a German national church, and instead opted for an intermediate version in the form of an autonomous Church in an authoritarian state. Such a political construction would not accept an entire separation between State and Church, therefore remaining definitely anti-secular.<sup>61</sup>

Stapel's attitude to the church question is somewhat divergent. On the one hand, we can see a defense of the state's religiousness and the autonomy of traditional communities, treated in his writings as an integral Church of Christ. On the other hand, however, understanding the role of Christianity and its truths does not grant it absolute autonomy. The Decalogue is treated by Stapel as a set of private commandments and not something relating to social life. While the prohibition of killing can be justified in relation to the individual, it should not be transferred to the state level. The obligation

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., pp. 24-26.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., pp. 28-29.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., pp. 42-43.

<sup>61</sup> G. Günther, "Aus der Zeit", *Glaube und Volk in der Entscheidung: christlich-deutsche Monatsschrift*, 1933, pp. 180-181.



to love one's enemies should be treated in the same way: it implies only to individual enemies, the commandment does not refer to other nations.<sup>62</sup>

The young conservatives of the Hamburg Circle meticulously searched through the Gospel to justify the state's prerogatives and reject pacifism. The principle of giving the emperor what belongs to the emperor cannot be separated from the necessity of giving God what belongs to God. Christ, in his farewell speech, ordered his disciples to buy a sword, yet he also bestowed grace on the centurion of Capharnaum. The Church depicted by the Hamburg Circle is therefore not a wandering church of the poor, but the backbone of the state.<sup>63</sup>

## CONSEQUENCES AND REMINISCENCES

The consequences of the activities of the Hamburg Circle can be considered in many ways. First, one may ask about the influence of its members' works on the course of political events in Germany in the 1930s. Since conducting public opinion polls is no longer an option, it can only be assessed whether the upcoming trend somehow consumed the achievements of the Circle. There is no doubt that the triumph of Nazism raised the hopes of some members of the group. Stapel expected that Hitler's state would consolidate the national church and turn to German aristocratic ideas.<sup>64</sup> Albrecht Erich Günther edited a collective work that expressed the hopes of a national revival in Germany after the emergence of national socialism.<sup>65</sup> His brother, Gerhard, who became the editor-in-chief of the outwardly religious and anti-liberal journal *Glaube und Volk*, was an NSDAP member between 1933 and 1941. Hans Bogner, another Nazi party member (from 1937), in 1936 joined the advisory board of the research department on the Jewish question in the Reich Institute for the History of the New Germany (Reichsinstitut für Geschichte des neuen Deutschlands).

However, most of the expectations did not come true and the adventure with the Nazi state led to a sense of disappointment because of the obvious incompatibility of young conservatism with the strictly secular, egalitarian, and racist Nazism. Moreover, because of their religiosity, aristocratism, and lack of links to racism, some of the members (especially Stapel) were finally rejected by the party as real or hypothetical coworkers. In other words, they did not manage to proliferate their ideas in the ideological and organizational reality of Hitlerism. In 1947, lost in hopelessness, Stapel attempted to reflect on the past. These reflections were expressed in an article entitled 'Finis Germaniae?', where he examined the causes of the multidimensional defeat of Germany and the territorial expansion of the East European nations in the manner of the great migration of peoples. He was aware that the history of Germany would be taught from the

<sup>62</sup> W. Stapel, *Der christliche...*, pp. 40–41.

<sup>63</sup> H. Bogner, *Die verwirklichte Demokratie...*, p. 218.

<sup>64</sup> Topics discussed in his controversial book: *Die Kirche Christi und der Staat Hitlers*, Hamburg 1933.

<sup>65</sup> A.E. Günther (ed.), *Was wir vom Nationalsozialismus erwarten: Zwanzig Antworten*, Heilbronn 1932.

perspective of foreign minds, but openly declared that Germans, like other nations, had the right to try to play a leading role among them. What lost the German nation was not so much the war as the desire to deprive other nations of humanity and subjectivity. It resulted from the adoption of a totalistic, not subjectively national, attitude. The result was a path to annihilation. The Germans followed the temptation of worldliness and thus of the technical civilization to which they eventually succumbed. Therefore, Germany was in ruins, but its future remained unpredictable, since, after a complete defeat and destruction, it remained only in the hands of God.<sup>66</sup> It really did. After the war, the members of the Hamburg Circle were not openly persecuted, but instead pushed to the margins of intellectual life, in realization that the time did not create too much of a demand for nationalist thought, which consequentially made some of them turn to religious considerations.

After several decades, there appeared some reminiscences of the conservative revolution, including the young conservative trend. Let us draw our attention to two of them.

In 2017, a famous collection of articles by **Rolf Peter Sieferle (1949-2016)**, a distinguished researcher of the conservative revolution in Germany, was published. Its title – *Finis Germania* – directly referred to Stapel's late article. The book is divided into four parts: *Finis Germania*, *The Paradoxes of Time*, *Mythos VB*, and *Fragments*. What made the book famous and provoked intense criticism<sup>67</sup> is generally its conviction that the historical stigmatization of Germans deprived them from the possibility of moral development and of any hypothetical large-scale ambitions. The Germans became a kind of a 'chicken people' who were afraid of any intellectual uncertainty: *The remnants of uncertainty become more intolerable the smaller they get. As long as it is not possible to increase each individual case to the statistical average, there remains an element of danger, which all demonstrations of average security cannot help to overcome.*<sup>68</sup>

This state of mind results from the syndrome of 'the eternal Nazi,' which became the founding myth of postwar Germany.<sup>69</sup> However, what seems even more interesting in the context of the Hamburg Circle is Sieferle's article referring to the relation between technology and the democratic-liberal paradigm. The German thinker does not see the logical links between both phenomena. He supposes that the communitarian, but technologically developed, 'Prussian socialism' that was successfully implemented in Germany after 1914 is an equally possible alternative for the expected development in Asia. The only clear thing is that today's Germany will not be able to apply this model of development; its story is finished.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>66</sup> W. Stapel, "Finis Germaniae?", in *Die Brücke: Auslese aus d. britischen Presse*, Hrsg. Publications Branch, British Information Services, 1947, no. 37, in S. Maass, *Starker Staat...*, pp. 149-153.

<sup>67</sup> See: Ch. Caldwell, "Germany's Newest Intellectual Antihero", *The New York Times*, 9 July 2017, at <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/08/opinion/sunday/germanys-newest-intellectual-antihero.html>>.

<sup>68</sup> R.P. Sieferle, *Finis Germania*, Berlin 2020, pp. 65-66.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 73 ff.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., pp. 51-53.

Another interesting case reflecting a relative rebirth of young conservatism is the Institute for State Policy (Institut für Staatspolitik) established in 2000 by Götz Kubitschek, Karlheinz Weißmann, and Stefan Hanz. The institute, being the main think-tank of the German New Rights, openly refers to the young conservative thought (with Albrecht Erich Günther's conviction that conservatism *does not mean clinging to what was yesterday, but (...) to what is eternally true*) as the leading principle. The activists of the Institute are trying to reestablish conservative thought in their country, focusing, however, on the issues which refer to the problems of today's Germany and Europe: state and society, politics and identity, immigration and integration, education and upbringing, war and crises, economic problems and ecology.<sup>71</sup>

The generally identity-oriented political line of the institute is being criticized and accused of anti-liberalism and anti-democratic inclinations. What sparked special interest toward the institution was its connection with the Alternative for Germany – the new rightist creation in Germany's political stage.<sup>72</sup> Similar to the fate of the Hamburg Circle and other young conservatives in the Weimar Republic, this initiative did not take the leading position on the right side of German political life.

## CONCLUSIONS

The phenomenon of the Hamburg Circle among the other representatives of the conservative revolution in Germany was strictly linked to the extremely negative perception of the Weimar Republic as a state form that did not comply with the German spirit and the expectations of the German people. The Hamburg Circle's doctrinal background with its inclination to elitism and overwhelming religiosity was obviously rooted in the conservative tradition. However, what actually drove the intellectual process was rather the nationalistic imperative, which had been developing since the beginnings of Romanticism. In this way, the group can be placed among the many revolutionary extremisms which appeared after WW1 as a result of the resentment toward the new reality, rather than from respect toward the traditional forms of German political and social life.

The main topics (determinants) of the Hamburg Circle's doctrine boil down to four areas: the necessity to create a non-liberal, 'nationally democratic' or autocratic state; the perception of an internal (liberal) and external (Jewish) enemy, which led the country toward destructive cosmopolitanism, pacifism, and the religion of human rights; the idea of a traditional national church; and the key factor of the Nation (*Volk*), which constituted the central point of the whole doctrine and justified all considerations of the other issues.

<sup>71</sup> Institut für Staatspolitik, *Arbeitsgebiete*, at <<https://staatspolitik.de/arbeitsgebiete/>>, 15 May 2021.

<sup>72</sup> See: H. Kellersohn, "Es geht um Einfluss auf die Köpfe", Das Institut für Staatspolitik Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung, at <<https://www.bpb.de/politik/extremismus/rechtsextremismus/230002/es-geht-um-einfluss-auf-die-koepfe-das-institut-fuer-staatspolitik>>, 15 May 2021.

The Hamburg Circle, despite its intellectual potential, did not manage to shape the Germans' souls during the time of the Weimar Republic. It did, however, set the stage for the rise of anti-Semitism, anti-liberalism, anti-democratism, and nationalistic devotion, which overwhelmed German minds in the 1930s. The primary intention of its political thought, timidly refreshed by Rolf Peter Sieferle and the New Rights, remained equally and very modestly, effective in the decades following WW2. And although it was still aggressively criticized, it was not forbidden in the postmodern era.

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