

WOUNDS OF THE PAST: TRAUMA AND GERMAN HISTORICAL THOUGHT AFTER 1945

BY

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DISSERTATION

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## // Abstract

My dissertation is an intellectual history of trauma and historical thinking in postwar Germany. I argue that the traumas of the Second World War generated a paradigm shift in German historical thought, as experiences of dehumanization, exile, imprisonment, destruction, and genocide destabilized narratives of progress and ignited critical reconsiderations of history's meaning, goal, and purpose. I focus on the work of a grouping of intellectuals whom I term "postprogressive," who traced the origins of these contemporary catastrophes back to the philosophy of history and worked to create historical visions centered not on progress, but on alternative poles such as the cosmos, order, and plurality. Through readings of their manuscripts, correspondence, and published writings, I contend that these thinkers' theoretical output constituted attempts to understand and overcome the trauma they had endured by radically rethinking the conceptions of history that had engendered it. Furthermore, I demonstrate how this process of reorientation worked beside and against dominant discourses of forgetting and coming to terms with the past, revealing a project of delegitimization of the past that has not been recognized by historians. In reconstructing these philosophical efforts, I offer "delegitimization" as a novel paradigm for understanding of German intellectuals' relationship with history in the postwar era.

This research speaks to different sites of confluence between ideas, politics, and bodies. Foremost, it offers a history of intellectual survival that is methodologically and theoretically significant to global histories of post-catastrophic thought and culture. Rather than being silenced by the horrors of the Second World War, these figures continued to think against catastrophe, allowing them to be understood alongside a range of post-colonial, post-traumatic, and post-

imperial discourses. This dissertation also theorizes and models intellectual history as the study of orientations, rather than of discreet ideas or concepts. This allows for an interpretation of the relationalities that organize sets of ideas into relationships of similitude or dissimilitude, antagonism or cooperation, recognition or mutual incomprehension. Furthermore, drawing on methodologies developed in the burgeoning interdisciplinary field of critical trauma studies, I highlight how the attempts of these thinkers to delegitimize and sublimate their trauma diverged from normative clinical conceptions of working-through and reintegration. These heterodox engagements with trauma and history also complicate dominant scholarly understandings of postwar Germans' relationship with the past through their incompatibility with binaries focused on repression and acknowledgment. By approaching trauma as both an object and as a critical lens, my project articulates the historical potency of trauma in moments and manifestations that are elided by hegemonic clinical and cultural norms.

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conviction that the complicated trajectories of historical theory have material importance for all students of all backgrounds; his immense knowledge and his unwavering dedication to *thinking*, to being *thoughtful* in a world constantly reshaped by power; all of these qualities are even more impressive now than when I became his student twelve years ago. It is to Eric that I owe a passion and a commitment to not only intellectual history, but to being a thinking human being. His example remains my goal.

Champaign, April 2019  
ZJR

THAT WHICH  
threw us together  
startles apart,

a world-boulder, sun-remote,  
hums.

- Paul Celan, from *Lichtzwang*<sup>1</sup>

I knew then that the war would never  
come to an end as long as, anywhere,  
even a single wound that it had caused  
continued to bleed.

- Heinrich Böll, “Die Botschaft”<sup>2</sup>

The violence of the body reaches the  
written page only through absence,  
through the intermediary of  
documents that the historian has been  
able to see on the sands from which a  
presence has since been washed  
away, and through a murmur that lets  
us hear—but from afar—the  
unknown immensity that seduces and  
menaces our knowledge.

- Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of  
History*

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<sup>1</sup> Original: “WAS UNS / zusammenwarf / schrickt auseinander // ein Weltstein, sonnenfern, / summt.” From *Lichtzwang*, 1970. Translation found in *Poems of Paul Celan*, rev. ed., trans. Michael Hamburger (New York: Persea, 2002), 278-279.

<sup>2</sup> Heinrich Böll, from “Die Botschaft,” in *Werke*, vol. 1, ed. Bernd Balzer (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1977/1978), 30-35. Cited in Stephen Brockmann, “German Literature, Year Zero: Writers and Politics, 1945-1953,” in Geoffrey J. Giles, ed., *Stunde Null: The End and the Beginning Fifty Years Ago* (Washington D.C.: German Historical Institute, 1997), 74. The translation here is taken from Brockmann’s essay.



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## Thinking from the Rubble // An Introduction

By the end of the Second World War, Europe had experienced death and destruction on a catastrophic scale: roughly 36 million dead from the war, including over 7 million Germans; thousands of villages, towns, and cities destroyed across the continent; hundreds of thousands of women raped; widespread malnutrition and deprivation; hundreds of thousands of orphaned children; 30 million people relocated through migration, both forced and willful; and the destruction of two-thirds of the European Jewish population in the Holocaust.<sup>1</sup> European empires—French, British, German, Italian—had shrunk or collapsed. The expansion of the USSR into Eastern Europe and the ascendance of the United States placed Europe at the front lines of a global ideological conflict. Germany itself was conquered, occupied, and eventually fractured between the socialist East and the capitalist West. These sufferings ramified in a global context as well, with the civil war in China, the rise of Mao Zedong and the People’s Republic, and the dropping of atomic weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. As Germans both at home and abroad considered these implications of genocide and global war in the aftermath of the defeat of the Third Reich and the occupation of Germany, they shared a widespread sentiment that history had gone wrong. The loss of life and the landscape of destruction in which Germans found themselves at the so-called “zero hour” was a brutal contrast to the glorious empire that had been prophesied by National Socialism. The narrative of a German “awakening” (*Aufbruch*), in which an invigorated and pure German *Volk* would seize its historical destiny as a master race, was suffused throughout National Socialist ideology. But by the war’s conclusion, the vision of a thousand-year Reich lay in tatters, its image of the future belied by the reality of the devastation it had wrought.

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<sup>1</sup> The majority of these statistics are taken from Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 17-23.

Germans after 1945 faced a crisis of historical meaning, in which history became a possible source of suffering rather than a font of salvation. The theologian Rudolf Bultmann, one of many thinkers to grapple with these problems in the postwar years, described the situation succinctly: “Men have become conscious not only of their dependence, but also of their helplessness. They have come to feel that they are not only interwoven with the course of history but are also at its mercy.”<sup>2</sup> Karl Jaspers, the psychiatrist-turned-philosopher, eminent political commentator, and critic of German complicity in the Holocaust wrote in a similar fashion: “We are seized by a feeling of dissatisfaction with history. We should like to force our way through history to a point before and above all history, to the matrix of Being, before which the whole of history becomes a phenomenon that can never be ‘right’ in itself, to the point at which, sharing knowledge with creation so to speak, we are no longer entirely at the mercy of history.”<sup>3</sup> This sentiment marked a deviation from the narratives of progress and modernity that had shaped European conceptions of history since the Enlightenment.<sup>4</sup> Under the pressure of violence and upheaval of the twentieth century, this historical optimism had given way to pessimism and uncertainty, a trend which was often most powerfully voiced by those who, as victims of the Hitler’s regime, experienced the catastrophes of the period long before German capitulation in 1945. This shared notion of historical despair provides an essential background to the crisis of historical meaning with which German thinkers grappled in the postwar period.

The core of this crisis was the unavoidability of the question of the meaningfulness or meaninglessness of history: whether it stands as a process with a discernable goal or a series of

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<sup>2</sup> From the opening remarks of his first Gifford Lecture, given at the University of Edinburgh on February 7<sup>th</sup>, 1955. See Rudolf Bultmann, *History and Eschatology: The Presence of Eternity* (Harper and Row, 1957), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, trans. Michael Bullock (London: Routledge, 1953). Originally published as *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (Zürich: Artemis-Verlag, 1949).

<sup>4</sup> For an overview of this long history of historicism, see Bruce Mazlish, *The Riddle of History: The Great Speculators from Vico to Freud* (New York: Minerva, 1968).

disconnected events with no unifying significance; whether it is a unique domain of human existence or simply a small and relatively trivial aspect of our presence in nature. The gravity of these questions was reflected in the urgency with which thinkers attempted to answer them. The answers they offered were not uniform, but revealed a spectrum of ideological, religious, and political differences among thinkers that refracted the crisis in variegated ways.

This crisis of meaning in history generated various investigations into the essential structure, provenance, and direction of historical consciousness and of the modern European conception of history itself. The shadow of doubt cast upon the meaning of history by the catastrophes of genocide and mass slaughter after 1945 compounded with previous setbacks to narratives of progress that had followed in the wake of the First World War. As nineteenth-century visions of progress found their estuary in mechanized slaughter and dehumanized landscape of the trenches, the question of history's goal was brought to the fore, as thinkers such as Jaspers testify. Despite the calamitous end of the hegemony of bourgeois progressivism, however, some argued that the fundamental idea of progress in history survived, to be refashioned in the historical visions of National Socialism and Soviet Communism and finding its inexorable expression in their numerous crimes.

Thus, the anxiety surrounding the meaning of history after the Second World War was inseparable from the suffering it inflicted. However, the nature of that suffering was not limited to the events themselves. The horrors of the Second World War refracted, reverberated, and ramified throughout the bodies, thoughts, and systems of signification produced by those who survived into the postwar era. They were wounds that often stayed open, bleeding into new social, intellectual, and political formations. As such, they often emerged as phenomena of trauma. Trauma stands distinct from suffering precisely in its diachronic potency. An extreme experience emerges as

trauma in its reexperience, in its position as a break in identity, in the inability of one who experiences to incorporate it into self-narration. Crucially, it must be noted that there is no objective threshold of suffering at which trauma occurs. It is decisively a qualitative phenomenon, determined by experiences of individual persons or groups and lacking in a universal theory of occurrence or detection. Furthermore, trauma often operates, as I argue in more detail below, in the interstices and hidden channels of texts, organizing and structuring meaning in ways that evade straightforward or facile interpretive practices.

My dissertation argues that this crisis of history cannot be explained without a consideration of trauma. The simultaneous experience of historical catastrophes and the experience of history itself as catastrophe destroyed both bodies and ideas. In this respect, trauma is a useful category of analysis for interpreting the spiritual, intellectual, and physical responses to this crisis. However, trauma's significance in this story is not limited to its role as event. On the contrary, trauma was a residual force in the texts of thinkers who grappled with the problem of historical meaning. It was a hidden signifier, providing the psychological and metaphorical bedrock for their historical criticism and organizing the philosophical and ideological trajectories of their thought. Furthermore, the thinkers examined here—although hailing from different educational and ideological backgrounds—enacted particular embodiments of trauma. Their work ran askew of and often opposed past and contemporary normative clinical conceptions of how trauma operates, how it is expressed, and how it should be treated.

These enactments can be understood through a paradigm I have termed “delegitimization.” These texts constitute delegitimizations of trauma. They are historical and philosophical works the function of which is to undermine the power and the legitimacy of the traumatic force, a function which is ironically enabled by trauma's hidden, metaphorical potency in their thought.

Delegitimization was a project of neutralization and ultimately depotentialization, aimed at reducing the source of the trauma to ineffectiveness. Trauma was effective on multiple historical levels, engendering a response to the extreme events experienced and conditioning—in a sense both limiting and enabling—the linguistic and philosophical-historical parameters of that response.

The rubric of delegitimization here is crucial, as it bounds both my interpretation of trauma in primary sources and my modification of scholarly discourses of trauma conditioned by that interpretation. Delegitimization functions in my reading in two valences. First, it operates in the texts of the thinkers I study to undermine and place into doubt the structures of historical consciousness which they believed to have been the underlying cause of twentieth-century catastrophes. This can be termed the philosophical-historical delegitimization of trauma. Second, it implicitly critiques normative clinical and scholarly conceptions of how trauma is resolved. The texts examined in this dissertation do not repress trauma, nor do they attempt to work through it. They do not (directly) seek a reintegration or an acceptance of the traumatic event. Rather, the delegitimizing mode of encountering trauma that they embody is an attempt to depotentialize the intellectual, political, theological—in short, the spiritual, in the widest (and most German) sense of the term—conditions which give trauma its very power. This may be termed the critical-theoretical delegitimization of trauma. Delegitimization, in these two often overlapping registers, allows us to identify and make sense of the non-normative responses to catastrophe that these texts instigate and the non-normative theorizations of trauma that they enable. Delegitimization is therefore a hermeneutic for the detection of trauma in heterodox discourses. Furthermore, it allows us to track congruencies, not only in ideology, ideas, and life experiences, but in basic orientations toward existential problems such as the one faced by postwar historical thinkers, revealing both the similarities and the diffusion of their delegitimizing efforts.

In drawing out and sustaining this argument, the chapters that follow center on the work of three particular thinkers: the philosopher Karl Löwith (1897-1973), the political scientist Eric Voegelin (1901-1985), and the historian Reinhart Koselleck (1923-2006). This grouping is not natural or entirely obvious, as these thinkers occupied different milieux and left variegated scholarly legacies across a range of disciplines, from theology and political philosophy to history and literary criticism. Although originating in different backgrounds over two generations, their physical and intellectual biographies intersect in fascinating ways. Löwith, a student of Martin Heidegger who was removed from his teaching position due to his Jewish heritage, and Voegelin, a strident and outspoken critic of National Socialism in Austria, were both forced into exile from the Third Reich; both found positions in the United States and eventually returned to West Germany (permanently in the case of Löwith, temporarily in the case of Voegelin). Koselleck, a veteran of both the Western and Eastern fronts in the Second World War and a Soviet prisoner of war in Karaganda, studied at the University of Heidelberg after the war and was heavily influenced by his teacher Löwith. In their experiences of discrimination, fear, anxiety, and bodily and spiritual precarity, each thinker lived through extreme events that we associate with trauma: the shattering of identity, the loss of physical security, and the overturning of sense and meaning, as well as physical hardship and suffering. All three thinkers worked to understand the historical and philosophical sources of the catastrophes that had befallen them and their society: Löwith by investigating the theological origins of the philosophy of history; Voegelin by uncovering the gnostic nature of political ideologies; Koselleck by tracing the continuity of political crisis throughout modern European history and by illuminating the moments of emergence of a singular, universal conception of history. These catastrophes, in their criticism, were positioned as the political and material traumas that revealed the consequences of historical consciousness. Along

with other intellectuals such as Hannah Arendt and Norbert Elias, in acting upon the problems of the postwar present, they were drawn, by varying degrees, deep into the European past. The responses to twentieth-century catastrophe that they embodied were not limited to the horizon of the present, but rather coalesced around different historical fulcra, such as the emergence of monotheism or the advent of modernity. Beyond these intellectual-biographical parallels and collisions, however, their historical-critical works demonstrate congruent expressions of trauma. Each of them crafted analyses and narratives that labored to undermine the legitimacy of the suffering they endured. Each produced highly-theoretical and philosophically-dense texts that carried out this delegitimization. And each of their delegitimizing historical visions was, in different manifestations, conditioned and determined by a metaphoric inflected by that trauma. Much as a finished piece of furniture still bears the grain of the wood from which it was constructed, their theoretical and historical treatments bore the marks of trauma.

These thinkers come together under a category I term “postprogressive.” Across their divergent beliefs, ideas, texts, and biographies, postprogressive as a category captures their disunified yet parallel efforts to root conceptions of progress out of historical consciousness, to such an extent that historical consciousness itself is often left empty and discarded. Beyond conventional ideological and theological divisions—indeed, across some of the most basic demarcations in modern social theory, such as that between the secular and the religious—they display diffuse yet congruent attacks on progressive philosophies of history in all guises and forms. Furthermore, their texts embody both implicit and explicit projects to materialize orientations toward history that are postprogressive, organized around non-eschatological poles such as the cosmos, order, and plurality.



In this sense, these thinkers embody, even in their attempts to overcome it, the catastrophe and tumult that defined the twentieth century. The texts they authored, as well as the intellectual trajectories of their careers in their entirety, cannot be separated or understood apart from the situation of deprivation and suffering that they endured. Through the problems that generated it and the very language in which it took shape, their work is inextricably linked to the various material conditions of postwar life in Germany and the United States. They sifted through, rearranged, and cast off pieces and remnants of the past in order to work on the present and the future. In doing so, they participated in projects of rebuilding that intellectually restructured Germany after defeat, but in ways that were often heterodox.

Perhaps the most familiar and most over-interpreted image of rebuilding in postwar Germany is the *Trümmerfrau*. These women, in their literal clearing away of the rubble of the past, came to represent the resilience the Germans and their willingness to start anew. This signification was, as scholars have shown, problematic in several different registers.<sup>5</sup> But the image of working through the rubble remains a powerful one. Given the aim of their work and the ramifications of their texts, the intellectuals under consideration in this dissertation may be usefully thought of as *Trümmerdenker*, thinking through and against the intellectual, moral, spiritual, and even physical rubble that surrounded them. That rubble—that is, the devastation wrought by National Socialism in its twelve years of crisis, culminating in the Holocaust and the destruction of Germany—in all its manifestations remained the fundamental focus and the impetus of their postwar work.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Elizabeth Heineman, “The Hour of the Woman: Memories of Germany’s ‘Crisis Years’ and West German National Identity,” in Hanna Schissler, ed., *The Miracle Years: A Cultural History of West Germany, 1949-1968* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 21-56.

<sup>6</sup> The connotation of rubble as constitutive of history and historical consciousness in the wake of catastrophe is evocative of Benjamin’s famous poetic description of the “angel of history,” who sees the course of events as a singular catastrophe and history as an ever-increasing wreckage.

The rubble and the women who worked to clear it held such powerful significance because of the immense extent of the spiritual and moral devastation that lay over Germany after its capitulation in 1945. In the words of Konrad Jarausch and Michael Geyer, “the German past seemed literally shattered, covering the present with shame and burdening the future with its detritus.”<sup>7</sup> For those who survived the collapse, there was no clear path forward, and no *prima facie* unstained traditions provided a refuge from which to rebuild. German institutions—including universities and churches—had coordinated with the National Socialist regime to varying degrees. The responsibility of the German people, communally and as individuals, was a question containing the highest political stakes, as the Nuremberg Trials and the contested and uneven implementation of denazification by the Allies attested. To stress the extent of this devastation is not to give credence to the myth of a “zero hour,” however. On the contrary, to adopt Jarausch and Geyer’s matrix of “disrupted time and fractured space,” it is to recognize the environment in which continuity between the Nazi past and the postwar present was maintained.<sup>8</sup> This was a continuity through rubble: both the ruins of the cities and the ruins of the past were presences linking Germans to the catastrophes which had upended Europe, and in which they had participated. Among the ruins were perpetrators and collaborators, conquerors and victims, all confronting the emptiness of the present and future. To conceive of rubble as continuity, as the very ground of the persistence of the past in postwar Germany, provides essential context for the engagement with history by postprogressive thinkers. For it was precisely in sifting through the spiritual and intellectual rubble left in the wake of National Socialism, the Second World War, and the Holocaust that they

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<sup>7</sup> Konrad H. Jarausch and Michael Geyer, *Shattered Past: Reconstructing German Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), vii.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 356-357.

identified deeper, more durable lineages linking past and present. Their historical-critical work read the rubble of the postwar era back in time, revealing a desolation that was old rather than new.

A discussion of interpretive method is necessary here. By and large, this dissertation operates within a practice of reading which may be classified, borrowing from Paul Ricoeur, as a hermeneutics of suspicion.<sup>9</sup> My reading is concerned as much with the hidden significations of texts as with their explicit intent. In the historical texts under consideration here—published essays, books, speeches, and articles; unpublished correspondence, outlines, and course materials—trauma is rarely, almost never, present on the surface. It is not the subject of these thinkers' investigations, it does not appear in their repertoire of theoretical categories, it is not a mode of analysis through which they examined their own experiences. Its historical trajectory had not yet lifted it to general cultural circulation at the time of their early works. Rather, trauma emerges in the interstices of their texts. It is the mortar, unremarkable at first glance, that unites their various possibilities into an identifiable intellectual architecture. In the attempt to elucidate the adhesive and meaning-producing effect of trauma, I have focused on moments, movements, and thrusts within the texts that reveal a metaphoric of trauma: breaks, crises, volatility, eruptions, and the like. Within this hermeneutics, trauma is more than a mode of reading. It is also, essentially, a mode of seeing absence, allowing for the detection of regimes of signification that texts themselves work to hide, obscure, and bury. It enables the interpretation of negative (in the sense of absence, not in the sense of valuation) factors determining the specific parameters of the

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<sup>9</sup> The concept, adopted from Ricoeur's identification of the "school of suspicion" encompassing thinkers such as Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche who read texts in order to expose the assumptions, ideologies, and power structures that they conceal, has attained a wide usage in theoretical and critical scholarship. See Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008). For scholarly examination of the concept, see Alison Scott-Baumann, *Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion* (London: Continuum, 2009) and Rita Felski, "Critique and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion," in *M/C* 15, no. 1 (2012): 8.

historical criticism of postprogressive thinkers, empowering us to see why and how their critiques took the forms that they did.

Although my interpretations are suspicious in the strictly hermeneutic sense, my work is not aimed primarily at elucidating the ideological and political assumptions inherent in these texts. To be sure, in their criticisms of eschatology (the consummation of history in Judeo-Christian thought), utopia, and the philosophy of history, Löwith, Voegelin, and Koselleck reflected various political values, many of which would be broadly classified as conservative. But by deemphasizing the question of politics, and by extension the application of hermeneutics as critique of ideology, we are able to see how the effects of trauma and the paradigm of delegitimization that these texts enact cut across and problematize familiar political (and medical) categories that shape scholarly discussion. It must be said as well that my purpose here is interpretation, not exegesis. This dissertation is not aimed at recovering, refining, or championing this or that critique or historical vision put forward by these thinkers. Rather, it is to interpret what those visions mean for intellectual historians, and what they say about the experience of history as catastrophe and as trauma.<sup>10</sup> What follows in this introduction is the explication of the theoretical and historiographical discourses in which this dissertation intervenes, albeit it with an important qualification. Due to the novelty of “postprogressive” as an intellectual-historical category and the unaddressed question of trauma in the work of such thinkers and in questions of philosophy of history in general, this dissertation touches upon historiographies irregularly and often tangentially.

### **// Neither Forgetting nor Mastering**

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<sup>10</sup> For a still-relevant examination of intellectual history in the wake of such catastrophe, see Roland Stromberg, *After Everything: Western Intellectual History since 1945* (New York: St. Martin's, 1975).

For Germans who lived in the postwar years, particularly in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Third Reich, the question of the past was palpable. The material traces of the past were present everywhere. Extensive urban destruction through bombing and invasion left thousands of Germans homeless at war's end. The death and maiming of millions of soldiers left both bodies and families severed. Millions of refugees lived a precarious existence, expelled from homes and cut off from friends and relatives. Occupying forces from the Soviet Union, the United States, Great Britain, and France took administrative control of commerce and governance. And most importantly, newly-liberated camps and their emaciated survivors testified to the enduring horrors of the National Socialist regime and its war of extermination.

Within this whirlwind of material afterlives of the past hovered the problem of guilt and complicity. Karl Jaspers provided the now-canonical statement of the problem in lectures delivered at the University of Heidelberg and published in 1946 as *Die Schuldfrage*. He described Germany as dishonored, reprobate before the entire world and bearing the entire weight of culpability for the war and its horrors.<sup>11</sup> The responsibility of Germans in the aftermath, according to Jaspers, was to come to an accounting of guilt and understand its dimensions. Distinguishing between political, moral, metaphysical, and criminal guilt, Jaspers held that all Germans, as subjects of the German polity under National Socialism, were liable for the regime and its actions.<sup>12</sup> Writing in the context of the Nuremberg trial and the widespread resentment among Germans of the Allies' indictments, Jaspers urged his audience to see the exposure and condemnation of Nazi crimes not as an accusation of essential lowness of Germans, but as an opportunity for individual and collective reckoning. The importance of Jaspers for our purpose here is his embodiment of the existential

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<sup>11</sup> Karl Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 42-43.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 55-56.

centrality of the past for postwar Germans' self-understanding. Whether through the embrace of guilt or its denial, whether in the abrogation or the reconstruction of a German national identity, whether in an admission of complicity or in a claim to innocence, the moral and political existence of postwar Germans was founded upon an orientation toward the past.<sup>13</sup>

The topic of postwar Germans' relationship to the past is enormous. In both primary and secondary literatures, it has generated an overwhelming number of treatments. What follows here is not meant to be exhaustive, as the literature on German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is neither the only nor the primary historiographical literature in which this dissertation is imbricated. However, although it is far beyond the scope of this dissertation to engage with the field in its entirety, it will be fruitful to sketch out some basic contours and to establish fundamental signposts. The scholarly concern with the project of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*—conventionally translated as “mastering” or “overcoming” the past—emerged out of heated contestations in the 1980s and

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<sup>13</sup> The topic of memory, and in particular this dissertations' non-engagement with the problem and the massive historiographical and theoretical literature surrounding it, deserves comment here. My work is not directly concerned with memory for two reasons. First, the thinkers I examine were not major participants in controversies over memorialization. Koselleck stands as a possible exception to this, as he did write and research extensively on war memorials. However, this work is not central to the body of his texts that are meaningful for this study. Second, and more importantly, the very project of memorialization is undercut, I would argue, by the delegitimizing projects the texts of Löwith, Voegelin, and Koselleck enact. For works that take up the question of memory directly, see Alan Confino and Peter Fritzsche, *The Work of Memory: New Directions in the Study of German Society and Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002); Aleida Assmann, *Shadows of Trauma: Memory and the Politics of Postwar Identity*, trans. Sarah Clift (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016); Wulf Kantsteiner, *In Pursuit of German Memory: History, Television, and Politics after Auschwitz* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006); Richard Ned Lebow, Wulf Kantsteiner, and Claudio Fogu, eds., *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Volkhard Knigge and Norbert Frei, eds., *Verbrechen erinnern. Die Auseinandersetzung mit Holocaust und Völkermord* (Munich: Beck, 2002); Saul Friedlander, *Memory, History, and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Harold Marcuse, *Legacies of Dachau: The Uses and Abuses of a Concentration Camp, 1933-2001* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Scott D. Denham and Mark Richard McCulloh, *W.G. Sebald: History, Memory, Trauma* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2006); Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Crises of Memory and the Second World War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006); Konrad Jarausch and Martin Sabrow, eds., *Verletztes Gedächtnis. Erinnerungskultur und Zeitgeschichte im Konflikt* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2002); Jeffrey K. Olick, *The Sins of the Fathers: Germany, Memory, Method* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, *Munich and Memory: Architecture, Monuments, and the Legacy of the Third Reich* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Brian Ladd, *The Ghosts of Berlin: Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); and of course, the monumental work found in Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory*, 3 vols., ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

1990s concerning the Holocaust, the crimes of the German Wehrmacht, and German collective guilt.<sup>14</sup> Scholars have demonstrated the centrality of the past to postwar German politics and self-understanding in a variety of contexts, ranging from film and media to parliamentary debates and elite political commentary.<sup>15</sup> What has emerged from this reservoir of scholarship are general, repeated characterizations of the various orientations toward the past active in the history of the Federal Republic.

For Germans, the challenge of the past and how to confront it was inseparable from identity, both personal and collective. What it meant to be German was a question fraught with the

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<sup>14</sup> Norbert Frei, *Adenauer's Germany and the Nazi Past: The Politics of Amnesty and Integration*, trans. Joel Golb, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), xi. See also Peter Baldwin, ed., *Reworking the Past: Hitler, the Holocaust, and the Historians' Debate* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), along with Nicolas Berg, *The Holocaust and the West German Historians: Historical Interpretation and Autobiographical Memory*, ed. and trans. Joel Golb (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2015) and Dagmar Barnouw, *Germany 1945: Views of War and Violence* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), especially Chapter 5, "Views of the Past: Memory and Historical Evidence."

<sup>15</sup> Along with the work of Frei cited above, for a cross-section of scholarship on postwar Germans' relationship to the past, see Frei, *1945 und wir. Das Dritte Reich im Bewußtsein der Deutschen* (Munich: Beck, 2005), as well as several other publications: Jaimey Fisher, *Disciplining Germany: Youth, Reeducation, and Reconstruction after the Second World War* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007); Mary Fulbrook, *German National Identity after the Holocaust* (Polity, 1999); Jeffrey Herf, *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); Edgar Wolfrum, *Geschichtspolitik in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Der Weg zur bundesrepublikanischen Erinnerung, 1948-1990* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1999); Frank Biess and Robert G. Moeller, eds., *Histories of the Aftermath: The Legacies of the Second World War in Europe* (New York: Berghahn, 2010); Robert G. Moeller, ed., *West Germany under Construction: Politics, Society, and Culture in the Adenauer Era* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997); Heide Fehrenbach, *Cinema in Democratizing Germany: Reconstructing National Identity after Hitler* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Martina Moeller, *Rubble, Ruins and Romanticism: Visual Style, Narration and Identity in German Post-War Cinema* (Bielefeld: Verlag Transcript, 2013); Anton Kaes, *From Hitler to Heimat: The Return of History as Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989); Konrad Jarausch, *After Hitler: Recivilizing Germans, 1945-1995*, trans. Brandon Hunziker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Charles S. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); Klaus Naumann, ed., *Nachkrieg in Deutschland* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2001); Frank Biess, *Homecomings: Returning POWs and the Legacies of Defeat in Postwar Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Caroline Sharples, *West Germans and the Nazi Legacy* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Bill Niven, ed., *Germans as Victims: Remembering the Past in Contemporary Germany* (New York: Palgrave, 2006); Jeffrey K. Olick, *In the House of the Hangman: The Agonies of German Defeat, 1943-1949* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Helmut Dubiel, *Niemand ist frei von der Geschichte. Die nationalsozialistische Herrschaft in den Debatten des Deutschen Bundestages* (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1999); Christoph Kleßmann, Hans Misselwitz, and Günter Wichert, eds., *Deutsche Vergangenheiten* (Berlin: Ch. Links, 1999); Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *In a Cold Crater: Cultural and Intellectual Life in Berlin, 1945-1948* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Anson Rabinbach, *In the Shadow of Catastrophe: German Intellectuals between Apocalypse and Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Liisi Keedus, *The Crisis of German Historicism: The Early Political Thought of Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

legacies of genocide, total war, and the brutality of the battles on Eastern Front and the advance of the Red Army. Concurrent with the physical reconstruction of Germany, then, the moral and political tasks of rehabilitation contained towering stakes. In the attempt at such rehabilitation, different dominant frameworks and rival understandings of how to engage with the past emerged. A. Dirk Moses has offered a useful taxonomy in his classification of “German Germans” and “Non-German Germans.”<sup>16</sup> The latter category refers to those dedicated to a project of coming to terms with the past, while the former encompasses those who attempted to “make the national past bearable.”<sup>17</sup> This classification is meant to cut across generational lines, sidestepping the familiar problematic of antagonism between “45ers,” who experienced the end of the war in their formative years, and “68ers,” who came of age in the Federal Republic and who saw the silence and complicity of their elders regarding the Nazi past as untenable. For Moses, a focus on the structuring of identity allows us to see how West Germany’s political consensus and its status as a model polity for its confrontation of the past were the products of contestations over different visions of Germanness.<sup>18</sup> Moses identifies the German German position with intellectuals who were at pains to defend Germanness from the stigma of guilt and to deny “metahistorical significance” to National Socialism and its crimes.<sup>19</sup> A fitting example of this orientation is found in the historian Ernst Nolte, whose writings on the comparability of German and Soviet atrocities

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<sup>16</sup> A. Dirk Moses, *German Intellectuals and the Nazi Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-10.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.



in the Second World War launched the infamous *Historikerstreit* in the 1980s.<sup>20</sup> The Non-German German position is defined by Moses as a “non-identity,” aimed at embodying before an international audience a postnational Germanness that placed German crimes at the center of history and self-understanding.<sup>21</sup>

This construction of binary identity positions among postwar intellectuals is commonplace in historical writing. Alongside Moses’ distinction between German Germans and Non-German Germans, conceptualizations often divide between Marxist and non-Marxist, nationalist and internationalist, and of course, East German and West German. Between these large divisions however, there is room for nuance and difference. The thinkers under consideration in this dissertation represent alternative orientations to both the past and to German identity that cut across these familiar scholarly demarcations. Löwith, Koselleck, and Voegelin defy categorization as German Germans or Non-German Germans, nationalists or internationalists (though they could certainly be classified as non-Marxists, but for philosophical-historical, rather than simply political, reasons.) They were not concerned directly with questions of German national identity, for their work relativized the philosophical-historical and eschatological-political concepts that gave those questions such valence after 1945. Their thought reveals work done upon the past, not in the service of political or cultural identity, but in the pursuit of fundamental historical reorientation. In this regard, they also complicate narratives of restoration, as they did not seek the reconstruction of a lost past but rather a destabilization of its orthodox conceptualization in

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<sup>20</sup> For a collection of the original texts of the debate, see *Forever in the Shadow of Hitler? Original Documents of the Historikerstreit, The Controversy Concerning the Singularity of the Holocaust*, trans. James Knowlton and Truett Cates (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1993). For current scholarly evaluations of the significance of the *Historikerstreit*, see the recent forum “Holocaust Scholarship and Politics in the Public Sphere: Reexamining the Causes, Consequences, and Controversy of the *Historikerstreit* and the Goldhagen Debate,” in *Central European History* 50 (2017): 375-403, along with Richard J. Evans, *In Hitler’s Shadow: West German Historians and the Attempt to Escape from the Nazi Past* (New York: Pantheon, 1989) and Gerrit Dworok, “*Historikerstreit*” und *Nationswerdung: Ursprünge und Deutung eines bundesrepublikanischen Konflikts* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2015).

<sup>21</sup> Moses, *German Intellectuals*, 230-235.

European thought.<sup>22</sup> Of course, their experiences of the political situation were fundamental to the conception and the trajectory of their work. But the horizons of significance at which their thought aimed exceeded the ambit of politics contained in debates about mastering the past. Their work reveals that beneath the question of how to respond to and confront the past was a volatile and profound contestation over the very nature of the past—its movement, its meaning—and the proper orientation of humanity toward it.

This work is consonant with other studies of postwar German recovery that highlight modes and methods of addressing the past buried beneath conventional narratives. Jennifer Kapczynski's examination of discourses of illness and the German body, for instance, charts a continuity between Third Reich and postwar uses of sickness as a political analogy, in which Nazi evocations of the nation as healthy body were replaced with construals of a collective illness afflicting Germany.<sup>23</sup> Kapczynski shows that there were multiple discourses of guilt and responsibility in the postwar period, revealing not a break with the past but "a phase of intellectual and semantic continuities."<sup>24</sup> Likewise, Anna Parkinson has argued for an appreciation of the "intense psychic energy," rather than coldness and distance, that characterized the emotional landscape in postwar Germany, and how emotional frameworks structured ideas about the past.<sup>25</sup> Although my work does not address issues of emotions or political metaphors per se, these scholars' emphasis on the variety of work done upon the past by postwar Germans is an essential cornerstone for studies of postwar heterodoxy, especially so in texts produced in direct response to the crisis of history that German thinkers faced.

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<sup>22</sup> For an adept account of political memory and restoration, see Herf, *Divided Memory*.

<sup>23</sup> Jennifer M. Kapczynski, *The German Patient: Crisis and Recovery in Postwar Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>25</sup> Anna M. Parkinson, *An Emotional State: The Politics of Emotion in Postwar West German Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 5.

This dissertation aims to advance these scholars' appreciation of the multiple, divergent potentialities present in postwar German confrontations with the past. Beneath (and before) dominant political narratives and the establishment of Germany as a model penitent nation, German thinkers' engagement with the past created a range of philosophical and historical endeavors whose radicality and experimentality is often elided. The history of the crisis of history in postwar Germany is thus not exhausted by debates about memorialization and generational guilt. Rather, it is a history of possibility: successive moments in which the fundamental structure and meaning of European conceptions of history were put into question and made contingent.

### **// Trauma Beyond Orthodoxy**

Trauma is everywhere in the twenty-first century. As an experience, a diagnosis, a concept, and a buzzword, we find it in a panoply of personalized, collectivized, and mediatized forms. Despite its current omnipresence, trauma has a distinct (and quite well-tread) conceptual-historical genealogy, a very brief overview of which is given here.<sup>26</sup> A term originally referring to bodily injury, trauma was modified and redeployed in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries to identify psychological affliction. After its initial use to describe cases of survivors of train accidents, trauma remained a somewhat secondary psychological phenomenon, tied up in medical discourses from concerns about shell shock in the world wars to the diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder in many Vietnam veterans. However, with widespread outrage and media attention surrounding the Vietnam war, the plight of many veterans, and the official medical codification of post-traumatic stress disorder in the third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 1980, trauma became a dominant cultural concept. The prevalence of trauma

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<sup>26</sup> For a much fuller treatment, see Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

has been insightfully identified as a symptom of the overwhelming concern with catastrophe and violence in the West.<sup>27</sup>

As such, trauma as a signifier has long since outstripped its clinical meaning. The specific model of post-traumatic stress disorder defined by American medical authorities is no longer able to contain the surfeit of meaning that the concept of trauma emits. With this proliferation of significations, scholarly treatments of trauma have also multiplied, producing various works that have productively shaped my analysis. Rather than an exhaustive historiography of scholarship on trauma, what follows is an explication of some particular trajectories that are essential to the goals of this dissertation.

The mutual prominence of trauma and psychoanalytic theory is in need of address here. The now-familiar concepts orbiting trauma in popular and scholarly discourses—repression, latency, “working through”—emerged out of psychoanalytic theory in the first half of the twentieth century. Psychoanalysis saw trauma as the disturbance of a stable psyche leading to the subsumption of the event, its distortion in memory, and its recurrent resurfacing—its belated “acting out” through the reexperience of trauma that has not been treated. Psychoanalysis then arrives as a process of “working through”: enabling the patient to recover the memory of the event, absorb its traumatic effects, and reintegrate and renarrate it into their sense of self. As intimated above in this introduction, this dissertation aims to undermine the psychoanalytic conception of trauma and its hegemony over scholarly and lay discourse. Throughout, I seek to avoid the clinical and prescriptive language embedded within psychoanalytic concepts such as “working through.” By decentering the normative—in the sense of both universalization and medicalization—

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<sup>27</sup> Paul Lerner and Mark S. Micale, eds., *Traumatic Pasts: History, Psychiatry, and Trauma in the Modern Age, 1870-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 3.

psychoanalytic story of how trauma works and how it is worked upon, I attempt to elucidate the alternative trajectories of trauma embodied in the work of postprogressive historical thinkers.

This project joins several currents of recent work in its attempt to explore non-normative and non-clinical expressions of trauma. Of particular import here is the recent theoretical work of the sociologist Jeffrey Alexander. Moving beyond both materialist and individualist models, Alexander stresses the cultural constructedness of any trauma narrative and the centrality of a figured “collective” that has been wounded and that the process of addressing the trauma seeks to work upon.<sup>28</sup> The collectivization of trauma occurs, in Alexander’s understanding, when social identity is made precarious and must be reimagined.<sup>29</sup> In turn, it creates different paths for the modification of trauma. Whereas individuals react in psychological terms—repression, denial, etc.—collectives engage in “symbolic construction and framing,” making meanings that move the collective forward from trauma.<sup>30</sup>

The full implications and range of Alexander’s social theory of trauma are beyond the historical scope of this dissertation. However, from his move to collective trauma, we can glean a significant theoretical quadrant that allows for the navigation of the complicated presence of trauma in postprogressive historical thinking. Alexander writes that “collective traumas are reflections of neither individual suffering nor actual events, but symbolic renderings that reconstruct and imagine them. Rather than descriptions of what is, they are arguments about what must have been and what should be.”<sup>31</sup> While we may quibble over the precise theoretical status of a “reflection”—how could representations of trauma not be reflections, however distorted, of events experienced?—the argumentative nature of collective traumas, their reconstructive and

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<sup>28</sup> Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), 2.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-3.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

imaginative work, illuminate the projects embodied in the work of postprogressive theorists. What the historical-critical texts of Löwith, Voegelin, and Koselleck confess, when interpreted through a hermeneutics oriented around trauma, is an attempt to collectivize, to take the individual event and read it as a shared catastrophe. They embody efforts to make the philosophy of history, Gnosticism, and historical consciousness into collective traumas, shared by all who have individually experienced the hardships and suffering of the Second World War. They confirm, in their messy and complicated grappling with trauma, Alexander's assertion that trauma is not an over-determinative entity; rather, its significance is always human made. It is this project of making trauma—and being made by it—that the texts under consideration in this dissertation participate in.

A further trajectory of this dissertation that is arced by scholarship on trauma—one that is most foundational for my work—is the expansion of trauma beyond clinically-defined boundaries. Following the call of Paul Lerner and Mark Micale, my work destabilizes the construction of a universal model of trauma.<sup>32</sup> My interpretations of Löwith, Koselleck, and Voegelin reveal expressions of trauma and modes of response that, in some crucial ways, diverge from normative clinical expectations. The most dominant of these expectations is diagnostic: the imposition of a model of recovery centered around “working through” trauma and reintegrating a fractured memory/narrative/self. The hegemony of this model is testified to by its reproduction not only in medical and popular discourses surrounding trauma, but in critical scholarship as well. Dominick LaCapra, for instance, in his impressive theoretical work on trauma, remains tied to a conceptual opposition between acting out and working through, despite his avowed interest in destabilizing

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<sup>32</sup> See the editors' introduction, Lerner and Micale, *Traumatic Pasts*, 25.

binary thinking.<sup>33</sup> Even his demarcation of narratives that construe trauma as absence from narratives that institute trauma as loss—the former write trauma as a metaphysical condition, the latter as historical—while useful for mapping the horizons of significance of various responses to trauma, still operates on a normatively-defined spectrum in which textual treatments of trauma are measured by their success in articulating the pastness of the event experienced and reintegrating the fractured psyche.<sup>34</sup> Such a limited field does not account for understandings of trauma in which the traumatic process itself is ongoing—for example, historical consciousness as metahistorical catastrophe in Löwith’s thought, or postwar Germans’ failure to “master the present” for Voegelin, or Koselleck’s identification of the persistence of crisis. “Working through” is insufficient as a category precisely because the linearity of past trauma leading to future reintegration is delegitimized, i.e. revealed to be dependent upon a false eschatology/metastasis/politics.

My work seeks to integrate criticism that calls attention to experiences and expression of trauma that surpass medically-recognized limits.<sup>35</sup> In recent years, such work has cohered around the emerging field of scholarship identified as critical trauma studies. Across multiple disciplines, different scholars have worked to uncover the cultural making of trauma and its imbrication in various strata of power. Following Monica Casper and Eric Wertheimer, my work in this dissertation attempts to hold in focus the tensions between the bodily and the cultural presences of trauma.<sup>36</sup> Although they were producers of difficult, dense, and often abstract treatises, Löwith,

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<sup>33</sup> Among many of his works on trauma, see in particular Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

<sup>34</sup> LaCapra acknowledges that “full ego identity,” i.e. full reintegration, may well be impossible. Yet, his treatment of the problem still reproduces a scale of success based on the level of “working through” demonstrated by any given narrative of trauma. *Ibid.*, 21-22.

<sup>35</sup> See the introduction in Lerner and Micalo, eds., *Traumatic Pasts*, 20. See also Monica J. Casper and Eric Wertheimer, eds., *Critical Trauma Studies: Understanding Violence, Conflict, and Memory in Everyday Life* (New York: NYU Press, 2016), 2, and Peter Leese and Jason Crouthamel, eds., *Traumatic Memories of the Second World War and After* (Palgrave: 2016), 2-3.

<sup>36</sup> Casper and Wertheimer, *Critical Trauma Studies*, 3.

Voegelin, and Koselleck each had physical experiences of extreme events. Löwith's physical displacement from Marburg, to Rome, to Sendai, to the United States; Voegelin's evasion of the Gestapo and escape across the Swiss border; Koselleck's deprivation and physical abuse at the hands of his captors in Karaganda; all of these experiences attest to the indelible bodily dimension of their engagement with the crisis of history. This dissertation thus takes the physiological aspect of trauma as a recurrent reference point that, while receiving less interpretive attention than philosophical texts, continuously grounds thought in bodily experience. These experiences did not have a constant, even effect, however. Their expression and treatment—indeed, their modification—through the intellection of these thinkers gives the presence of the body in their texts a variegated valence: sometimes immanent and intense, sometimes distant, sometimes embraced, sometimes erased. What the attention to theoretical treatments of trauma enables is precisely the identification and interpretation of this changing valence, of illuminating the contingent embodiment of historical crisis in the thought of these intellectuals.

In this respect, my work also contributes to engagements with trauma that call into question not only the normative clinical conception of trauma, but also the subject-patient model that discourse constructs. As Maurice Stevens has compellingly argued, trauma involves the “falling apart and coming together” of worlds and selves.<sup>37</sup> Congruent with a hermeneutics of suspicion that deemphasizes authorial intent, such an orientation allows for a recognition of the fracturing effects of trauma and its destabilization of various regimes of meaning. What falls apart in the work of Löwith, Koselleck, and Voegelin is the progressive understanding of history that promises fulfillment in a secular eschaton. This constitutes the spiritual dimension of the trauma they endured; not the falling apart of this worldview itself, but the catastrophic effects of its

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<sup>37</sup> Maurice E. Stevens, “Trauma Is as Trauma Does: The Politics of Affect in Catastrophic Times,” in Casper and Wertheimer, eds., *Critical Trauma Studies*, 23-24.



disintegration, is the wound inflicted. What comes together in their expressions of trauma are polyvalent, multiply-refracted historical worlds built in opposition to the hegemony of the philosophy of history. In Löwith's return to the cosmos, in Koselleck's rehabilitation of plurality, and in Voegelin's restoration of order, conceptions of history itself become articulated in language that bears the marks of the catastrophic falling apart of progressive histories, a catastrophe which for each of them did not end with the close of the Second World War, but continued its dominance and destructiveness into the postwar period. Building from Stevens' discussion of the belatedness of traumatic signifiers—the way in which marks of trauma appear after the fact, becoming visible only retroactively—this lingering presence of trauma as a linguistic cipher is taken in my work as the residual, unifying element—the mortar, the adhesive system, the cosmic microwave background—imparting force and meaning to the texts under consideration.<sup>38</sup>

In the case of postwar German postprogressive historical theorists, what trauma allows—why it is extrapolated upon here as an interpretive category rather than other experiential-evaluative rubrics, such as reaction, regret, political loss, defeat, and humiliation—is an understanding of the ramification of the extreme event across the divides of individual/collective, material/spiritual, synchronic/diachronic, and bodily/intellectual. Trauma's potency across temporal positions—the disruption of narrative that constitutes its core as a psychological event—is precisely its utility as a category of historical and textual analysis. The metaphors of seeping, adhesion, and coagulation that I have employed throughout this dissertation are chosen in the

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 26. The role of trauma in the broader context of postwar history has received increased attention from historians, literary scholars, and cultural critics. For some examples, see Anne Fuchs, *After the Dresden Bombing: Pathways of Memory, 1945 to the Present* (New York: Palgrave, 2012), Richard Langston, *Visions of Violence: German Avant-Gardes After Fascism* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2008), Gabriele Schwab, *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), Susanne Veas-Gulani, *Trauma and Guilt: Literature of Wartime Bombing in Germany* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2003), Elisabeth Bronfen, Birgit R. Erdle, and Sigrid Weigel, eds., *Trauma. Zwischen Psychoanalyse und kulturellem Deutungsmuster* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1999), Micha Brumlik, "Deutschland – eine traumatische Kultur," in Naumann, ed., *Nachkrieg in Deutschland*, 409-418, and the aforementioned volume from Crouthamel and Leese.

attempt to capture this motility. The recognition of the futural effectivity of trauma thus enables a unique interpretive position. It opens up the possibility of comprehending the multiplicity of pasts in the past, of understanding how the concerns of a given present are embodied and expressed in a plurality of alternative histories that work to destabilize and radically reorient the contemporary. Thus, it allows us to see, in ways that other hermeneutic lenses do not, the contingency of historical temporalities as they are contested and restructured by intellectual work.

### **// Chapter Overview**

This dissertation is organized into two stages. Part I, labeled “Aftermath” and containing Chapters One, Two, and Three, examines the responses of post-progressive thinkers to the historical catastrophes interlinked through their experiences of the Second World War. The texts here comprise projects of analysis and diagnosis. Thus, they are largely negative in their criticism, aimed at uncovering what has gone wrong. Part II, labeled “Alternatives” and containing Chapters Four, Five, and Six, seeks to uncover the positive correlates to the negative criticism analyzed in Part I. The texts interpreted here function to create alternative historical orientations that will avoid the intellectual and spiritual errors which lead to world-historical suffering in the twentieth century. They are thus prescriptive and constructive, aimed at securing alternative historical futures.

The history of the confrontation with philosophy of history by post-progressive thinkers is taken up in Chapter One with a reading of Karl Löwith’s *Meaning in History* and the various texts produced during his exile. Reading his criticism of the philosophy of history as secularized Christian eschatology alongside his narration of his persecution at the hands of National Socialism and his encounters with Japanese spirituality, it argues that Löwith’s anti-eschatological scholarship constituted an attempt to delegitimize the bifurcation of his assimilated identity into

incommensurable spheres of Jewishness and Germanness. Löwith's insistence on the wholeness of his identity and its stability through years of exile and turmoil along with his attack upon narratives of progress and historical meaning reveal the entwinement of trauma and his critical historical work.

Chapter Two traces the diagnostic work of Eric Voegelin through a reading of his works on Gnosticism. Joining manuscript material documenting his emotional responses to the *Anschluss* and his flight from Austria to his published excoriations of modern political religions, it argues that his attempt to delegitimize Gnosticism as an historical-epistemological paradigm entailed the assumption of the position of the therapist/surgeon vis-à-vis the social patient. Thus, his criticism of Gnosticism was both constituted by and evocative of an encounter with trauma that was expressed through a medical and bodily metaphors that undergirded his critical project.

Chapter Three investigates the permutations of trauma in Reinhart Koselleck's famous dissertation/first book *Critique and Crisis* and links it to his later reflections on the mnemonic temporality of the Second World War. Connecting his condemnation of presumptuous utopian enlighteners with his insistence on the suspension of historical judgment, this chapter reveals their shared foundation in a geological metaphors of conjuring and eruption that ties his historical work to problems of trauma. Furthermore, by examining his explicit identification of the crisis of the eighteenth century with the crisis of the twentieth, it argues that his delegitimization of Enlightenment utopia is indelibly a delegitimization of contemporary projects of perfection and historical fulfilment.

Part II shifts analysis to the positive historical visions embodied by postprogressive thinkers. Chapter Four traces Eric Voegelin's evocation of order as a historical fulcrum and interprets it in light of his decrying of the continuity between the Nazi and postwar eras in

Germany. It argues that his work in *Order and History* functions as an effort to institute a superhistorical conception of order as the organizing principle of human history and historical thought. The chapter, in turn, reads this resuscitation of order as a project run through with the effects of trauma, as order works in Voegelin's texts to make trauma ineffective by constructing an unalterable and ordered historical fundament.

Continuing this theme of prescription, Chapter Five undertakes a deep reading of Karl Löwith's postwar essays, in particular those written after his return to Heidelberg in 1952. From his critiques of historical consciousness and his lauding of ancient Greek wisdom, this chapter argues that across his diffuse essays Löwith constructed a coherent cosmic view of history that sought to decenter human suffering and to drain historical events of their significance. In turn, this chapter argues that this decentering—which involves a radical historical positionality that reads the temporality of all historical events as proof of their ultimate meaninglessness—is powered by trauma, and reveals Löwith's vision of a historical world in which the eternal rather than the ephemeral is given meaning.

Chapter Six examines Koselleck's essays of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s to argue that his critique of history in the singular represents a further response to trauma. The concept of histories in the plural that he championed and sought to recover works to make possible trajectories of historical meaning that undermine the eschatological projections of the philosophy of history and its expectation of progress. Again, I work to show that this project is intertwined with the question of the Nazi past, as the articulation of possible histories is at once an appeal to possible futures, thus escaping the all-encompassing determination of historical eschatology and its concomitant political violence.

Following these body chapters, I offer a conclusion investigating the historiographical and theoretical consequences of the study of trauma in intellectual history.

## Chapter 1 // Exile and Eschatology in Löwith's Critique of the Philosophy of History

### // Introduction

On January 9<sup>th</sup>, 1959, the German philosopher Karl Löwith addressed the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences on the occasion of his admittance with a speech entitled “Curriculum Vitae.” At once a piece of autobiography, contemporary history, and philosophical criticism, the speech represents Löwith's appraisal of his life as a thinker from his student days before the First World War to his acceptance of a professorship at the University of Heidelberg in 1952. Describing his departure from the New School for Social Research, where he had held a chair since 1949, Löwith writes:

After eighteen years' absence (1952) I returned to Germany, where I found the conditions at the university oddly unchanged, despite everything that had happened in the interim. It became clear to me only in retrospect how little this emigration to foreign countries with different ways of thinking, how little historical destinies in general, are able to change the character of an adult person, and even that of a nation. It is true that one learns many additional things and can no longer look at what is left of the old Europe with the same eyes, as if one had never been away from it, but one does not become another person; nor does one simply stay the same person – one becomes what one is and can be within one's limits.<sup>1</sup>

This passage is remarkable in and of itself, but when placed within the context of Löwith's life and thought—marked by imprisonment, persecution, and exile—it bristles with significance. The image conveyed here is one of individual identity maintained through the catastrophes of the twentieth century, through world war and genocide, through destruction and political partition, and through an exile that spanned the world.

Löwith was no stranger to world-historical events. His life was deeply marked by the upheavals that would define the early twentieth century. Löwith was born in 1897 in Munich,

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<sup>1</sup> Löwith, “Curriculum Vitae,” in *My Life in Germany Before and After 1933*, trans. Elizabeth King (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 162. All quotations come from King's translation unless otherwise noted.

where his father was an established painter. His comfortable bourgeois upbringing generated a desire for action and danger, which led the young Löwith to view the First World War as an opportunity. He volunteered in October 1914, joining the Bavarian Alpine Corps. By Christmas of that year, he had been placed on the Western Front near Peronne as a member of a reserve battalion. After Italy's declaration of war on Austria in 1915, he was transferred to the German Alpine Corps. On a patrol in the Alps to capture prisoners, Löwith himself was wounded and taken captive by Italian troops. He was treated for two months at a field hospital, and eventually interred in a prisoner of war camp in a fortress at Finalmarina overlooking the Ligurian Sea. Despite the hardships of imprisonment, his time as a captive instilled in Löwith an admiration for Italy and its people, who maintained "an appreciation of human weakness" which, in Löwith's estimation, was sorely lacking in Germany.<sup>2</sup> He returned home in 1917, was discharged and awarded a decoration and a monthly allowance for his being wounded and his war service. These war accolades would later offer Löwith temporary protection, as Jews who served at the front in the First World War were exempted from expulsion from the civil service, until the Nuremberg Race Laws abolished this exemption in 1935.

Löwith's understanding of the significance of the war was not unusual among his generation. In his memoir *My Life in Germany* written in the late 1930s, he describes how the "full extent of the break" was first occluded by exhaustion, but this statement is preceded by the claim that most of his school friends had died.<sup>3</sup> The emerging consciousness of this break between the world before the war and the world after was acknowledged by the adult Löwith as a fault line between generations: the sons who had survived the calamity of the front could not share their

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<sup>2</sup> Löwith, *My Life in Germany*, 8.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-15.

fathers' belief in "continuity."<sup>4</sup> Löwith characterizes the outlook of the young men of his generation through language of disillusionment and difficulty: "Because before us lay not a blossoming spring but a night of impenetrable darkness, and it was therefore pointless to wait for prophets to tell us what we should be doing in our disenchanting world."<sup>5</sup>

Here, Löwith's recollection of the intellectual and spiritual challenge facing Germans after the First World War signals the concerns that drove his work in the 1930s and 1940s, and prefigures the narrative contours of his magnum opus, *Meaning in History*.<sup>6</sup> The stress on the darkness of the situation reveals the emptiness of the optimism that had encouraged the war. This optimism, exemplified by Wilhelm II's bold promise in 1914 that German troops would return victorious before the leaves fell from the trees, is attached by Löwith not only to his own father, who disapproved of his son's "indifference" to the war after his return, but to fathers in general.<sup>7</sup> Much of Löwith's philosophical work was devoted to tracing, diagnosing, and combating the theological and philosophical sources of this optimism. The impatience with any "prophets" who would claim to show the way anticipated Löwith's later bracing critiques of the philosophy of history, as we shall see below. And the identification of the world as "disenchanted" stands as a signpost prefiguring Löwith's corrective to the philosophy of history.

After his return from captivity in 1917, Löwith soon began his university studies in philosophy and biology in Munich and Freiburg, dual interests that decisively shaped his interest

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 17. This language of disenchantment echoes that of one of Löwith's great intellectual influences, Max Weber, in the conclusion of "Politics as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber*, ed. and trans. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948).

<sup>6</sup> The figuration of the present as a nadir from which the past is visible in its destructiveness is characteristic of *Meaning in History*.

<sup>7</sup> Löwith, *My Life in Germany*, 15, 18.



in nature and history.<sup>8</sup> In Freiburg, he studied under Edmund Husserl, as well as Husserl's young assistant, Martin Heidegger. Löwith's description of his encounter with Heidegger resonates with other recollections of the controversial figure. Partly "militant and preacher," Heidegger drew his power and his popularity from "thematic indeterminacy and the sheer appeal of his philosophical will, his intellectual intensity and his concentration on 'the one thing that mattered.'"<sup>9</sup> The nuances of Löwith's relationship to Heidegger and the tortured contours of its development over time—particularly after Heidegger's embrace of National Socialism—are beyond the scope of this chapter.<sup>10</sup> However, it is impossible not to hear, in Löwith's characterization of Heidegger's will to "sweep away" the ruins of European thought, echoes of Löwith's own effort to delegitimize European philosophy of history, which constitutes the bulk of our analysis below.

Löwith received his doctorate in 1923 under the supervision of the phenomenologist Moritz Geiger in Munich, and later completed his *Habilitation*—a second thesis necessary for a professorship—in 1928 under Heidegger in Marburg. There, he worked as a lecturer until his dismissal on racial grounds in 1933. Löwith saw this ostracization at the time as a closure of possibilities not only in Marburg, but, as he described in a letter to Leo Strauss, in Germany as a whole.<sup>11</sup> In 1934, he emigrated to Rome with the help of a fellowship from the Rockefeller

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<sup>8</sup> Löwith credits the desire to study philosophy and biology simultaneously to his readings of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, as well as to the "less reflective science of living things," a statement which provides some clue to his eventual choice to become a philosopher rather than a biologist. See Löwith, "Curriculum Vitae," 157.

<sup>9</sup> Löwith, *My Life in Germany*, 30. For a similar description of Heidegger's appeal and charisma, see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Apprenticeships*. PG#.

<sup>10</sup> Löwith's major philosophical treatment of his teacher came in *Heidegger: Denker in dürftiger Zeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 1953). This book was later reprinted in Löwith's *Sämtliche Schriften*, vol. 8 (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 1984), 124-234. For more sustained examinations of this relationship, see Richard Wolin, *Heidegger's Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, Hans Jonas, and Herbert Marcuse* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Yotam Hotam, "Overcoming the Mentor: Heidegger's Present and the Presence of Heidegger in Karl Löwith's and Hans Jonas' Postwar Thought," in *History of European Ideas* 35, no. 2 (2009): 253-264. See also Wolin's introduction to Löwith's *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism*, ed. Richard Wolin, trans. Gary Steiner (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 1-26.

<sup>11</sup> Karl Löwith to Leo Strauss, 23 February 1935, trans. George Elliott Tucker, in *Independent Journal of Philosophy* 5/6 (1988): 178.

Foundation. As Liliane Weissberg has noted, Löwith was not particularly keen to emigrate, and only did so once his funding was secured and the protection of his veteran status had been eroded.<sup>12</sup> This hesitation was tied intimately to Löwith's identity and the bifurcation of that identity inflicted by National Socialism. Löwith's father had converted to Protestant Christianity, and Löwith himself had been baptized, and even married in a Protestant church. His self-understanding was that of full assimilation. In a telling passage from his memoir, Löwith writes with a sense of relief that his father died before 1933, and thus was able to receive the honor of burial in a distinguished artists' cemetery in Munich. His father, whom he sketches as "a German lock, stock and barrel, and even a Bavarian," represents for Löwith the successful dream of assimilation: Moravian born and of humble origins, he found prestige and recognition in Munich and was a full participation in elite cultural life.<sup>13</sup>

Further insight into Löwith's relationship to his embattled identity can be gleaned from his description of the exilic Jewish community in Rome. In the same letter to Leo Strauss quoted above, Löwith wrote that, "for even such an 'assimilated' Jew as I cannot fail to appreciate the incisiveness and the seriousness of the German Jewish problem – but neither do I sympathize with the utterly embittered émigrés, whose number here by the way is very small. Most of them don't understand what is or is not taking place in Germany, because they think in old-fashioned moral categories instead of in philosophical-historical ones."<sup>14</sup> Here, Löwith's ideal of assimilation collides with the injustice of his exile. The castigation for the failure to see the philosophical-historical sources of the problem foreshadows Löwith's relentless critique of the philosophy of history and his tracing of the catastrophes of the twentieth century to their source in secularized

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<sup>12</sup> Liliane Weissberg, "East and West: Karl Löwith's Routes of Exile," in Horch, Mittelmann, and Neuberger, eds., *Exilerfahrung und Konstruktionen von Identität, 1933 bis 1945* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 177.

<sup>13</sup> Löwith, *My Life in Germany*, 69.

<sup>14</sup> Karl Löwith to Leo Strauss, 23 February 1935, op. cit., 179.

eschatology. Further, the reality of the forced unjust separation of Jewishness and Germanness is acknowledged by Löwith, but its consequences resisted through his self-separation. Writing five years later in 1940, Löwith wrote that exile, rather than fostering solidarity, heightened the differentiation of “personal differences.” He continued: “Thus, in Rome we preferred the company of those Jews and half-Jews, who like ourselves, perceived themselves to be Germans, and if possible we avoided those all too Jewish Jews who together formed a kind of ghetto.”<sup>15</sup> The marker “all too Jewish” reveals the assimilated identity in crisis: the trauma of expulsion from the German university is reinforced by the presence of unassimilated Jews. Weissberg’s argument that Löwith’s understanding of the relationship between Germanness and Jewishness was one of unidirectional movement toward assimilation can thus be furthered by an interpretation of the obstruction of that assimilation as a moment of trauma.<sup>16</sup> The bifurcation of assimilated identity moves from historical moment to historical condition, only understandable through philosophical-historical criticism. The separation of identities suffered at the hands of the Third Reich was thus significantly generative of Löwith’s intellectual work. The investigation of secularization that he undertook in *Meaning and History* emerged out of an indelibly bodily experience of exile, expressed by Löwith in spatial terms: as National Socialism drove a spatial wedge between Löwith and Germanness, Löwith responded with a wedge between his assimilated identity and those who were “all too Jewish.”

Löwith’s time in Italy was limited. He lobbied and networked extensively in search of a permanent position, with possibilities at the University of North Carolina and Istanbul falling through. In June 1936, however, he received an offer from the Imperial University in Sendai,

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<sup>15</sup> Löwith, *My Life in Germany*, 95.

<sup>16</sup> Weissberg, “East and West,” 173.

Japan, which had been negotiated a former student.<sup>17</sup> The worsening of the situation in Italy was exemplified by the efforts of the German embassy and the German Cultural Institute to prevent Löwith's appointment in Japan. In October of 1936, after a final visit to Germany and Switzerland, Löwith and his wife Ada began the trip to Japan aboard an ocean liner. Many of his experiences during this trip—as well as his later trip from Japan to the United States—were recorded and described by Löwith in his travel journals.<sup>18</sup> A thorough analysis of these texts is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, some moments are germane to our interpretation. As Liliane Weissberg observes, despite Löwith's attested affinity for Italy and Italian humanity, his bitter goodbyes are aimed not at Italy, but at Germany.<sup>19</sup> In the entry for October 11<sup>th</sup>, after recounting the appearance of a newspaper report on a speech given by the jurist Carl Schmitt, of whom Löwith had written quite critically under a pseudonym, Löwith exclaimed:

What has now come to power in Germany under the hegemony of the philistine petty bourgeois is not political *being*, but non-being: unprincipled subservience, which is dressed up and morally adorned as a “German peculiarity,” as Germanic “character” and as “heroism” (which is identical with a lack of civic courage.)<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> As Weissberg notes importantly, Löwith's memoir obscures the amount of maneuvering and networking he did to find an appointment, but rather frames it as a “happy accident.” See *ibid.*, 177-178.

<sup>18</sup> The manuscripts of these travel diaries are held in the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach, A: Löwith, and many were included in the published volume. See Karl Löwith, *Reisetagebuch 1936 und 1941. Von Rom nach Sendai. Von Japan nach Amerika*, eds., Klaus Stichweh and Ulrich von Bülow (Marbach am Neckar: Deutsche Schillergesellschaft, 2001). Weissberg gives a useful overview of the tone of the travel diaries as a whole: “Löwith's path into emigration is thus described as an adventure and anthropological research project, and his travel journals written before, during, and after WWII are similar in tone and form. In all of them, Löwith turns a blind eye to the unpleasant facts of his life, everything that may disturb his idea of being guided by »happy accidents.«” Weissberg, “East and West,” 182. Among these “unpleasant facts,” Weissberg notes, was the suicide of Löwith's mother in Munich-Milbertshofen in 1943. This focus away from the unpleasant, one could contend, is part of the larger movement toward delegitimization of the source of the unpleasantness in Löwith's thought.

<sup>19</sup> Weissberg, “East and West,” 179-180.

<sup>20</sup> Löwith, *Reisetagebuch*, 9-10. All translations from this text are mine. Original: “Was jetzt in Deutschland unter der Vorherrschaft der Klein- und Spiessbürger zur Herrschaft kam, ist kein politisches *Wesen*, sondern ein Unwesen: charakterlose Untertänigkeit, die sich als »deutsche Eigenart«, als germanischer »Charakter« und als »Heroismus« (der identisch ist mit Mangel an Zivilcourage) verkleidet und moralisch aufputzt.”

Löwith's ire here is given a face. His ousting from the university and from Germany was not the result of abstract forces or cruel fates. Instead, it was the direct result of the cowardice of people.<sup>21</sup> The National Socialist goal of the purification of the body politic, carried out through the delimitation of German from Jew, resulted not in the blossoming of heroism, but rather in a culture of "subservience" (*Untertänigkeit*). It is within this nexus that Löwith's later ambivalence about the concept of a homeland is to be understood.<sup>22</sup> It also provides a platform for understanding his encounter with Japanese thought and culture. For in Löwith's understanding, where Germans, caught up with history, debased themselves in subservience, the Japanese maintained a more distant, more serene, and more stoic orientation toward historical change and historical destiny.

In December 1936, Löwith arrived in Japan to take up his chair in Sendai, where he remained until his departure for the United States in 1941. This period was deeply formative for his critiques of historical consciousness. Löwith's perception and interpretation of the Japanese way of life are expressed in texts he composed after his establishment in the United States and the commencement of the war with Japan.

Löwith's representations of Japan were oriented around his experience of cultural difference. Despite living among the results of westernization—including his own university position—Löwith perceived the persistent influence of a traditional Japanese worldview. From the minutiae of everyday life and habit to the fundamental contours of psychology, Löwith noted the insurmountable alterity of Japanese life when viewed from a Western perspective. Western philosophical self-understanding, for Löwith, is antithetical to Japanese thought. Where the West orients itself around being, Japan is centered on nothingness; where the fundamental metaphor of

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<sup>21</sup> The petty bourgeoisie and its failures are a recurrent subject of discussion in Löwith's memoir, as noted by Koselleck in his preface.

<sup>22</sup> For more on Löwith's complicated relationship to both the idea of a homeland and Germany as a homeland, see Weissberg, "East and West," 184-190. This topic is also examined at greater length in Chapter 5 of this dissertation.

philosophical understanding in the West is the all-revealing light of the sun, in Japan it is the soft light of the moon.<sup>23</sup> Moonlight reveals the paradoxical interconnection of eternity and momentariness, in which life bursts from nothingness into motion and, after a brief but beautiful flowering, returns to motionlessness. “The whole movement of history is like the motionless movement of a waterfall, which has the clear-cut shape of a ribbon and yet is totally shapeless, changing at every moment and yet always the same.”<sup>24</sup>

In these paradoxes of Japanese spirituality, Löwith found both inspiration and confirmation for his suspicion of Western historical consciousness. In his explanation of the Japanese appreciation for the momentary and the transitory, we can see a foreshadowing of Löwith’s championing of nature against history. Rodolphe Gasché has convincingly argued that from the beginning of his time in Japan, Löwith hoped to rediscover a lost Europe in the Far East.<sup>25</sup> That is, in his effort to escape the historical consciousness which was consuming the West and to rediscover a philosophy centered on nature rather than history, Löwith found sustenance in Japanese philosophy. Exile thus makes possible the recovery of Europe.<sup>26</sup> The philosophical encounter with Japan constituted therefore a practice of exile, and exile a practice of philosophy. The claims of Löwith and others regarding the essential continuity of his philosophical outlook must be ameliorated by an understanding of the formative nature of his experience in Japan. It was only through exile—through an encounter with a radically non-Western philosophical

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<sup>23</sup> Karl Löwith, “The Japanese Mind: A Picture of the Mentality that We Must Understand if We are to Conquer,” in *Sämtliche Schriften*, vol. 2, 561. This essay originally appeared in *Fortune*, December 1943.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 561.

<sup>25</sup> Rodolphe Gasché, “On An Eastward Trajectory Toward Europe: Karl Löwith’s Exiles,” in Eckart Goebel and Sigrid Weigel, eds., “Escape to Life” *German Intellectuals in New York: A Compendium on Exile after 1933* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2012) 314, 317-319.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 321. Gasché illuminates the situation well: “Only in exile, in a thoroughly foreign land, is he capable of recovering a meaning of Greece, and hence of Europe, that had not dawned on him in Europe, and which, because of the predominance of the sciences and of historicism (philosophy of history), could not be experienced there at all.”

orientation—that Löwith’s proposed solution to the disaster of historical consciousness became available to him.

The excitement and freshness of a sea voyage that included stops in Singapore, Hong Kong, and Kobe was soon replaced by a feeling of isolation. Löwith’s experiences in Japan were marked by an ever-present alterity, a distance likely extenuated by the concentration of most German exiles in Tokyo, as well as by the fact that his position allowed him to teach in German to a small cohort of German-speaking Japanese students. But even other Germans were not always friendly, as National Socialism had its representatives in Japan as well. This sense of isolation and unease was increased during the year 1938, which held two events that continued to shift Löwith’s exile further east and his orientation further away from historical consciousness. The passages in *My Life in Germany* devoted to these events and their consequences reveal the inseparability of the residues of trauma and the question of a homeland. The first was the *Anschluss*, the annexation of Austria in March 1938 by the Third Reich. Löwith’s father, born in Drosau in Bohemia, had served as a connection for Löwith to Austria, and his mother had spent the winter of 1937-1938 in Vienna. After Austria’s concession to the Third Reich, however, Löwith felt the pain of severance. Writing in his memoir in 1940, in a section titled “German Events between 1936 and 1939,” he described the depth of this loss: “With the rape of Austria I have lost my homeland a second time, and the idea that at least there we might in the future be able to feel at home again has now gone forever.”<sup>27</sup> The loss of Germany and German cultural identity is reinforced and finalized by the capitulation of an Austria imagined as a last, hopeful reserve of German culture. The possibility of Germanness for Löwith is foreclosed, for in swallowing Austria the Third Reich had swallowed German identity as well. This received a cruel, material signification for Löwith, as in 1938 the Consulate

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<sup>27</sup> Löwith, *My Life in Germany*, 133.

stamped a “J” on his passport and made his first name “Israel,” in order to further set him from Germans.<sup>28</sup> The eclipse of German identity and the eclipse of the possibility of a homeland are thus one and the same in Löwith’s text.

After the events of 1938, perhaps most importantly the so-called *Kristallnacht*, the SA-led pogrom of 9-10 November in which hundreds of Jews were murdered, thousands incarcerated, and their property looted or destroyed, Löwith described how the mood among exiles in Japan darkened, with many now waiting to emigrate to the United States.<sup>29</sup> Löwith too began the process of moving eastward. Essential to Löwith’s third stage of exile were two theologians: Paul Tillich, who had emigrated to the United States after his dismissal from the University of Frankfurt in 1933, and Reinhold Niebuhr. It was also at this time that Löwith wrote his essay for the memoir prize, which also served as an opportunity to reach an American audience and interact with American scholars, as Weissberg notes.<sup>30</sup> Tillich and Niebuhr succeeded in obtaining for Löwith a position at the Hartford Theological Seminary, which he took up in 1941, just 6 months before the attack on Pearl Harbor. It was here, where he taught from 1941 to 1949, that Löwith would conceive of and lay the groundwork for the project that would culminate in his famous work *Meaning in History*, which remains the most-discussed and most-influential piece in his oeuvre. Contracted to teach the early Church fathers, Löwith became intimate with the contours of sacred history. His exposure to the progress-oriented Protestantism that was dominant at the institution was also formative, as the link between religious expectation and secular hope in history became central to Löwith’s thought.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>30</sup> Weissberg, “East and West,” 167.

<sup>31</sup> Löwith, *My Life in Germany*, 164-165.



With this abbreviated yet tumultuous biography in mind, Löwith's claim to continuity in his life and philosophy, a claim supported by Koselleck and Gadamer, becomes all the more strange. What does it mean to say, as Löwith did in his 1952 speech "Curriculum Vitae," that "one becomes what one is and can be within one's limits," especially when this statement is placed in relief against the litany of catastrophes above? What is the reason for this distancing, for this limiting of the effects "historical destinies"? The answer intersects both text and context. Löwith's remarkable claims to continuity in character, not only for individuals but for nations, is only interpretable within the history of the University of Heidelberg. As Weissberg avers, Löwith's apparent serenity regarding the upheavals of recent history would have been welcomed by his Heidelberg colleagues, as it did not put their activities under the Third Reich at the forefront of significance.<sup>32</sup> Löwith's orientation was therefore also a convenient fit at a university such as Heidelberg, whose faculty as a whole had been extensively coordinated with the National Socialist regime and had been so poorly denazified after the Second World War.

In terms of text, Löwith's distancing of himself from calamity is inseparably linked to his work on the philosophy of history. This investigation, carried out throughout the 1940s, would culminate in the publication in 1949 of *Meaning in History*.

### // Secularization, Progress, Eschatology

The intent of *Meaning in History* was both direct and forceful, an effort to confront "the possibility, or rather the impossibility, of imposing on history a reasoned order or of drawing out the working of God."<sup>33</sup> Löwith took as his target any conception of history which posited a meaningful process at work behind the stream of upheavals and catastrophes that constitutes our

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<sup>32</sup> Weissberg, "East and West," 169. See also Steven P. Remy, *The Heidelberg Myth: The Nazification and Denazification of a German University* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

<sup>33</sup> Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), v.

past, a motivation which would continue to drive his scholarship until his death. For Löwith, this conception constituted the animating force behind European philosophy of history, which he defined in specific terms in his introduction: “In the following discussion the term ‘philosophy of history’ is used to mean a systematic interpretation of universal history in accordance with a principle by which historical events and successions are unified and directed toward an ultimate meaning.”<sup>34</sup> This formal definition of philosophy of history allowed Löwith to draw together thinkers as diverse as Marx and Burckhardt, Comte and Vico, Voltaire and Bossuet. While this is an impressive feat of cohesion in and of itself, the true incision of *Meaning in History* was its account of the origin of this common philosophical-historical thread. For Löwith, the investment in historical meaning on the part of these thinkers had its roots in biblical eschatology: “taken in this sense, philosophy of history is, however, entirely dependent on theology of history, in particular on the theological concept of history as a history of fulfilment and salvation.”<sup>35</sup>

This narrative, as Löwith freely acknowledges in his introduction, is one of secularization, in which Hebrew and Christian expectation of a fulfilment of history via the eschaton is progressively stripped of its overt religious implications and morphed into a secular belief in progress via the philosophy of history. This argument comprised the famous “secularization thesis” which sparked a sustained controversy in postwar German thought. Löwith’s position in this debate was staked out by his excavation of the theological roots of the philosophy of history. However, the concept of secularization was—and remains—itself contested and unclear. We must ask: what exactly is secularized? What connects modern philosophy of history to the horrors of the twentieth century? For Löwith, the answer lies in philosophy of history’s reliance on eschatology and teleology, an argument which he would restate and maintain throughout his life

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 1.

and later work. Traditionally understood in the theological sense as the study of the “last things”—death, judgment, the final destination of souls—eschatology in traditional Christian thought was defined by the expectation of the end of history and the coming of the Kingdom of God. This expectation of a fulfillment is essential for Löwith: “the very existence of a philosophy of history and its quest for a meaning is due to the history of salvation; it emerged from the faith in an ultimate purpose.”<sup>36</sup> This purpose, furthermore, implies a goal toward which history is impelled: “History, too, is meaningful only by indicating some transcendent purpose beyond the actual facts. But, since history is a movement in time, the purpose is a goal. Single events as such are not meaningful, nor is a mere succession of events. To venture a statement about the meaning of historical events is possible only when their *telos* becomes apparent.”<sup>37</sup>

For Löwith, secularization consists of the transposition of the supernatural and superhistorical eschaton into the realizable goal of human history. Thus the belief in historical progress is a secularization of the Christian belief in the coming Kingdom of God. The precise mechanism of this transposition, however, would prove to be a point of contestation, not only in the philosophical debates of the postwar decades, but in scholarly reconstructions as well.<sup>38</sup> Löwith’s chief critic in this regard was the younger philosopher Hans Blumenberg. Blumenberg,

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 5. In regards to our focus on trauma and a climate of suffering, it is telling that, in arguing on this same page that the meaning of a thing coincides with its purpose, and that this purpose transcends the thing itself, Löwith offers a B-29 as one example.

<sup>38</sup> Although essential for the context it provides, the secularization debate is not the focal point of my dissertation. Listed here are those works which are most useful for the establishment of the terms of the debate. These include Jeffrey Barash, “The Sense of History: On the Political Implications of Karl Löwith’s Concept of Secularization,” in *History and Theory* 37, no. 1 (February, 1998): 69-82; Stephen A. McKnight, “The Legitimacy of the Modern Age: The Löwith-Blumenberg Debate in Light of Recent Scholarship,” in *The Political Science Reviewer* 19 (Spring, 1990): 177-195; Robert M. Wallace, “Progress, Secularization and Modernity: The Löwith-Blumenberg Debate,” in *New German Critique* 22 (Winter, 1981): 63-79; and Joe Paul Kroll, “A Human End to History? Hans Blumenberg, Karl Löwith and Carl Schmitt on Secularization and Modernity” (Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton, 2010). See also the recent reassessment by Sjoerd Griffioen, “Secularization between Faith and Reason: Reinvestigating the Löwith-Blumenberg Debate,” *New German Critique* 136 (February, 2019): 71-101, as well as Peter E. Gordon, “Secularization, Genealogy, and the Legitimacy of the Modern Age: Remarks on the Löwith-Blumenberg Debate,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 80, no. 1 (January, 2019): 147-170.

himself classified as half Jewish by the Nazis and for a period imprisoned in a work camp, first publicly engaged with Löwith's concept of secularization in 1962 at the Seventh German Congress for Philosophy in Münster.<sup>39</sup> Blumenberg offered a critique of the concept of secularization that, in Kroll's words, questioned the notion of "expropriation and deformation of a supposedly authentic core from the outside" and denied the obviousness of the transformation in substance from religious to secular eschatology.<sup>40</sup> In short, Blumenberg raised the question of what precisely was the substance undergoing secularization, especially since Christian eschatology and secular progress are opposed regarding the vector of arrival of the consummation of history: Christianity from the outside, and progress from the inside, an asymmetry which Löwith did not fully resolve in *Meaning in History*.<sup>41</sup> Leaving aside the matter of whether one might argue, as I would, that the translation from transcendence to immanence is exactly the operative center of secularization in Löwith's scheme—a reading inflected by Voegelin—what is pertinent for our analysis is the problem of continuity that Blumenberg's critique brings to light. For if there is no persistent substance upon which the process of secularization acted, then Löwith's deep history and its delegitimization of the philosophy of history are stymied. For Blumenberg, the core of the idea of progress was not eschatology, but rather "self-assertion," a claim which constituted an attempt to defend the legitimacy of modernity from attacks made by Carl Schmitt and others.<sup>42</sup> In the place of "transposition" (*Umsetzung*), in which a substance is maintained throughout secularization, Blumenberg offers "recasting" (*Umbesetzung*).<sup>43</sup> Within this framework, the philosophy of history

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<sup>39</sup> An excellent overview of the congress and its key personalities, which along with Löwith and Blumenberg included Theodor Adorno, Jürgen Habermas, and Eric Voegelin, is found in Kroll, "A Human End to History?" 131-142. Kroll convincingly argues that it was their interaction at this conference, more than the publication of Blumenberg's *Legitimität der Neuzeit*, which drove the engagement between Löwith and Blumenberg.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 137 and Wallace, "Progress, Secularization and Modernity," 68-69.

<sup>41</sup> Wallace, "Progress, Secularization and Modernity," 69-70.

<sup>42</sup> Kroll, "A Human End to History?" 140-143; Wallace, "Progress, Secularization and Modernity," 71.

<sup>43</sup> This summation, as well as the translation of *Umbesetzung* as "recasting," is taken from Kroll, "A Human End to History?" 139.

is not dependent upon the Christian eschaton, but is rather a fully modern, and thus fully legitimate, expression.

Regardless of the consistency or inconsistency, correctness or incorrectness of the positions of the debate established above, the concern for our interpretation is the question of how to account for Löwith's insistence on the paradigm of continuity. I contend that the concept of legitimacy, brought to the debate by Blumenberg, is key, but in a different register than Blumenberg intended. Whereas the question of legitimacy and secularization was read by Blumenberg—along with his exegetes—as a question of modernity against theological absolutism, for Löwith legitimacy is not an overt consideration.<sup>44</sup> Rather, his is a project of delegitimization, not simply as intention, but as effect. Here I disagree with those interpretations—whether they cast Löwith as reactionary, in the case of Habermas, or as a “reluctant modern,” in the case of Kroll—that place modernity at the center of Löwith's project. Löwith was no stranger to the turmoil of the modern period, as we outlined above. However, modernity—itsself a temporal concept irreducibly associated with a break—only attains meaning in Löwith's critique insofar as it is associated with a temporal horizon of expectation that first emerged in ancient Palestine in the form of Jewish messianism and Christianity. That is to say, whether or not Löwith's account of secularization is philosophically correct is secondary to the fact that within his analysis modernity is a second-order question. That Löwith's work cast as illegitimate modernity's self-understanding is an effect of the delegitimization of eschatology, whose political ramifications he and millions of others had suffered extensively. Thus, Löwith's entwinement with a hermeneutic of continuity in the history of European historical thought is not an attack on modernity per se, but is instead a historical

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<sup>44</sup> As Kroll notes in his defense of Löwith against Schmittian and theological appropriations, Löwith was not interested in recovering an authentic Christian view of history, as he took it to be in error as much as modern philosophy of history. See *Ibid.*, 129.

orientation conditioned by trauma and constructed toward that trauma's delegitimization. Its significance lies therefore, not in its power to explain modernity, but for the manner in which its being structured by trauma reveals the stakes of historical thought for postwar German thinkers.

With the contours of the debate over secularization established, we can now turn to tracing the effects of trauma in *Meaning in History*. Using the secularization concept, Löwith brings to light the theological framework that underpins yet is hidden from modern historical consciousness. In order to carry out this revelation, Löwith insists on the necessity of working backwards, from Burckhardt to the Bible:

An adequate approach to history and its interpretation is necessarily regressive for the very reason that history is moving forward, leaving behind the historical foundations of the more recent and contemporary elaborations. The historical consciousness cannot but start with itself... We understand—and misunderstand—ancient authors, but always in the light of contemporary thought, reading the book of history backward from the last to the first page.<sup>45</sup>

This presentist hermeneutic is telling, allowing us our first ingress into understanding how Löwith's thought was conditioned by trauma. In the passage above, the significance of any set of historical events does not inhere in the events themselves; rather, the concerns and difficulties that shape the historian's own time determine their significance in retrospect. Löwith's narrative of secularization, then, is self-consciously built to respond to the crises that had beset Europe in recent years. This connection is cemented in the following words:

The methodical regress from the modern secular interpretations of history to their ancient religious pattern is, last but not least, substantially justified by the realization that we find ourselves more or less at the end of the modern rope. It has worn too thin to give hopeful support. We have learned to wait without hope, for "hope would be hope for the wrong thing."<sup>46</sup> Hence the wholesomeness of remembering in these times of suspense what has been forgotten and of recovering the genuine sources of our sophisticated results... The outstanding element, however, out of which an interpretation of history is, in the last analysis, an attempt

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<sup>45</sup> Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 2.

<sup>46</sup> This quotation, marked but unattributed by Löwith, comes from T.S. Eliot's "Four Quarters."

to understand the meaning of history as the meaning of suffering by historical action.<sup>47</sup>

The intonations here of hopelessness, weariness, and suffering ground the question of the meaning of history in the very real catastrophes of the recent past. The problem is not a mere trifle fussed over in dusty tomes by forgotten pedants, but a crisis emerging out of experience. The question of meaning in history is, for Löwith, a question of our ability to understand suffering historically; and the gravity of this question is attested to by the sufferings of the twentieth century: “in our times crosses have been borne silently by millions of people...”<sup>48</sup> Likewise, the project of recovery identified here is a space in which trauma emerges. “Remembering” the historical genealogy of the philosophy of history provides an opportunity for “wholesomeness.” What has been shattered by philosophical-historical catastrophe can be reexperienced, through the scholarly reconstruction of that catastrophe’s origins, as a unity. This passage reveals the function of *Meaning in History* as a response, meant to work upon the trauma that has overturned both Löwith’s life and the “wholesomeness” he seeks to recover.

Löwith locates the source of this eschatological orientation in the Hebrew, and later Christian, conception of the past as preparation: “in the Hebrew and Christian view of history the past is a promise to the future; consequently, the interpretation of the past becomes a prophecy in reverse, demonstrating the past as a meaningful ‘preparation’ for the future.”<sup>49</sup> This orientation allowed for the understanding of time as oriented toward the future, rather than toward an origin in the past.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, as Löwith contends in a later essay, this orientation has embodied by working historians as well, thus framing their attempts to “determine what happened” within the

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<sup>47</sup> Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 3.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

scheme of expectation and fulfilment.<sup>51</sup> The Christian doctrine of the incarnation furthered this development, separating as it did all of human history into pre- and post-advent.<sup>52</sup> As Löwith concisely argued in another essay, this chronological division remained essential to historical consciousness long after faith in Christ ceased to be a philosophical-historical motivator: “The ‘development’ of the historical world and historical existence, the meaning of which lies in the future, is not the result of a philosophical insight, but the product of a hopeful expectation which referred originally to the Kingdom of God and finally to the Kingdom of Man...The Christian confidence in a coming fulfillment is indeed missing from the modern historical consciousness, but the view of the future as such has remained dominant.”<sup>53</sup>

In Löwith’s telling, what remains of Hebrew and Christian expectation of the future when this process of secularization is complete is the modern, secular belief in progress. This argument, present in *Meaning in History*, would be made forcefully by Löwith in a conference paper titled “The Fate of Progress” (Originally *Das Verhängnis des Fortschritts*).<sup>54</sup> Written for the seventh *Deutscher Kongress für Philosophie*, held in Münster in 1962 and devoted to the theme of progress

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<sup>51</sup> Karl Löwith, “The Quest for the Meaning of History,” in *Nature, History, and Existentialism*, ed. Arnold Levison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966), PGS. All quotations here are from Levison’s translation. Originally appeared as “Vom Sinn der Geschichte,” in *Der Sinn der Geschichte*, ed. Leohnhard Reinisch (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1961), 31-49. It is also reproduced in volume 2 of Löwith’s *Sämtliche Schriften*.

<sup>52</sup> As Löwith notes in the opening of his introduction to his memoir: “the division of European history into ‘before’ and ‘after’ Christ still dominates the calendar in Germany, but no longer the mind.” See “Introduction,” *My Life in Germany*, xix. In Löwith’s own terms, the extension would be that the form of the division remains dominant, but not the content.

<sup>53</sup> Karl Löwith, “Mensch und Geschichte,” in *Gesammelte Abhandlungen. Zur Kritik der geschichtlichen Existenz* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1960), 157. Translations from this text are mine. Original: „Die „Entdeckung“ der geschichtlichen Welt und der geschichtlichen Existenz, deren Sinn in der Zukunft liegt, ist nicht das Ergebnis einer philosophischen Einsicht, sondern das Produkt einer hoffnungsvollen Erwartung, die sich ursprünglich auf das Reich Gottes und schließlich auf das Reich des Menschen bezog...Die christliche Zuversicht auf eine kommende Erfüllung ist zwar dem modernen Geschichtsbewußtsein abhanden gekommen, aber die Sicht auf die Zukunft als solche ist herrschend geblieben.“

<sup>54</sup> This essay was first published in *Die Idee des Fortschritts. Neun Vorträge (der Kieler Universitätstage 1962) über Wege und Grenzen des Fortschrittsglaubens*, ed. Erich Burck (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1963), 17-40. It later appeared in *Die Philosophie und die Frage nach dem Fortschritt*, eds., Helmut Kuhn and Franz Wiedmann (Munich: A. Pustet, 1964), which constituted the edited volume of the contributions to the Münster Congress. It appeared in English as “The Fate of Progress,” in *Nature, History, and Existentialism*, PGS.



(*Fortschritt*), it contains Löwith's concentrated account of the genetic relationship between progress and eschatology.

He begins the essay by delineating progress from development, marking the former as an essentially human trait.<sup>55</sup> This separation between humans and nature is widened by the concept of progress, which Löwith sees as originating in the growing dominion of humans over nature: "progress as a universal fact is not associated with just any science but with one particular one, with modern physical science as it arose in the seventeenth century and which, up to the nineteenth century, was regarded as the *only* science."<sup>56</sup> This drive to gain mastery over nature was originally utopian in character, and coincided with the eclipse of traditional European society: "This acceleration of scientific progress is paralleled by the progressive alteration and dissolution of the old European traditions in religion, morals, politics, and social life."<sup>57</sup> Here then, the process of secularization proceeded in tandem with the decline of influence of the original concepts: as faith in the progress of science increases, so must faith in the providence of God decrease.

But what is the connection between progress and philosophy of history? And what is its relevance amidst a mood of historical despair and fatalism, as exemplified by Bultmann above? This lengthy passage provides the answer:

In regard to this modern revolutionary concept of the history of humanity, it has been said with some justice that history has become for us the most urgent, universal, and serious problem. However, this supremacy of history only apparently contradicts the actual predominance of physical science. History has only become a pressing concern because of the advances of physical science which brought about radical changes in our historical existence. History has become an urgent problem within the last century just because scientific technology, and military technology in particular, have altered human relations at an extremely rapid rate. Modern physical science is a power which changes and destroys tradition; since it never ceases to move forward, it cannot leave things as they are. For us, history is no longer the occurrence of change within a world that has a stable

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 158.

natural order, but everything which, for us, *is the world* is drawn into the historical process. And since history is the opposite of all that is constant, enduring, and eternal, and since, in its modern character, it transforms radically whatever exists, it is impossible to take a firm foothold in history from which to proclaim truths valid for all time.<sup>58</sup>

This passage states powerfully the urgency of these issues for thinkers in the postwar period. The disruptive power of modern science and its unending drive for progress has rendered the historical condition total: the consciousness of a past that prepares the way for and is subsumed and perfected in the future is concretely rooted in the experience of dissolution that shaped the European modernity.<sup>59</sup> History, as a record of change over time, now comes to encompass even the natural world from which it had been separated in antiquity.<sup>60</sup> Thus, humans are confronted with “an uncanny coincidence of fatalism and a will to progress,” forced to come to terms with the fruits of progress and with its devastation, with both advanced mastery over nature and advanced helplessness in the face of history.<sup>61</sup> The most poignant example of this dilemma, as Löwith notes, is the atomic bomb: at once a triumph of our mastery over nature and sign of the inescapability of its consequences. Like Prometheus, we are “*set free and yet imprisoned by our own power.*”<sup>62</sup>

Now that we have examined Löwith’s argument for the affinity between Christian expectation and the secular ideal of progress, we must ask: what are the turning points which drove this development? Who are the thinkers who shaped such a fateful course? The key figure in this transference of eschatology from theology to philosophy of history, whose influence for Löwith is momentous yet hidden, is one Joachim of Fiore. A twelfth-century monk and author apocalyptic

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>59</sup> For a classic, and still powerful account of the expressions of this dialectic of progress and dissolution, see Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin, 1982).

<sup>60</sup> This classical separation of history from nature is covered by Löwith in numerous texts. See *Meaning in History*, 4-5; “The Quest for the Meaning of History,” in *Nature, History, and Existentialism*, 137-139; “Mensch und Geschichte,” in *Gesammelte Abhandlungen*, 153-155.

<sup>61</sup> Löwith, “The Fate of Progress,” 159.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 160.

treatises, Joachim provided the fundamental scheme that would be adopted by later philosophers of history. His function as a philosophical-historical lynchpin was noted by other postwar scholars as well.<sup>63</sup>

Löwith opens his chapter on Joachim in *Meaning in History* with the following passage: “there have always occurred and recurred apocalyptic speculations and expectations of an imminent consummation, but never until Joachim of Floris (1131-1202) have they been elaborated into a consistent system of historico-allegorical interpretation.”<sup>64</sup> Löwith continues: “what matters for the understanding of history is Joachim’s revolutionary attempt to delineate a new scheme of epochs and dispensations by which the traditional scheme of religious progress from the Old to the New Testament became extended and superseded.”<sup>65</sup> In specific terms, this “revolutionary attempt” consisted of reinterpretation of the apocalypse into a tripartite chronology of dispensations corresponding to the doctrine of the trinity. The first dispensation, the Age of the Father, was the era of the Mosaic Law, beginning with Adam and solidified in Abraham. The second dispensation, the Age of the Son, was the era of the gospel, beginning with Uzziah and solidified with Zechariah. The third dispensation, the Age of the Spirit, began with St. Benedict, to be fulfilled in a coming era of contemplation and grace.<sup>66</sup> In this configuration, the preceding ages prefigure and are perfected in the superseding ages. For Löwith, the consequences of this interpretive turn are profound:

This attempt to explain history religiously and the Revelation of St. John historically is no more and no less than an intricate elaboration of the Christian presupposition that the church is the body of Christ and that therefore her history is intrinsically religious and not merely a department of the history of the world. And,

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<sup>63</sup> The most notable example is Jacob Taubes, *Abendländische Eschatologie*, Beiträge zur Soziologie und Sozialphilosophie, ed. René König, vol. 3 (Bern, 1947). In English as *Occidental Eschatology*, trans. David Ratmoko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

<sup>64</sup> Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 145. Löwith’s appellation here of “Floris” is drawn from a German term for the city of Fiore.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>66</sup> See Löwith’s more detailed summary, *Ibid.*, 148-149.

since the history after Christ is still on its way and yet revealed as having an end, the fullness of time is not to be conceived traditionally as a unique event of the past but as something to be worked out in the future, in the perspective of which the church, from Christ until now, is not an everlasting foundation but an imperfect prefiguration. The interpretation of history thus necessarily becomes prophecy, and the right understanding of the past depends on the proper perspective for the future, in which the preceding significations come to their end. This consummation does not occur beyond historical time, at the end of the world, but in a last historical epoch.<sup>67</sup>

This imposition of a tripartite history—past, present, future—and the transformation of history into prophecy for the future is one of the central foundations for modern philosophy of history. The transposition of the eschatological event into a temporal horizon, for Löwith, sets the stage for the philosophical-historical millennialism which brought such destruction to Europe in the twentieth century. As Löwith notes, despite Joachim’s religious intentions, his framework allowed for “future perversions,” namely the introduction of an eschatological event within history, which “intensified the power of the secular drive toward a final solution of problems which cannot be solved by their own means and on their own level.”<sup>68</sup> The term “final solution” here is telling, as Löwith concludes his chapter on Joachim with the following passage:

The third dispensation of the Joachites reappeared as a third International and a third *Reich*, inaugurated by a *dux* or a *Führer* who was acclaimed as a savior and greeted by millions with *Heil!* The source of all these formidable attempts to fulfill history by and within itself is the passionate, but fearful and humble, expectation of the Franciscan spirituals that a last conflict will bring history to its climax and end. It needed a sacrifice like that of Nietzsche to re-establish, in an ‘Antichrist,’ the Christian alternative between the Kingdom of God and the world, between creation with consummation and eternal recurrence without beginning and end.<sup>69</sup>

In the sentences above, we see the extent to which Löwith’s response to the question of meaning in history and his attacks on philosophy of history were responses to the catastrophic (and ongoing) legacy of totalitarianism and world war. The centrality of Joachim and the influence of his

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 150-151.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 159; 158-159.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 159.

historical scheme in *Meaning in History* cannot be underestimated. Löwith devoted the first of two appendices of his book to the topic of “Modern Joachimism.” The afterlives of Joachim revealed for Löwith the fateful problem of secularization. Addressing modern conceptions of historical time that remain divided into tripartite dispensations, Löwith showed the deep survivability of Christian chronology. Even Nietzsche, who more than any other thinker embraced the challenge to “re-evaluate the whole course of history radically,” reproduced, in his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, a chronology of dispensations.<sup>70</sup> Zarathustra’s parable “On the Three Metamorphoses” displays this in Löwith’s analysis, as the camel, the lion, and the child correspond with the ages of the Father/Law, Son/Gospel, and Spirit/Freedom respectively.<sup>71</sup> Löwith identifies the seriousness of the problem succinctly: “If, nevertheless, we still maintain the Christian frame of reference in our historical maps and thinking, this can be done thoughtfully only if we also maintain the Christian expectation which was its principle; for the significance of the Christian distinction of historical time into B.C. and A.D. does not depend on an expedient division of secular periods, subject to constant revisions, but on an absolute eschatological turning-point which affected the very belief in a continuous history of the world.”<sup>72</sup> The elevation of the birth of Christ to the dividing line in history was not undertaken due to events in profane history, but rather due to belief in the fundamental transformation of the historical world through the incarnation of God. To maintain, for Löwith, a chronological scheme built out of such eschatology, within a worldview that overtly denies the superhistorical nature of the dividing event, represents a failure to think, a refusal to be thoughtful. Here, Rodolphe Gasché’s characterization of Löwith’s project as “awakening” is

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 211-212.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 211.

crucial.<sup>73</sup> By unearthing the theological origins of the secular belief in progress, Löwith was enacting a practice, aimed at awakening postwar readers from the presuppositions of the philosophy of history and the belief in progress. Gasché thus interprets *Meaning in History* as an attempt to “undo” historical consciousness by working backwards against its chronological assumptions. Going further, I argue that this project is also an attempt to undo trauma, to delegitimize it and make possible an alternative orientation toward history free from traumatic trappings. For by undermining the theological and spiritual foundations of the philosophy of history which he held to be generative of the catastrophes of the twentieth century, Löwith was also working to undermine its significance, its very historical effectivity.

Löwith was not only an observer of the poisonous fruits of modern historical consciousness, he was also a victim. His posthumously-published memoir *My Life in Germany Before and After 1933*, which first appeared in 1986, was originally written in 1940 for a Harvard University competition of the same name which sought to collect firsthand accounts of life in Germany before and after the rise of National Socialism.<sup>74</sup> In significant ways, it is the more detailed counterpart of the speech with which we opened, as it contains Löwith’s accounts of and reflections on the events, people, and movements that had shaped his life, and allows us to see the entanglement between trauma and his philosophical work.

Any reading of *My Life in Germany* must take note of the connections Löwith draws between the calamities of the First and Second World Wars. This continuity, furthermore, is already linked with philosophy of history and its dangers. As Löwith writes in his introduction,

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<sup>73</sup> Rodolphe Gasché, “The Reminders of Faith: On Karl Löwith’s Conception of Secularization,” in *Divinatio* 28 (2008): 31.

<sup>74</sup> For more information and context, see the introduction in Harry Liebersohn and Dorothee Schneider, “*My Life in Germany Before and After January 30, 1933*”: *A Guide to a Manuscript Collection at Houghton Library, Harvard University* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 2001).

dated 14 January 1940 and written in Sendai: “the dictatorships emerging from the World War laid claim to dating the whole of history in a new way, just as the French Revolution had done. And indeed, it cannot be denied that everything is different from the way it was before.”<sup>75</sup> This passage shows the consistency with which Löwith placed questions of history at the forefront of his thought, and it also reveals a fascinating tension in his own recollections of the recent past. For how can we square this claim that “everything is different from the way it was before,”—made in 1940—to his statement from the “Curriculum Vitae” speech in 1952, that “one does not become another person?”<sup>76</sup>

This conundrum takes us directly into Löwith’s relationship with trauma and its shaping effect on his condemnations of philosophy of history. This relationship is one of distance. As exemplified again in the passage from his Academy speech, Löwith denies the ability of historical events to redefine a person. This stress on the continuity of identity is telling in light of Löwith’s experience of the forced bifurcation of German identity which was brought about by National Socialist ideology. Löwith describes how, before the ascent of National Socialism, he did not fret particularly over his descent: “...I had never emphasized my Jewishness even before Hitler, and perceived myself as German. My father was essentially German in his nature and looks, only the smallest minority of my friends were Jewish, my wife was German and connections with my mother’s relatives were by now virtually non-existent. My life was wholly based on ‘emancipation’, and I was instinctively more sensitive to Jews than were many naïve Germans.”<sup>77</sup> However, after the German Revolution of 1918, this identity began to be separated by ideology. Late in the memoir, Löwith recounts how as early as 1920, his best friend from before the war

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<sup>75</sup> Löwith, *My Life in Germany*, xix.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

refused to meet him since he was “with Hitler,” and thus opposed to Jews, an event which Löwith explicitly notes as the beginning for him of this separation between Germanness and Jewishness.<sup>78</sup>

Throughout *My Life in Germany*, the reader is confronted with the painful results of this forced separation of identities. Löwith describes how the “Front Clause,” which aimed to expel Jews from civil service, made a provision for those who had served during World War I, the hypocrisy of which was not lost on him: “*The ‘front argument’ was generally accepted, and this was matched by the matter-of-factness with which the dismissal and defamation of all other Jews was accepted!*”<sup>79</sup> The heroism associated with service thus served as a temporary protection for Jews such as Löwith, rendered non-German but also not yet *persona non grata*. This protection, as Löwith notes, would be obliterated with the Nuremburg laws of 1935.<sup>80</sup> Describing professors, such as his friend Leo Spitzer, who did not benefit from even this temporary protection, Löwith writes:

There were other Jewish professors, too, who tried to distance themselves. At the decisive moment they did not know where they belonged, because their Germanness was as weak as their Jewishness. The reproach of ‘mimicry’ which anti-Semites as well as Zionists levelled against the Germanized Jew does indeed apply to them – but only to them. Both extremes thus escaped the problem which was both for me and also in itself the decisive one: that one can be a German *and* a Jew, although the conduct of Germans forbade one to take one’s stand beside them at this moment, even from a distance.<sup>81</sup>

In this passage, Löwith reveals how the separation of German and Jewish identity became the central crisis brought about by National Socialism. This separation was more than a crisis of personal identity or a problem for philosophy, however. As Löwith recounts, it bore destructive consequences for families and friends throughout Germany: “thousands of human relations and

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 10. Italics in original.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 81.



existences were destroyed or shattered in this fashion, and the newspapers published a long list of suicides every day.”<sup>82</sup>

Already in 1933, Löwith’s teaching position at the University of Marburg was becoming untenable, suffused by an atmosphere of “insurmountable distance” between him, a Jew, and an audience of SA students.<sup>83</sup> This formed the beginning of Löwith’s exile, which would take him from Germany to Rome, Rome to Sendai, Sendai to the United States, and eventually back to Germany. The term exile was given particular stress by Löwith, as he saw a crucial difference between the experience of Jews such as himself and that of *émigrés*: “however, we were no political refugees, as in our view we had been Germans for generations, while for the others we were suddenly Jews – German Jews who were going abroad only because Germany had deprived them of the conditions of their material and moral existence. The German-Jewish emigrants were overwhelmingly *exiles* – that is to say, people who had been expelled against their expectations and wishes.”<sup>84</sup> Here, the bifurcation of German and Jewish identities becomes the basis of Löwith’s experience of exile. And just as his existence in Germany was conditioned by this separation, so too was his experience abroad, as the National Socialist state continued its harassment even after the departure of exiles. In Löwith’s case, this is again exemplified by his increasing isolation from the Italian-German Cultural Institute during his stay in Rome as a Rockefeller fellow, the German embassy’s attempt to block his appointment in Sendai, and the efforts of the secretary of the German-Japanese Cultural Institute to prevent the renewal of his contract.<sup>85</sup> As Löwith put it succinctly, “it was impossible to escape from the swastika even in the

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 92-93, 113, 123-124.

Orient.”<sup>86</sup> Thus, exile was not an escape from the conditions of oppression which drove Löwith from Germany, but was a practice through which they were continually reasserted, engaged, and resisted.

What these examples drawn from Löwith’s memoir reveal to us is the centrality of the bifurcation of German and Jewish identity to Löwith’s experience during these years. This is cemented if we turn to his epilogue to *My Life in Germany*:

In these records the political and social changes in Germany are portrayed above all in terms of the separation between Germanness and Jewishness. This restriction was necessary to fulfil the requirement that reports should deal only with one’s own experience. Yet at the same time the German revolution affected me primarily as a Jew, and it would be foolish to think that an individual could perhaps somehow escape these universal events. My life is now indeed conditioned by the abandonment of emancipation in Germany, and from this arises the crisis on one salient point: that one is a German and a Jew precisely because the one was separated from the other in Germany. Even those who can find a new homeland and obtain citizenship rights in another country will take a large part of their lives to heal this breach, and indeed, even more so if they took their Germanness for granted and perceived themselves as Germans before Hitler. Although this is a fact, the history of one’s own life cannot be concentrated on this *one* question. The *world* is too wide, and life is too rich to be compartmentalized into a ‘before’ and ‘after’ anything. Only *history* knows such turning points, but all histories survive beyond them, and the only thing that remains constant is that which knows neither a before nor an after, because it is always like this, as it has been and will be in the future.<sup>87</sup>

In this passage, movingly written and humanly compelling, we see laid bare the connections that unite Löwith’s philosophical-historical criticism and trauma. The terms “crisis,” “separated,” “heal,” “breach,” all enunciate the violence of National Socialism’s forced partition of German and Jewish identity. Löwith, as one of those who “took their Germanness for granted” before the rise of Hitler, offers a recollection that is marked by this separation and the years of exile that resulted from it. Löwith’s account of the division of his identity is an account of trauma, of a

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 144.

wound that has not healed, of a gulf inserted violently in the self that has not yet been bridged. If we take this bifurcation as the central problem of Löwith's life and thought, as a preeminent condition of his existence, we must then interpret his criticism of philosophy of history, begun in exile and fully formed in the postwar period, as a tracing of this trauma to its source: namely, a conception of history that imposes meaning on the historical process, providing a telos that its adherents have fervently and violently striven to realize. In this narrative, then, philosophy of history itself becomes a traumatic discourse.

Even with this articulation of trauma, however, we see immediately Löwith's response. Against National Socialism's reduction of human beings to their racial traits, against the totalization of this separation of identities, Löwith pronounces a refusal, an insistence that "the history of one's own life cannot be concentrated on this *one* question." This argument is built on a binary that surfaces, again and again, in the structure of Löwith's thought and that he repeatedly attempts to overcome: the dichotomy between history and the natural world, represented in the passage above by twin italicized terms. The chronological caesura inserted by trauma, the separation into a "before" and an "after," is for Löwith only achievable by history. The world itself, however, is "too rich to be compartmentalized" into these schemes. This pivot towards the natural world is Löwith's response to the trauma of philosophy of history. Against the traumatic "before" and "after" of history, Löwith posits the "has been" and "will be" of nature.

## // Conclusion

In this examination of Löwith's biography, his memoir, and his historical work, we have attempted to highlight the potency of trauma in the constitution of his thought. Through his experience of the bifurcation of his identity and his identification of the philosophy of history as a secularization of Christian theology of history and its attending eschaton, we have seen how

Löwith's work to undermine the philosophy of history was also an attempt to undermine the trauma he experienced. This project of undermining was also an "awakening," to borrow again Gasché's terminology, aimed at releasing both himself and his postwar audience from the thrall of historical consciousness. And what he sought to awake that audience into was a vision of nature undistorted by historical expectations.

The construction of this alternative was a practice that extended far beyond Löwith's work in *Meaning and History*, however. It would form the center of his intellectual work for at least two decades, and in its own right, constituted a project more sweeping and more ambitious than the revelation of the theological underpinnings of the philosophy of history. It was no less than an attempt to create an orientation toward history that would be free of catastrophe, free of upheaval, free of trauma. It is this attempt which we examine in Chapter Five below.

## Chapter 2 // “Therapy of Order”: Trauma and the Body in Voegelin’s Work on Gnosticism

### // Introduction

Buried in immense correspondence preserved in the Eric Voegelin Papers in the Hoover Institution Archives—thirty-eight boxes, documenting a voluminous communication that incorporates figures from F.A. Hayek and Henry Kissinger to Arnold Toynbee and Joseph Ratzinger—is a particularly rich letter addressed to the religious scholar and theorist Jacob Taubes. Dated May 15<sup>th</sup>, 1953, it is a response to a letter from Taubes that (unfortunately not included in the folder, although there was a rather large correspondence between the two thinkers). Despite the absence of the initial letter, the nature of the conversation is clear from Voegelin’s response, which comprises a lengthy and emotionally powerful discussion of responsibility for National Socialist crimes. Taubes was familiar with Nazi persecution, having moved from Vienna in 1936 when his father was called to serve as rabbi in Zurich. Taubes spent the war in Switzerland, where he interacted with Hans Urs von Balthasar and Karl Barth, and produced a formidable dissertation in 1947 entitled *Abendländische Eschatologie* which would have significant impact on Voegelin’s own work on eschatology. Thus Taubes as a Jew and Voegelin as a political critic had both witnessed complicity in Nazi rule and participation in Nazi persecution among Germans. As such, they were both well-positioned to engage a pressing problem that their correspondence identified: “the question of accountability for metaphysical blindness.”

Whereas Taubes apparently understood this “metaphysical blindness” as a condition that lay beyond personal responsibility, Voegelin was less forgiving, apportioning a large amount of blame to individual accountability. In his explanation of his stance, Voegelin offered a self-examination that was at once personal and sweeping:

What pertains to my side of the dichotomy I can thus speak of as no more than an ‘inclination’; I have come to absolutely no clarity in the question. I can only attempt to become conscious of the motives which ‘incline’ me in this direction. Concerning one, a very essential one, we have already conversed. On the basis of literary sources, I would assert that several eminent representatives of questionable ‘impotence’ are absolutely not metaphysically blind, but know the problems very well. However, they do not want to acknowledge them. The second motive, to me emotionally very strong, comes from the causal connection which I believe to see between gnostic eschatology and the brutal facts of the concentration camp. The father is a strong-minded agnostic with a still very respectable ethos and male pride in the king’s throne; the sons are washed-out liberals, and the grandchildren are national socialists or communists. In every visage of a positivist professor or a liberal pastor I see the visage of the SS murderer who he brought forth shining through. Very personal and wholly general problems flow together for me in these visions, in which faces become transparent to me and I see their victims die. Very personal, because I also feel myself to be one of the potential victims – and I am often allergic to individuals in whom I see my potential murderer.<sup>1</sup>

There is much to be interpreted here in this lengthy passage, which contains within itself numerous significations of trauma, the body, and Gnosticism which this chapter will draw out in Voegelin’s thought. The “visage of the SS murderer” is described by Voegelin as a figure of repetition. Beneath the now-respectable personages of professors and pastors lies a true face, a murderer’s face, that shines through and reappears under Voegelin’s gaze. The imagery of this description is indelibly traumatic. The “shining through” (*durchscheinen*) of the true identity reveals the latent

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<sup>1</sup> Voegelin to Taubes, 15 May 1953, Eric Voegelin Papers, Box 37, Folder 10, Hoover Institution Archive. The preceding letter from Taubes to which Voegelin was responding could not be found in the file. Original: “Und nun lassen Sie mich aus dem reichen Inhalt Ihrer Briefe einen Punkt herausgreifen, der – wie Sie ja bemerkt haben – mich immer wieder beschäftigt: die Frage der Verantwortung für metaphysische [sic] Blindheit. Sie sind mehr dazu geneigt, in solcher Blindheit ein Schicksal zu sehen, das einem Menschen zufällt; ich bin mehr geneigt, ein gut Teil als persönliche Schuld zuzurechnen. Was meine Seite der Dichotomie betrifft, so kann ich nicht mehr als von einer „Neigung“ sprechen; ich bin in der Frage durchaus nicht zu irgendwelcher Klarheit gekommen. Ich kann nur versuchen, mir der Motive bewusst zu werden, die mich in dieser Richtung „neigen“. Ueber eines, ein sehr wesentliches, haben wir uns schon unterhalten. Ich würde behaupten, auf Grund der literarischen Quellen, dass einige hervorragende Vertreter der fraglichen „Impotenz“ durchaus nicht metaphysisch blind sind, sondern die Probleme sehr kennen, aber sie nicht an-erkennen wollen. Das zweite, bei mir emotional sehr starke Motiv, kommt aus dem Kausalzusammenhang, den ich zwischen der gnostischen Eschatologie und den brutalen Fakten der Konzenstrationslager zu sehen glaube. Die Väter stark-geistige Agnostiker, mit noch sehr respektablem Ethos und Männerstolz vor Königsthronen, die Söhne sind ausgewaschene Liberale, und die Enkel sind National-Sozialisten oder Kommunisten. In jeder Visage eines positivistischen Professors oder liberalen Pfarrers sehe ich die Visage des SS-Mörders durchscheinen, den er verursacht. Sehr persönliche und ganz allgemeine Probleme fließen mir in diesen Visionen zusammen, in denen Gesichter mir transparent werden und ich ihre Opfer sterben sehe. Sehr persönliche: weil ich mich auch als eines der potentiellen Opfer fühle – und ich bin offenbar allergisch gegen Individuen, in denen ich meine potentiellen Mörder sehe.”

and reemergent properties of trauma, and serves to delegitimize the surface; liberalism and positivism become masks that hide the true murderous nature of the adherents of their ideologies. The metaphor of the visage, further, links this expression of trauma to the body. The penetration of the false visage and the perception of the true identity beneath is expressed in medical terms: Voegelin is “allergic” to these appearances, signifying a necessarily bodily reaction that requires treatment.

This language of trauma, body, and illness thus gives Voegelin’s reply to Taubes the characteristics of a diagnosis. And like medical diagnosis, Voegelin’s identification of the illness is accompanied by an etiology, a prognosis, and a plan of treatment. The first of these is present already within the letter to Taubes. It is constituted by “the causal connection” he observes “between gnostic eschatology and the brutal facts of the concentration camp,” a connection which for him is “emotionally very strong.” The potential and capacity for murder, originating within “gnostic eschatology,” is transmitted through positivism and liberalism until it breaks out into the violence of fascism and communism. Here is a condensed etiology of National Socialism and the carnage it unleashed upon Europe and the world. But with the identification of this causality, further questions are necessary. What, for Voegelin, constitutes “gnostic eschatology?” What are the means of its transmission and proliferation? And what treatment is possible for those individuals, institutions, and societies that are afflicted?

This chapter seeks to answer such questions through a reading of Voegelin’s controversial work on Gnosticism. In particular, this interpretation focuses on the presence of traumatic, bodily, and medical metaphors that surface in Voegelin’s thought and that organize and direct the meanings produced by his texts. I argue that Voegelin’s critique of Gnosticism formed a delegitimization of the trauma that afflicted him and that many others had suffered under the rise

of National Socialism and the devastations of the Second World War and the Holocaust. This delegitimization was effected through a constellation of medical metaphors that cast the spiritual deformation of Gnosticism as a sickness and constituted Voegelin as a physician and therapist. This metaphoric was expressed, I argue in turn, through the narration of a counter-history of spiritual disorder that Voegelin's texts constructed, in an ironic application of gnostic divisions, as a true history lying beneath the merely political and eventual. In his metaphors of therapy and sickness, ground and order, waves and immanentization, the texts produced by Voegelin functioned as attempts to reanchor history to a stable foundation and to undermine the trauma of totalitarian violence and its enabling (and ongoing) gnostic politics by suturing Western politics to a stable, non-traumatic foundation.

Voegelin's approach toward problems of philosophy of history through a metaphorical paradigm drawn from medicine embeds his criticism within a larger discourse of medicalization that developed in postwar Germany. In her indispensable book, *The German Patient*, Jennifer Kapczynski has shown how fascism was cast after the Second World War as a sickness from which Germany had to recover.<sup>2</sup> This discourse of sickness worked to counter the question of guilt, allowing the catastrophic environment in which Germans found themselves to be biopoliticized: "crisis becomes a biopolitical metaphor, presuming a collective social body that is sick and in need of care."<sup>3</sup> Kapczynski thus reveals a discursive history in which the physician, not the statesman, is the authority tasked with fixing the damage inflicted by the crimes of the Second World War. As this chapter attempts to show, one possible figuration of the social physician was that of the critic of philosophy of history.

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<sup>2</sup> Jennifer M. Kapczynski, *The German Patient: Crisis and Recovery in Postwar Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.



## // Trauma of Exile, Exile as Trauma

The framing of our investigation of trauma in Voegelin's work on Gnosticism will be greatly enabled by an overview of his biography, in particular his experiences of persecution and exile at the hands of the Third Reich. Voegelin was born in Cologne in 1901 but moved as a child with his family to Vienna in 1910, placing him as a thinker doubly affected by National Socialism and its catastrophic degradation of both Germany and Austria. He began attending the University of Vienna in 1919 and received a doctorate in political science in 1922. After years which included residencies in France, England, and the United States, Voegelin completed his habilitation in 1929. He would later describe this time spent abroad as formative, as it burst open his intellectual horizon which had been determined by neo-Kantian debates in Vienna.<sup>4</sup> These experiences are doubly significant in light of Voegelin's later emigration, and his unique construal of the United States as his true homeland, in opposition to a Germany that had fallen into a "realm of shadows."<sup>5</sup>

As a *Privatdozent* after 1929 and later an associate professor of political science, Voegelin was well-placed and well-equipped to observe the growing political crisis in central Europe. With the rising threat of National Socialism in Germany and political ineffectiveness within Austria, due not least to the Civil War of 1934 which saw the defeat and the outlaw of the Social Democrats and the victory of Austrofascism, questions of political existence were paramount. Voegelin later portrayed himself as an insightful observer of the crisis and one of the few intellectuals—along with Karl Krauss—who were "too intelligent to sympathize" with ideologues of the left.<sup>6</sup> Voegelin himself would publish a book—*Der autoritäre Staat*—arguing for the necessity of an authoritarian regime for the protection of democracy against radicals on both the left and the right.

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<sup>4</sup> Eric Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, ed. Ellis Sandoz, vol. 34 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 60.

<sup>5</sup> For a thorough investigation of Voegelin's construction of exile and emigration, see Chapter 4 below.

<sup>6</sup> Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, 69.

The collapse of the Austrian state in 1938, its annexation by Nazi Germany, and the inaction of neighboring democratic nations constituted the first of a series of experiences that led to Voegelin's emigration and which would hold deep traumatic resonances in his life and work. Voegelin described his reaction to Austria's incorporation into the Nazi state as "a profound emotional shock," as he had presumed that the impending international crisis which the annexation would ignite would be motivation for Western powers to intervene.<sup>7</sup> When this intervention did not come, shock turned to anger:

I remember that the events caused in me a state of unlimited fury. In the wake of the Austrian occupation by Hitler, I even for a moment contemplated joining the National Socialists, because those rotten swine who called themselves democrats—meaning the Western democracies—certainly deserved to be conquered and destroyed if they were capable of such criminal idiocy. But the character development of the past would not permit this extreme step. Reason got the better after several hours of such fury, and I prepared my emigration.<sup>8</sup>

This passage illustrates powerfully the catastrophic nature of the *Anschluss* for Voegelin. A fury which sought, even if only for a few hours, to punish the "rotten swine" who stood aside as Austria was overtaken points, along with the "emotional shock" mentioned above, toward the trauma of the event. Here, the assumption of the security of Austria clashes with the suddenness—in Voegelin's retrospection—of its capitulation. One moment's security is vanished, and after a period of shock, emigration begins.

The trauma of the *Anschluss* was compounded by the difficulties and stresses of emigration for Voegelin. As he would recall later, the anger and shock gave way to fear as the fascist state sought to prevent his exit at a critical juncture. The following passage demonstrates this transfer:

The emigration plan almost miscarried. Though I was politically an entirely unimportant figure, and the important ones had to be caught first, my turn came at last. Just when we had nearly finished our preparations and my passport was with the police in order to get the exit visa, the Gestapo appeared at my apartment to

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 70.

confiscate the passport. Fortunately, I was not at home, and my wife [Lissy Onken Voegelin] was delighted to tell them that the passport was with the police for the purpose of getting the exit visa, which satisfied the Gestapo. We were able, through friends, to get the passport, including the exit visa, from the police before the Gestapo got it—that all in one day. On the same day, in the evening, with two bags, I caught a train to Zurich, trembling on the way that the Gestapo after all would find out about me and arrest me at the border. But apparently even the Gestapo was not as efficient as my wife and I in these matters, and I got through unarrested. My wife stayed with her parents, with a Gestapo guard in front of the apartment waiting for me to show up again. My wife knew that I had escaped when the Gestapo guard was withdrawn, and about twenty minutes later my telegram arrived from Zurich telling her that I had arrived there.<sup>9</sup>

In this narration of his escape from Austria, Voegelin cements the traumatic nature of his emigration and evokes a larger narrative in which the submerged homeland of Austria is replaced by relocation in the United States. The contours of this narrative are examined in detail in Chapter 4. For the moment, it suffices to establish the fury toward the Western powers, the disgust with the Gestapo and National Socialism, and the trauma of emigration as components of an essentially bodily foreground to his intellectual excoriations of political religions. For both in the descriptions of his bodily state—anger, fear, “trembling”—and in the narration of his geographical displacement—exile is, after all, fundamentally the relocation of bodies—Voegelin’s text establishes both a history and a historical metaphoricity that link spiritual catastrophes to discourses of bodily infirmity. The collapse of Austria stands as a traumata, in the individual body and in the collective body politic, which is ramified in Voegelin’s physical suffering and his material exit from the country. Voegelin’s exile would eventually land him in the United States, and it was in this context that the fusing of spiritual, political, and bodily traumas would find its most significant intellectual expression, in the form of his critiques of Gnosticism.

### **// Diagnosis: Gnosticism as Spiritual Disease**

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 71.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, intellectuals of various nationalities, religions, and ideological persuasions offered their diagnoses of the cause of the catastrophe. Karl Löwith, as we learned in the previous chapter, identified progressive philosophy of history as the culprit. American figures such as William Montgomery McGovern and William Shirer found the origins of the Third Reich in a supposed long history of German authoritarianism. The leaders and stars of the Frankfurt School, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, argued in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that the rationalization which emerged in enlightenment critique, rather than leading to liberation, had instead enabled disastrous potential for social control and dehumanized, depersonalized violence. Among these strains of interpretation, which continue to exercise influence over scholarly and popular understandings of German fascism, a parallel but divergent account of the source of the catastrophe was developed by Voegelin.

For Voegelin, the germ of the sickness that had swept over Europe and the world in the early and mid-twentieth century was not rooted in social control and relations of production, nor in a flawed German character that created a fateful historical failure to democratize and Westernize, nor even in eighteenth century notions of secular progress. Rather, Voegelin held the historical origins of the trauma which befell him and millions of others to be primarily spiritual. The genesis of the recent catastrophes in Voegelin's analyses lay far beyond the immediate past. The culprit identified by Voegelin was Gnosticism, a religious phenomenon that emerged in the ancient Hellenic world and that had appeared in various guises and in various movements throughout western religious history.

Voegelin's first major treatment of the gnostic nature of modernity was presented in his *The New Science of Politics*.<sup>10</sup> Given as a series of lectures at the University of Chicago during the winter quarter of 1951, it secured both fame and notoriety for Voegelin as a thinker in the United States.<sup>11</sup> The aim of the lectures was to establish first principles for the understanding of political representation. From the outset of the first lecture, the significance of the postwar present was unmistakable, as Voegelin opened with a discussion of the centrality of crisis in the Hellenic world for the development of political philosophy: "In an hour of crisis, when the order of a society flounders and disintegrates, the fundamental problems of political existence in history are more apt to come into view than in periods of comparative stability."<sup>12</sup> Written in the wake of emigration, global war, and under the shroud of nuclear détente, the crisis which birthed Hellenic philosophy is repurposed, and Voegelin is self-positioned as a new Plato for the twentieth century.

The essential argument at the heart of Voegelin's lectures was a claim that "a political society comes into existence when it articulates itself and produces a representative."<sup>13</sup> The "self-representation" of a political collective is established through the legitimation of a representative. Voegelin provides key historical examples of this process, from the "cosmological" representations of ancient Near Eastern empires to the political theology of the Mongols. Within in this survey of modes of political representation, Voegelin comes to a decisive turning point with the Christian supersession of the pagan world. The "fateful result" of this victory was "de-divinization," namely the "historical process in which the culture of polytheism died from experiential atrophy, and human existence in society became reordered through the experience of

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<sup>10</sup> Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952). Reprinted in *Modernity Without Restraint*, ed. Manfred Henningsen, vol. 5 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 75-241. The citations that follow are from the University of Chicago edition.

<sup>11</sup> See Manfred Henningsen, "Editor's Introduction," in *CW* 5, 2.

<sup>12</sup> Voegelin, *New Science of Politics*, 1-2.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

man's destination."<sup>14</sup> This reorientation contained two possibilities. In Western orthodox Christianity, defined by St. Augustine, this destination was placed outside the boundaries of history in an "eschatology of transhistorical, supernatural perfection."<sup>15</sup> In this conception, the destination of humanity lies beyond history, achievable through salvation made possible by "the pneumatic presence of Christ in his church."<sup>16</sup> The second possibility, which was latent with in the first and eventually overtook it, was that of the "re-divinization" of the world and an immanentization of the meaning of history.

The lynchpin figure in this process of re-divinization for Voegelin is familiar to us from our examination of Löwith in Chapter 1. Voegelin, like Löwith, saw in the work of Joachim of Fiore a mode of thinking that would become a fundamental character of modern politics and ideology: "in his Trinitarian eschatology Joachim created the aggregate of symbols which govern the self-interpretation of modern political society to this day."<sup>17</sup> Following Löwith, Voegelin identifies Joachim's tripartite timeline as one of these key symbols, along with a *dux* or leader who embodies the age, a prophet to call a new age forth, and a "brotherhood of autonomous persons" as an ideal community that lives and thrives "without institutional authority."<sup>18</sup> Voegelin characterizes Joachim's historical speculation as a revolt against St. Augustine, who had separated sacred and profane history. And the result of this revolt was the emergence of the problem of an *eidos* of history.<sup>19</sup> As Voegelin writes, in the Augustinian conception of history,

there is no *eidos* of history, because the eschatological supernature is not a nature in the philosophical, immanent sense. The problem of an *eidos* in history, hence, arises only when Christian transcendental fulfilment becomes immanentized. The course of history as a whole is no object of experience; history has no *eidos*, because

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 119.

the course of history extends into the unknown future. The meaning of history, thus, is an illusion; and this illusionary *eidos* is created by treating a symbol of faith as if it were a proposition concerning an object of immanent experience.<sup>20</sup>

Joachim's tripartite dispensation of history into an Age of the Father, an Age of the Son, and an Age of the Spirit which will be brought about and realized within history represents a rejection of this traditional Christian theology of history as exemplified by St. Augustine. This rejection, Voegelin argues, "will lead into the fallacious immanentization of the Christian eschaton."<sup>21</sup> This immanentization, moreover, created the problem of an "eidos of history," and enabled modern thinkers to project "a certainty about the meaning of history, and about their own place in it, which otherwise they would not have had."<sup>22</sup>

In the above passages, we see Voegelin tracing the modern drive to posit a meaning or goal for history back to the thought of Joachim of Fiore and de-divinization of the world that was achieved by the establishment of Western Christianity. The common core which Voegelin uses to unite movements and ideas that are otherwise politically, philosophically, and temporally divergent is Gnosticism. Especially significant for our analysis is the language of immanentization. In the "fallacious immanentization of the Christian eschaton," the apocalyptic fulfillment of history is translated to the present, pulled out of eternity and incarnated in the realm of history. The eschaton thus becomes the essential component of history as such: not merely an event, but rather history's realization of its own purpose and destiny.

In its analysis of the translation of the eschatological to the inherent, "immanentization" in Voegelin's text betrays a trajectory of trauma. Immanentization is the conceptual-historical cement that makes possible the entwining of "gnostic eschatology" with "the brutal facts of the

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 119, 122.

concentration camps” that Voegelin effected in his letter to Taubes with which we opened. If the horrors of the Second World War represent the material consequences of politically-mobilized Gnosticism, then the immanentization of the Christian eschaton becomes in Voegelin’s narration a traumatic event, the moment at which the violence of the twentieth century was conceived. The traumatic ramifications of immanentization are further solidified through the function of latency in Voegelin’s analysis. The “radically immanent fulfilment” that Joachim inaugurated in the twelfth century “grew rather slowly, in a long process that roughly may be called ‘from humanism to enlightenment...’”<sup>23</sup> The full effects of immanentization, the entirety of the trauma it afflicted in Voegelin’s text, only come about over time. It is only in the twentieth century that the horror of immanentization begun in the thirteenth is comprehensible. Thus, immanentization functions as a metaphorical wedge driving humankind apart from proper political symbolism, which Voegelin organizes under the aegis of “order.”

Voegelin’s work to delegitimize this process of immanentization was explicit. He wrote: “The course of history as a whole is no object of experience; history has no eidos, because the course of history extends into the unknown future. The meaning of history, thus, is an illusion; and this illusionary eidos is created by treating a symbol of faith as if it were a proposition concerning an object of immanent experience.”<sup>24</sup> Here, the trauma, once established, is undermined and rendered illusory. The eidos of history—the immanentization of which had birthed catastrophe—is erased and its effects dissolved. The trauma of immanentization, including its latent development and significance, is depotentiated by establishing anew the open temporality of history properly understood. Thus, the very traumatic potential of immanentization is written out through the establishment of its illegitimacy: for if the immanentization of the eschaton is denied, then its

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 120.



power to define metahistorical chronology is rendered inert. The damage of the wound itself is lessened if its fundamental conceptualization was in error.

Alongside this theoretical (and in many ways abstruse) delegitimization, Voegelin's text also bears the traces of trauma in more visceral registers. Commenting on Comte's division between those who strove to further the cause of positivism and those who resisted and his presumption to judge the latter, Voegelin wrote: "The material civilization of the West, to be sure, is still advancing; but on this rising plane of civilization the progressive symbolism of contributions, commemoration, and oblivion draws the contours of those "holes of oblivion" into which the divine redeemers of the gnostic empires drop their victims with a bullet in the neck."<sup>25</sup> Here, the stark violence of a "bullet in the neck" as the practical application of gnostic politics both prefigures the distrust expressed in the letter to Taubes and enmeshes Voegelin's criticisms of Gnosticism within a bodily metaphors shaded by trauma. It is in the figure of a wound—a traumata—that the gnostic politics find their material effect. The "death of God," Voegelin went on to argue, is coterminous with both a murder of order (in the sense of an abandonment of proper understandings of the human, the political, and the divine) and the murder of real human beings who resist the program of realization of gnostic reality.<sup>26</sup> The extent to which gnostic politics take hold, for Voegelin, is the precise extent to which human society is severed from order. Gnosticism thus functions as the central historical wound underlying the diffuse, particular traumas of twentieth century political violence.

The sweeping scope and the intense bitterness of Voegelin's excoriation of Gnosticism roots his criticisms in the body and trauma, and also reproduce trauma in the development of his arguments, in the very outbursts of condemnation and disgust. However, our understanding of this

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 131.

disgust must also account for Voegelin’s diagnosis of the dominance of gnostic thinking down to his contemporary moment. A “bullet in the neck,” of course, is aimed at directly summoning the crimes of totalitarian regimes from Europe’s recent history—specifically Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Yet, as we demonstrated in the opening of this chapter, Voegelin perceived and explicitly stated that responsibility for these crimes and the conditions of their possibility had hardly been addressed. The liberal pastors and positivist professors in whose visages Voegelin saw SS killers stand as proof of his intense perception of continuity in both politics and in danger.

However, the totalizing language in which Voegelin expresses his disgust is often accompanied by a striking optimism—or if not optimism, a non-pessimism—regarding its future dominance. Voegelin argued that totalitarianism constituted “journey’s end of the Gnostic search for a civil theology.”<sup>27</sup> That is, in the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, the gnostic drive for immanent fulfillment of a historical eschaton found its most integrated efforts. However, despite Gnosticism reaching the end of its journey, and despite the terrifying effectiveness—in terms of bloodshed—of totalitarian implementations of eschatology, Voegelin proffers hope through the establishment of a transhistorical position from which the emergence and dominance of Gnosticism can be reconstituted as a feature of decline. Take the following passage:

“The peculiar, repressive result of the growth of gnosticism in Western society suggests the conception of a civilizational cycle of world-historic proportions. There emerge the contours of a giant cycle, transcending the cycles of the single civilizations. The acme of this cycle would be marked by the appearance of Christ; the pre-Christian high civilizations would form its ascending branch; modern, Gnostic civilization would form its descending branch. The pre-Christian high civilizations advanced from the compactness of experience to the differentiation of the soul as the sensorium of transcendence; and, in the Mediterranean civilizational area, this evolution culminated in the maximum of differentiation, through the revelation of the Logos in history. In so far as the pre-Christian civilizations advance toward this maximum of the advent, their dynamics may be called ‘adventitious.’ Modern Gnostic civilization reverses the tendency toward differentiation; and, in so far as it recedes from the maximum, its dynamics may be

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 163.

called ‘recessive.’ While Western society has its own cycle of growth, flowering, and decline, it must be considered—because of the growth of gnosticism in its course—as the declining branch of the larger advent-recession cycle.”<sup>28</sup>

Here, the preponderance of gnostic politics against which Voegelin rails is undercut and made contingent by his construction of a philosophy of history in which world spiritual and political history is mapped onto a cycle of expansion and retraction centered around the level of “differentiation” of symbolizations of order. The precise contours and significance of this concept of differentiation are laid out in Chapter 4. What concerns our interpretation here is the effect of Voegelin’s metahistorical position vis-à-vis trauma. To write the totality of modern Gnosticism—which for Voegelin was indeed a phenomenon surpassing nearly all ideological, religious, spiritual, and geographic boundaries—as a stage in a cycle that will once again yield a greater understanding of order is indelibly a maneuver that delegitimizes the trauma inflicted and sustained by Gnosticism as construed in Voegelin’s analysis. The image of the cycle is attended in Voegelin’s discussion by the metaphor of the wave, which, though it catches much in its swell, will surely pass. The allergy to potential SS killers; the omnipresence of their enablers; the “bullet in the neck” as the unavoidable result of gnostic politics sifting the wheat from the chaff; in short, all horrors of the Second World War which elsewhere Voegelin portrays as present and all-too-powerful; these are now relativized within a narrative of growth and decline. Thus, Voegelin’s allergy is cured through historical criticism; by delegitimizing Gnosticism’s claim to a secular advent, his text delegitimizes also the trauma it inflicted.

This philosophical-historical orientation further enabled Voegelin to make prognostications concerning the future of gnostic politics, a future which in his estimation would follow one of two paths: incessant warfare and social upheavals, or “the abandoning of Gnostic

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 164.

dreaming before the worst has happened.”<sup>29</sup> The euphemist reference to the “worst” is a nod to the possibility of nuclear war, but nuclear war understood not as geopolitics but as spiritual decline. But even the possibility of escape from Gnosticism within such gloom demonstrates the mobilization of “order”—itself a complicated and multivalent category in Voegelin’s work—as optimism and as delegitimization. To wake from “gnostic dreaming” then becomes, at the conclusion of Voegelin’s lectures, the treatment necessary for the survival of modern politics. And in this manner, it prefigures Voegelin’s later appropriation in full of the position of physician and therapist of Western politics.

### // Prescription: “Therapy of Order”

Although present throughout numerous texts produced during the post-exilic period of his career, the significance of Voegelin’s work on Gnosticism is most strongly concentrated in work produced at the beginning and at the end of the 1950s. Going beyond the establishment of the historical provenance of modern Gnosticism in *The New Science of Politics*, these texts established the architecture of a novel method of delegitimization. In these essays, a medical metaphoric is solidified in which Voegelin assumes the position of therapist and physician, offering a cure to the gnostic sickness which grips Western thought, society, and politics.

The diagnostic/prescriptive function of political science was laid out by Voegelin in 1952 essay for *Merkur* descriptively titled “Gnostic Politics.”<sup>30</sup> Here, after delineating the emergence of radical Puritanism as a fulcrum for the explosion of modern Gnosticism, Voegelin offered a diagnosis that would become central to his treatment of the spiritual and political deficiency of

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>30</sup> Originally published as “Gnostische Politik,” in *Merkur* 6, no. 4 (1952). Reprinted as “Gnostic Politics,” trans. Frederick Lawrence, in *Published Essays, 1940-1952*, ed. Ellis Sandoz, vol. 10 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press), 223-240. Citations in this chapter are taken from the *Collected Works* volume.

modern ideologies. He identified the “spiritual condition” of gnostic politicians, from Cromwell down the present, as “pneumopathological.”<sup>31</sup> Extrapolating, Voegelin argued that “the essence of gnostic politics must be interpreted as a spiritual sickness, as a *nosos* in Plato’s and Schelling’s sense of the term: a disturbance in the life of the spirit as distinct from mental illness in the sense of a psychopathology.”<sup>32</sup> The medical and bodily significations are thus established, with the locus of the illness located not in the mind but in the spirit, thereby requiring a spiritual rather than psychological treatment.

The proliferation of this “pneumopathology” in Voegelin’s construction operated through a characteristically gnostic denial of “reality” in favor of a “dream reality,” the latter of which both obscures the natural order against which the gnostic strains and guarantees through eschatological faith the new order they wish to bring about. This pathology is contrasted with Voegelin’s diagnostic position: “For the critical observer the sick aspect of the vision and its motivating intention consists in a derailment, a break with reality. He knows that the dream cannot be realized and that the dream operation, if it is undertaken, leads, after terrible disturbances of the existing order, to a new condition of reality that has nothing to do with the intended dream reality.”<sup>33</sup> This passage works to establish a positionality in which the author functions as therapist, observing the delusions of a patient that is blind to the truth. Sickness is set against reality, with the gnostic pathology driving the patient further and further toward a “dream reality.”

From the observation created through the imposition of the therapist/patient dynamic, Voegelin also developed a typology of gnostic delusion that at once revealed its manifold forms and its basic unity. In describing the mechanisms by which Gnosticism prefigures the defeat of its

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 226.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 226.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 230-231.

enemies and the anointing of the gnostic elect, Voegelin offered the following historical pattern: “More recent Gnostics replace the ancient oriental signs of subjection with concentration camps and gas chambers; and instead of white linen testifying to one’s belonging to the kingdom, brown, blue, black, or other colors needing to be washed less often are selected for clothing.”<sup>34</sup> The white linen of Christ’s martyrs symbolized in Revelation is substituted in Voegelin’s acerbity by the brown and black uniforms of the SA, the SS, and Italian fascism. Through satire Voegelin thus established a fundamental link between the gnostic desire to establish a new order and rampant dehumanizing violence. An “exquisite brutality” becomes definitive, which effects “the legitimation of violence as a spiritual penal action against the forces opposed to the light.”<sup>35</sup> The political ends of violence is rendered less meaningful than the structure of the spiritual worldview—in this case secularized—that informs them. The different colors of revolution enumerated above thus find a greater similarity in Voegelin’s analysis from parallel nature of their goals: whether brown or black or blue, they all produce red.

In this revolutionary violence Voegelin denounced what he perceived to be a fundamental philosophical error at the heart of gnostic conceptualizations of the world and the future. Writing early in the essay, Voegelin insisted that “the nature of a thing is that by which it is this kind of thing and not another in its essence. *Ex definitione* nature is immutable.”<sup>36</sup> The gnostic striving against this purported immutability reveals both the central metaphysical gulf separating Voegelin from the objects of his ire and an animating principle in his identification of Gnosticism as sickness and himself as doctor. For, if the nature against which gnostics revolt is unchanging, then that revolt itself is pathological and in need of diagnosis and treatment.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 229-230.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 226.

The effort to undermine and delegitimize gnostic politics involved not simply a description of the violence inflicted by gnostic regimes, but also a metaphoric of violence that was semantically linked to medicine and to the body. Describing totalitarian projects of remaking the human, Voegelin attempted to establish their basic unity. He wrote, “This peculiar idea of the creation of the superman by a revolutionary blood-intoxication shows how closely the more recent Gnostics are related to each other, even if they battle each other on the historical scene.”<sup>37</sup> Voegelin’s visceral phrase “blood-intoxication” reveals again the essentially bodily metaphoric network in which his critique operates, and also illuminates his construction of a metahistory beyond the purely “historical;” that is, a history of spiritual sickness that operates beneath and beyond political events. Thus, the depicted unity of gnostic politics delegitimizes trauma on two fronts: by revealing the politics that informed the trauma to be based in a fundamental metaphysical error, and by removing the traumatic events themselves from the base realm of historical determinacy.

Again, however, this distancing attempt founders through the articulation of violent metaphors. For, by evoking the violence of totalitarian regimes again and again, the very language of Voegelin’s historical narrative reproduces the trauma that his analysis works to delegitimize. This friction comes to a head near the conclusion of the *Merkur* essay. Voegelin writes, “The permanent revolution of Gnosis is a cancerous ulcer in the body of reality, it is the death of a civilization if it is not stopped by stronger formative forces. From the standpoint of reality the problem of Gnosis is therefore not the advent of the new eon but the struggle of concrete forces in reality against the mortal threat of pathological dreamers.”<sup>38</sup> The bodily overtones here are

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 237-238.

unmistakable. Gnosis, as cancer, threatens the healthy body of reality, and the removal of the ulcer necessitates the elimination of the pathogen.

In the face of such apocalyptic stakes, Voegelin also essayed to develop a practical program for the defense of “reality” against the “dreamers.” This practice was also expressed through an idiom semantically tethered to the body and drawn from medical discourses. If “pneumopathology” was the diagnostic apparatus through which Voegelin executed a critique of gnostic politics, then the prescriptive corollary of that condition was the institution of a “therapy of order.”

This phrase, filled with multiple significations, was employed by Voegelin in a 1958 lecture that would become one of the most influential texts of his oeuvre. “Science, Politics, and Gnosticism” continued the line of critique introduced in the lectures of *The New Science of Politics* and set out directly the historical, intellectual, political, and spiritual dimensions of the struggle between Gnosticism and order. Voegelin begins his text with a genealogy of Gnosticism, highlighting the worldview’s emergence amid the cataclysms of the fall of ancient ecumenical empires in the Mediterranean and the Near East, which “reduce men who exercise no control over the proceedings of history to an extreme state of forlornness in the turmoil of the world, of intellectual disorientation, of material and spiritual insecurity.”<sup>39</sup> The unifying characteristic of these experiences is the perception of the world as “an alien place,” hostile and inhospitable, in need of radical abandonment or transformation.<sup>40</sup> In these grim descriptions of the alienation rampant in late Hellenic societies can easily be detected a trace of identification on the part of Voegelin. In an ironic turn, his account of the origin of Gnosticism is framed through the very

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<sup>39</sup> Eric Voegelin, “Science, Politics, and Gnosticism,” trans. William J. Fitzpatrick, in *Modernity Without Restraint*, ed. Manfred Henningsen, vol. 5 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 253-254.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 254-255.



sense of loss, insanity, and degeneration that informs Voegelin's critiques of the postwar present. Thus, Gnosticism possesses a threat in Voegelin's analysis that derives from its familiarity, an improper answer to a pressing problem, a problem that persists in the twentieth century and that had left its marks on Voegelin's own bodily and intellectual history. Within this identification, however, order as a concept bounds Voegelin's rhetoric and serves as the figurative limit preventing him from reproducing a counter-gnosis.

Within this crucible of disintegration, according to Voegelin, Gnosticism effected a severing between man and order by recasting the world as a "prison."<sup>41</sup> No longer content with the world as it is—a world of suffering—the gnostic begins working toward the world as it should be, or perhaps more accurately, as it truly is. For Voegelin, of course, such a project is doomed not only to failure, but to violence. Echoing his argument in the *Merkur* essay on Gnosticism and politics, Voegelin identifies the proverbial "murder of God" as the necessary spiritual step in the development of the gnostic project. In contrast to traditional religious systems—whether poly- or monotheistic—the order of being was established and legitimated through its attunement to a transcendent source. "Gnostic man," however, "must carry on the work of salvation himself."<sup>42</sup> This self-election to the task of dispelling the false world construes reality itself as a material vulnerable to the administrations of humans. This is made clear in the following argument from Voegelin: "The aim of parousiastic Gnosticism is to destroy the order of being, which is experienced as defective and unjust, and through man's creative power to replace it with a perfect and just order."<sup>43</sup> This contention not only seeks to depict Gnosticism and its derivative politics as essentially destructive rather than creative enterprises, but it also reveals the political stakes of

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 255.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 255.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 278.

Voegelin's own work: an attempt to wrest control of reality back away from the prophets and adherents of gnosis and reorient human society around transcendent order.

It is in this gnostic attempt to replace reality that Voegelin insists on the identity of gnostic theology and gnostic violence. Retreading his argument concerning the immutability of essence, he writes: "The nature of a thing cannot be changed; whoever tries to 'alter' its nature destroys the thing. Man cannot transform himself into a superman; the attempt to create a superman is an attempt to murder man. Historically, the murder of God is not followed by the superman, but by the murder of man: the deicide of the gnostic theoreticians is followed by the homicide of the revolutionary practitioners."<sup>44</sup> This passage establishes an interlocking set of propositions that form a fully-developed historical logic, leading from Nietzsche and Marx to the gulag and the concentration camp. The "will to murder of the gnostic magician" is precisely the material link in Voegelin's account between ancient heresy and present cruelty; it is the pathological aspect of modern political and spiritual malaise.<sup>45</sup>

It is against this pathology of murder that the "therapy of order" is directed. In Voegelin's view, the manifest disorder of modern societies was correlated to the fragmented vision of reality present in any gnostic politics. The revelation of the true order of being was the task of philosophical scholarship. However, Voegelin described this task as one opposed by the reigning disorder of the day, and did so in directly medical terms: "Society resists the therapeutic activity of science."<sup>46</sup> In response to this existence, Voegelin proposes the "therapy of order," which aims to contest gnostic falsehoods and reveal the true, eternal order of being to a twentieth-century humanity that is blind to it.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 284.

<sup>45</sup> The quoted phrase can be found in *ibid.*, 286.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 260.

The means of this contestation, however, are more complicated than they may appear. For the order of being which was evident to Voegelin was far from evident from those whom he constructed as “ideologists” and “intellectual swindlers.” The conversation could not be had in good faith with honest interlocutors, in Voegelin’s opinion. “Rather,” he wrote, “we are confronted here with persons who know that, and why, their opinions cannot stand up under critical analysis and who therefore make the prohibition of the examination of their premises part of their dogma.”<sup>47</sup> Here, the arsenal of intellectual argumentation is rendered preemptively impotent. Truth and falsity, reason and unreason, coherence and incoherence; such concepts and the syllogistic reasoning that underpins them are useless in the face of the gnostic “prohibition.” Where reason was useless, however, Voegelin would turn to experience.

The “therapy of order” was not a discursive remedy, but an existential one. This is made clear in an essay published in 1967, entitled “On Debate and Existence.”<sup>48</sup> The essay appeared in *Intercollegiate Review*, a publication of the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, a conservative organization whose leaders and readers would have had sympathy for Voegelin’s denunciations of reality-blind ideologues. In this piece, Voegelin worked through the difficulties he perceived for discursive engagement with gnostics. Appealing to the hypothetical experience of his audience and their presumed memories of failed conversations with ideologists, Voegelin wrote, “Rational argument could not prevail because the partner to the discussion did not accept as binding for himself the matrix of reality in which all specific questions concerning our existence as human beings are ultimately rooted...”<sup>49</sup> This “matrix of reality”—later referred to in “Science, Politics, and Gnosticism” as the “ground of order”<sup>50</sup>—is the contested space upon which ideological

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 261.

<sup>48</sup> Eric Voegelin, “On Debate and Existence,” in *Intercollegiate Review* 3 (1967): 143-152.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>50</sup> Voegelin, “Science, Politics, and Gnosticism,” 261.

enemies build rival visions of the world. Voegelin consistently traced the emergence of this ideological contestation to the modern world, a story he tells again in the *Intercollegiate Review* essay, this time through a detailed and quite technical discussion of Aristotelian and Thomist metaphysics. The specifics of this lesson in the history of philosophy is less important for our reading here than Voegelin's use of Aristotle and St. Thomas as examples revealing the greater challenge facing twentieth-century thinkers. Voegelin argues directly that the metaphysical questions with which these thinkers grappled are experientially relevant to the "everyman" whom they represent and to whom their speculations must answer. He wrote that "More specifically, the represented have a right to receive answers not only to their own questions but also to hear answers to brilliant and well propagated errors which threaten to disintegrate the order of society by disintegrating the order of existence in everyman personally. It is a situation and an obligation that must be faced in our twentieth century as much as Thomas had to face it in his thirteenth."<sup>51</sup>

It is essential to see the logic of rubble operating within Voegelin's thinking here. The disintegration of the "order of society" is explicitly causative of the disintegration of personal existence, and implicitly evocative of the physical disintegration of bodies, cities, and nature that resulted from the clash of gnostic empires in the twentieth century. For the "ground of order" to be revealed, the rubble of gnostic constructions must be cleared, and the only method of clearing is by rebuilding from the ground up a shared experience of reality, through which (and only through which, according to Voegelin) rational discourse is possible.

Within this spatial metaphors of order and disorder, however, the intervention called for by Voegelin is also indelibly medical. The importance of Aristotle and St. Thomas lies not in the specifics of their grand metaphysics—for the cosmos which enabled their constructions had, in

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<sup>51</sup> Voegelin, "On Debate and Existence," 144.

Voegelin's estimation, been "superseded by the universe of modern physics and astronomy"<sup>52</sup>— but rather the experience of reality which they shared and which they were able to illuminate for "everyman." Voegelin explained: "To be sure, a large part of the symbolism has become obsolete, but there is a solid core of truth in it that can be, and must be, salvaged by means of some surgery."<sup>53</sup> This "surgery" is precisely the excavation of a shared experience of order, figured at once as an uncluttered landscape and as an unblemished body. A form of debate which undertakes this task is, again, not discursive; rather, "it is medical in character in that it has to diagnose the syndromes of untrue existence and by their noetic structure to initiate, if possible, a healing process."<sup>54</sup>

These medical metaphors were not limited by Voegelin to his article on Aristotle and St. Thomas. Prior to the publication of his article "Gnostische Politik" in *Merkur* in 1952, Voegelin discussed his arguments with Hans Paeschke, the co-founder and chief editor of the journal. Answering Paeschke's inquiry as to whether Voegelin's employment of the concept of Gnosticism was too negative, Voegelin responded through the language of medicine. "The 'question of the antidote,'" Voegelin wrote, borrowing Paeschke's phrase, "which you raise (quite legitimately), has a very simple answer: the 'antidote' is the understanding of sickness as such and the return to the tradition of classical and Christian thought – as seen in an example from this manuscript."<sup>55</sup> While the nature of this "return" (*Rückkehr*) was attenuated by 1967, as seen above, the concept

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>55</sup> Voegelin to Merkur, December 13<sup>th</sup>, 1951, Hoover Institution Archives, Box 25, Folder 10. All translations from this correspondence are mine. Original: "Die 'Frage nach dem Gegenmittel', die Sie erheben (sehr berechtigterweise), hat eine sehr einfache Antwort: das 'Gegenmittel' ist das Verständnis der Krankheit als solcher und die Rückkehr zur Tradition des klassischen und christlichen Denkens – wie sie an einem Beispiel in diesem MS vorliegt." Paeschke's letter to which Voegelin was responding can be found *ibid.*

of traditional thought as “antidote” (*Gegensmittel*) points toward a sustained engagement with medical metaphors in Voegelin’s work on Gnosticism.

The healing process, however, does not proceed unopposed in Voegelin’s analysis. If we recall again his complaints in “Science, Politics, and Gnosticism” concerning those who disallow all questioning of their dogma, we see that the metaphor of “therapy of order” was no mere allusion to psychiatry. Rather, it points toward Voegelin’s assumption, in his therapy of order, of the position of the psychoanalyst. The refusal of the gnostic ideologue to engage in rational debate, as construed by Voegelin, evokes the psychoanalytic concept of resistance. As early as 1925, Freud had identified resistance as a fundamental component of psychoanalytic theory.<sup>56</sup> Definitionally, resistance identifies a patient’s objections to the psychoanalyst’s technique and their desire to avoid or deflect the questioning of the therapist. In Voegelin’s denouncement of gnostic dogmas, we can thus see this unfalsifiable characterization of the patient’s relationship to psychoanalytic method. And much as psychoanalysis was needed to overcome resistance for Freud, the “therapy of order” was needed to overcome Gnosticism for Voegelin.

This appropriation of therapist-patient orientation from psychology reveals a crucial function of Voegelin’s critique and a further determinant layer of his bodily-medical metaphors. To be sure, Freud himself was regarded by Voegelin as another purveyor of second-realities and gnostic errors, along with Marx, Comte, Hegel, and Nietzsche.<sup>57</sup> Ironically, however, it is this precise *prima facie* dismissal of the objections of the patient that Voegelin reproduces through his analogy of “therapy of order.” In delegitimizing the architecture of gnostic philosophies Voegelin

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<sup>56</sup> See Sigmund Freud, *An Autobiographical Study*, 1925.

<sup>57</sup> See Eric Voegelin, “Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme,” in *Published Essays, 1966-1985*, vol. 12 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990), 315-375.

replicates their fundamental presumption of correctitude and unfalsifiability. Thus, his delegitimization is carried out through the reapplication of a normative conception of therapy.

It is in this reapplication that we are again able to glimpse the work of trauma. Postwar society, rent by the catastrophic effects of Gnosticism, becomes a patient on a couch and an operating table, and Voegelin the therapist-surgeon seeking to both correct the pathological forms of thinking that have led to illness and to excise the damage done to the social—and spiritual—body. The wound here traumatizes across physical, intellectual, and spiritual registers. The separation of the body from the “ground” of order mirrors the rending that is semantically inherent in trauma. “Order” delegitimizes the trauma of gnostic immanentization by reconnecting humans with the “ground” from which they had been cleaved. The “therapy of order,” then, must be interpreted not as an innocent assumption of medical positionality for the purpose of rhetoric; rather, due to its ironic reinscription of gnostic surety, it is an expression of a textual trajectory that works toward the delegitimization of the trauma that has afflicted the patient.

The question of Voegelin’s reproduction of gnostic tendencies—tendencies identified in his own taxonomy of gnostic deficiencies—is pertinent here, not for its relation to the consistency or inconsistency, fairness or unfairness, accuracy or inaccuracy of Voegelin’s work on Gnosticism, but rather for its revelation of the immense weight, both intellectual and ethical, borne by the concept of order in Voegelin’s texts. Order as a concept bounds Voegelin’s rhetoric and serves as the metaphorical limit preventing him from crossing into a counter-Gnosticism. The construction of “order” as the experiential base of all rational intellection and as the essential element for the health—and even survival—of society demonstrates that the task of reformation for postwar thinkers such as Voegelin extended far beyond the assemblages of wood, brick, iron, steel, and mortar that were necessary for the rebirth of West Germany’s physical infrastructure. The task was

also the restoration of bodies, across their physical, psychological, and spiritual modalities. The rootedness of Voegelin’s philosophical work in the metaphorical bedrock of the body is proof here. “Order” is the lifeline, the desperate intervention, which can divert society-as-body from the ongoing catastrophe of Gnosticism. The rubble which dominated the landscape after 1945 could not, in Voegelin’s thought, be removed as easily from the spirit as from the streets of cities.

This restoration, however, was not the reestablishment of previous social forms. Rather, the very transcendent grounding of order for Voegelin, its ineradicability and its fundamental existential presence, provided hope against the relentless imposition of gnostic politics. This is clear if we return to Voegelin’s correspondence with Hans Paeschke, editor of *Merkur*. Describing again the nature of the “antidote” (*Gegensmittel*) he was prescribing, Voegelin declared, “The antidote, as suggested, the personal transformation, is for everyman, here and now, his possibility.”<sup>58</sup> In clearing the rubble of trauma and providing therapy to the patients laid low by Gnosticism, Voegelin’s work constituted a restoration into the future—a hopefulness in the face of gnostic dominance that can only be understood through the lens of trauma and delegitimization. Along with his denunciations of the failure of denazification and the unsettling comfort of postwar West Germany with its Nazi past (examined in detail in Chapter 4), this restoration of order into the future shows that “restoration” as a rubric was not the exclusive domain of Adenauerian politics. On the contrary, Voegelin’s work represents a heterodox restoration as much at odds with the domain cultural politics of the Federal Republic as with the familiar ideological enemies of Marxism and Communism.

## // Conclusion: Hermeneutics and Embodiment

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<sup>58</sup> Voegelin to Merkur, December 13<sup>th</sup>, 1951, Hoover Institution Archives, Box 25, Folder 10. Original: ““Das Gegenmittel, wie angedeutet, die persönliche Wandlung, ist für jedermann, hier und jetzt, seine Möglichkeit.”



From this explication of Voegelin's texts, we can illuminate the broader threads of their embeddedness within postwar society and culture. Voegelin's angry and often anguished condemnations of gnostic thinking reveal that, in terms of the project of historical comprehension of the meaning of the events of the twentieth century, the end of the Second World War was no end at all. Of particular import is the medicalized language through which Voegelin's critiques were expressed and by which they intersect with other strata of material and bodily histories. Following the important work of Jennifer Kapczynski, this chapter reveals the unavoidability of the body in postwar German history, an unavoidability that is as relevant—if not more—to intellectual history as it is to cultural, social, and environmental history. Our interpretations of Voegelin's texts on Gnosticism, their dependence upon a bodily and medical metaphors, and their complex relation to trauma, point toward the entanglement of bodies and ideas and the necessity of a hermeneutic that positions embodiment as a central textual, historical, and historiographical concern.

### Chapter 3 // Trauma Conjured: Utopia and Catastrophe in Koselleck's *Critique and Crisis*

#### // Introduction

On May 6<sup>th</sup>, 1995, one day after the fifty-year anniversary of the end of the Second World War in Europe, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* published a series of retrospective articles on the war's conclusion. Among them was a piece written by one of Germany's most renowned historians: Reinhart Koselleck, a veteran of both the Eastern and Western fronts and a former prisoner of war. In his reflection, entitled "Glowing lava, congealed in memory," Koselleck engaged directly with the matters of memory and historical distance that such an anniversary evoked.<sup>1</sup> Koselleck recounts various memories of his wartime experience—the crushing of his foot under the wheel of an artillery gun; the forced march to the East as a prisoner of war; the Soviet-guided tour and dismantlement of the Auschwitz concentration camp, the forced labor in Karaganda; the hunger, the fear, the shame—while also exploring how these memories function and remain effective in the present.

This latter dimension, hinted at by the article's title, reveals a deeper purpose on Koselleck's part reaching beyond mere anecdote. After describing his arrival at Auschwitz via forced march at the direction of his Soviet captors and the revelation of the camp's horrible purpose, Koselleck writes: "There are experiences which burst out in the body like glowing masses of lava and there congeal. Immovable since then, they can be called up, unchanged and at any time."<sup>2</sup> Such memories, differentiated from that majority which only continue to exist as "literary

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<sup>1</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, "Glühende Lava, zur Erinnerung geronnen," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, May 6, 1995. All translations from this article are my own.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. Original: "Es gibt Erfahrungen, die sich als glühende Lavamasse in den Leib ergießen und dort gerinnen. Unverrückbar lassen sie sich seitdem abrufen, jederzeit und unverändert."

stories,” remain powerful through the continued immediacy of the “primary experience.”<sup>3</sup> These memories, these *Lavmassen*, “...are established on their sensory presence. Smell, taste, sound, touch, and the visible environment, in short all senses, in delight or pain, become awake again and require no labor of memory in order to be true and remain true.”<sup>4</sup> Koselleck gives several examples of this phenomenon from his own experience of the war’s end: the prison camp supervisor and Auschwitz survivor who could not imagine a physical punishment fit to match the gassing of millions; the walk through the gates of Auschwitz with its famous slogan; the endless hunger and forced labor; the hopeless plight of two Volga-German children who labored alongside him in the camp.

This mnemonic phenomenon has important consequences for the very prospect of memorializing the end of the war. Those memories for which primary experience is not itself sufficient create a temporal elongation of those very experiences. Describing the death of one of his aunts, Koselleck writes: “That an aunt of mine died in the course of the euthanasia action, that she had been murdered, we knew already in 1940; that she had been gassed, I had first learned much, much later. Thus there are war experiences which must always be made new again in order to authenticate the entire truth, because the primary experience is not sufficient. And new truths always accrue: in this regard, the war never ended for my generation, or it always begins again, insofar as old experiences must process anew.”<sup>5</sup> Here, the experience of the war continues as new truths are revealed. The realization that his aunt was gassed reignites the original experience,

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. Original: “literarische Geschichte” and “Primärerfahrung.”

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. Original: “...dann gründen sie auf ihrer sinnlichen Präsenz. Der Geruch, der Geschmack, Das Geräusch, das Gefühl und das sichtbare Umfeld, kurz alle Sinne, in Lust oder Schmerz, werden wieder wach und bedürfen keiner Gedächtnisarbeit, um wahr zu sein und wahr zu bleiben.“

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. Original: “Daß eine Tante von mir im Zuge der Euthanasieaktion getötet, ermordet worden war, wußten wir schon 1940; daß auch sie vergast worden war, habe ich erst sehr viel später gelernt. So gibt es Kriegserfahrungen, die immer wieder neu gemacht werden müssen, weil die Primärerfahrungen nicht hinreichen, um die ganze Wahrheit zu verbürgen. Und immer neue Wahrheiten kommen hinzu: Insofern geht, für meine Generation, der Krieg nie zu Ende, oder er fängt immer wieder an, soweit sich alte Erfahrungen aufs neue abarbeiten müssen.”

reinstantiating the war and necessitating its “processing” (*abarbeiten*). This is even more poignant in the case of experiences of the war’s end, a topic on which Koselleck reflects at length via a consideration of the question of “liberation” (*Befreiung*). Where some experienced the end of the war as liberation, others experienced it as death. His own experiences of the end of the war are multiple: the deaths of his aunts; the capture of Strasbourg by the Allies, his escape across the Rhine, and de Gaulle’s commemoration of the liberation of Strasbourg twenty years later; the sight of the tricolor flag flying over occupied Münster in a Soviet newsreel. Through these experiences and memories, dispersed over a range of time, Koselleck complicates both any one date to identify as the conclusion of the Second World War—here May 9<sup>th</sup>, 1945 is but one end among many—and that conclusion’s memorialization: for how can one look back on that which is still occurring? Indeed, as he remarks near the conclusion of his piece: “But the ends of the war themselves had no end,” invoking the use of the atomic bomb and the Soviet engagement against Japan.<sup>6</sup> Finally, he describes his release from the prison camp as an event that also marked a conclusion: “The angst remained. That was also an end to the war.”<sup>7</sup>

In Koselleck’s enumeration of these experiences, in the framework articulated for their comprehension, and in their temporal effects, the specter of trauma is palpable. His insistence on the perpetual eruptability of primary experiences, their characterization as “masses of Lava,” and their powerful effectivity in the present all point to trauma as a unifying factor. The prolongation of the war’s end, the proliferation of different *Kriegsende*—each unique—is itself a process driven by trauma. Furthermore, the conceptual bases of Koselleck’s retrospective raise the larger question of trauma in his historical work. For his articulation of various ends to the war does not fail to evoke the concepts of plurality, contemporaneity/noncontemporaneity, and temporality in history

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. Original: “Aber die Kriegsende nahmen kein Ende.”

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. Original: “Die Angst blieb. Auch das war ein Kriegsende.”

to which much of his scholarship was devoted. These connections are no accident. Rather, I argue that Koselleck's historical and historiographical theorizing is conditioned by a metaphoric of history that is centered on trauma. Trauma is an essential dimension that links Koselleck's thought to his experiences as a soldier, prisoner of war, and returnee, and to the larger contexts of postwar Germany's political challenges and its fraught relationship with its recent past.

This chapter seeks to uncover the function of trauma in Koselleck's early work, as manifested in his dissertation, published as *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society*. Combining an examination of his personal written recollections and interviews with a careful reading of his published dissertation will allow us to envision trauma as an arena in which memory, everyday life, and intellectual history converged. Additionally, mapping the resonances of trauma in Koselleck's life and work and the instances in which these align with and disrupt normative conceptions of trauma will enable a consideration of the mutability and mobility of trauma as impetus, as concept, and as hermeneutic paradigm.

## // Crisis and Experience

Koselleck's biography was intimately linked with the catastrophe that would form the consistent focus—sometimes in the foreground, always in the background—of his historical work.<sup>8</sup> He was born in Görlitz to a comfortable educated bourgeois household, his father a historian and principal at a gymnasium in Breslau, and his mother a scion of a prominent Prussian family.<sup>9</sup> This upbringing, as Koselleck later acknowledged, was central to the formation of his political

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<sup>8</sup> Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann and Sean Franzel, "Introduction: Translating Koselleck," in Reinhart Koselleck, *Sediments of Time: On Possible Histories*, ed. and trans. Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann and Sean Franzel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), and Niklas Olsen, *History in the Plural: An Introduction to the Work of Reinhart Koselleck* (New York: Berghahn, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Carsten Dutt and Reinhart Koselleck, *Erfahrene Geschichte. Zwei Gespräche* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2013), 13. All translations from this text are mine.

consciousness, and thus to the experience of the coming years as crisis. Among the early tenets of his formation, he recounted aversion to radical leftist politics, as well as a general resentment at the humiliation of the Treaty of Versailles and the political efficacy of that resentment.<sup>10</sup> However, this refined rearing also imparted a distaste for National Socialism, as evidenced by the disgust showed by his mother in 1932 at the sight of a poster depicting Hitler's visage.<sup>11</sup> This distrust of National Socialism would be reinforced when, after the Nazi seizure of power in 1933, Koselleck's father was removed from his position as rector of the Pädagogischen Hochschule in Dortmund for political reasons, leading to three years of unemployment and difficult times for the family.<sup>12</sup>

The tension between cultivated bourgeois values and the decidedly uncultivated politics of National Socialism was present within Koselleck's own family. He recounted an argument between his father and his older brother, who had become an enthusiastic leader in the Hitler Youth:

I still remember, as my brother came home from the Nuremberg party convention, from that party convention at which Hitler held the infamous speech, according to which the German youth should be "swift as a greyhound, tough as leather, hard as Krupp steel" – then my father added to the report of my brother: "...and as dumb as a post." Today, I still see before me how my brother turned red with rage.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, the breakage and destabilization represented by National Socialism were experientially present within Koselleck's childhood household. So too, however, were the contradictions and concessions given to the regime, in the form of his father's eventual membership in the Reiter SA and Koselleck's own participation in the Hitler Youth, however unhappy.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 13-14.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 15. Original: "Ich erinnere noch, als mein Bruder vom Nürnberger Parteitag nach Hause kam, von jenem Parteitag, auf dem Hitler die berüchtigte Rede hielt, der zufolge die deutsche Jugend 'flink wie die Windhunde, zäh wie Leder, hart wie Kruppstahl' sein sollte, - damals ergänzte<sup>13</sup> mein Vater den Bericht meins Bruders: '...und dumm wie Bohnenstroh'. Ich sehe heute noch vor mir, wie mein Bruder rot anlief vor Wut."

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 16-18.

The incision of crisis into Koselleck's experience was deepened immensely by his service in the Second World War. While a student in 1941, Koselleck enlisted voluntarily along with the majority of his classmates. He would serve on both the Eastern and Western fronts, experiencing various hardships listed in our examination of his war recollection in the opening of this chapter. Central to these experiences, and worthy of extended examination, is his time spent as a Soviet prisoner of war. It was during this captivity that Koselleck had to face the full reality of the Holocaust. He was forcibly marched by Soviet forces through the concentration camp at Auschwitz. What was once hearsay and rumor among soldiers was now an unavoidable reality. The consequences and the stakes of this reality were reinforced in Karaganda, in a scene Koselleck recounted on multiple occasions. A supervisor from upper Silesia, furious with Koselleck, moved to assault him with a footstool due to his slowness in performing his labor, but after brandishing the object, threw it aside and yelled "what should I bash your head in with, where you have gassed millions."<sup>15</sup> It is in this question, posed in an environment of hardship, crying out against the horror of immense suffering and death, that we can see the centrality and persistence of the question of crisis in Koselleck's thought and experience. The inability of his overseer to conceive of a punishment worthy of the crime of genocide is generative of the destabilization of familiar frameworks after 1945. Koselleck's scholarly investigations into the source and nature of the crisis thus must be interpreted with reference to his bodily experience of that very crisis.

### **// Tracing the Trauma: Crisis and the Philosophy of History**

Upon his return to Germany in 1947 after a year and a half of captivity as a prisoner of war, Koselleck began attending the University of Heidelberg. Although he originally intended to study art history, the advice of his father, the influence of his upbringing, and the overriding desire

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 22.

to discover the roots of Germany's present situation led Koselleck to the discipline of history. He described this transition in a 2003 interview with Carsten Dutt: "And indeed history was naturally the field that attracted me the strongest. My father was a historian, and now there was the need to reflect upon the National Socialist period and the war. And my central motive from the start was basically to get on the trail of the utopia which brought about the catastrophe of the Third Reich."<sup>16</sup> Already at the outset of his academic training, we find the seeds of his historical worldview and the values and concerns which shaped it. The two concepts identified here, utopia and catastrophe, are powerful channels which run throughout Koselleck's early thought, both of which found fertile ground at the University of Heidelberg.

In Heidelberg, Koselleck found a milieu that would prove productive for the task of understanding the recent catastrophe. Historians such as his advisor Johannes Kühn—whom Koselleck later designated as "the most important historian in Heidelberg" for his interests—were formative, as were experiences with a variety of figures in other disciplines, including Alfred Weber, the brother of the renowned sociologist Max Weber, the jurist Carl Schmitt, and the philosophers Hans-Georg Gadamer and Karl Löwith.<sup>17</sup> The connection to Löwith is of particular note for our purposes, as his investigations into the theological origins of the philosophy of history were also a response to the trauma of National Socialism (as I examine in detail in Chapter 1). Koselleck was responsible for nearly a third of the German translation of *Meaning in History*, an

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 32. Original: "Und doch war die Geschichte natürlich das Fach, das mich am stärksten anzog. Mein Vater war Historiker, und nun war da das Bedürfnis, die NS-Zeit und den Krieg in der Reflexion einzuholen. Und mein Hauptmotiv war im Grunde von Anfang an das, der Utopie auf die Spur zu kommen, die die Katastrophe des Dritten Reichs herbeigeführt hat."

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 35. Original: "Der wichtigste Historiker wurde in Heidelberg für mich dann allerdings Johannes Kühn, der 1949 aus Leipzig berufen worden war."



experience which occupied some three months and which proved important for his project in *Critique and Crisis*.<sup>18</sup>

Submitted in 1954 and originally published in 1959, *Critique and Crisis* constituted Koselleck's first full-fledged effort to trace the origins and development of the utopian outlook which he believed to have had such catastrophic effects in the world around him.<sup>19</sup> Beginning with the emergence of Absolutism from the morass of religious civil war in the European sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Koselleck tracked the permutations of Utopian thought and political crisis from the establishment of the Absolutist state to its death knell in the French Revolution. In doing so, he combined readings of canonical thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau with analyses of institutions including masonic lodges. The thread uniting these different figures, texts, and groups in his narrative is utopianism and the philosophical-historical structures of thought that made it possible.

The pertinence of the postwar present in his study of Enlightenment utopia is made explicit from the outset. Koselleck frames his study within the situation of the Cold War: "From an historical point of view the present tension between two superpowers, the USA and the USSR, is a result of European history. Europe's history has broadened; it has become world history and will run its course as that, having allowed the whole world to drift into a state of permanent crisis."<sup>20</sup> The crisis that in the 1950s threatened to consume the entire globe has its roots in European history, particularly in the very process by which modern European society globalized itself: the development of a utopian philosophy of history out of the political crisis of the Enlightenment. In

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 37-38. The translation of Löwith's treatise appeared in German as *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1953).

<sup>19</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988). Originally published as *Kritik und Krise. Eine Studie zur Pathogenese der bürgerlichen Welt* (Freiburg/Munich: Verlag Karl Alber, 1959). All translations are taken from the MIT edition unless otherwise noted.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 5.

Koselleck's telling, the rise of bourgeois society was accompanied by the development of a progressive philosophy of history that, in aspiring to unify all mankind, articulated a single, global field of historical action. The mandate of this global mission, however, is at once claimed by two otherwise incommensurate entities, the United States and the Soviet Union, leading to its fracture and revealing its origin in crisis: "They mutually segregate each other in order to feign a non-existent unity. Their testimony is therefore one of terror and fear. The world's Utopian unity reproduces its own fission."<sup>21</sup> Here, the dual universal visions embodied by the United States and the Soviet Union push against each other: both see the world as a field for the realization of a historical mission, and precisely this shared framework leads them to block each other. The clash of two universalisms creates the fission of crisis.

This fission, Koselleck argues, is not new. Rather, it is traceable as an effective historical force to the eighteenth century, which he identifies as "the antechamber to our present epoch..."<sup>22</sup> Here, the political crisis of the *ancien régime* is cast as the dominant factor in the history of European politics since the French Revolution.<sup>23</sup> The problems which arose through the Enlightenment's critique of Absolutism, in Koselleck's account, are the very problems which threaten the postwar world in the twentieth century. This initial historical positioning has several decisive consequences for our interpretation of Koselleck's work. First, it displays Koselleck's search for the historical and intellectual origins of the catastrophes that had marred his contemporary world. Similar to the trajectories of Löwith and Voegelin which we followed in previous chapters, Koselleck turned to history in order to comprehend and respond to the historical situation in which he found himself. This focus on Enlightenment utopianism and the philosophy

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>23</sup> "The link between the origins of the modern philosophy of history and the start of the crisis which, initially in Europe, has been determining political events since 1789, will come within our purview." Ibid., 6.

of history represents a search for a singular, fundamental cause that could explain the postwar crisis.<sup>24</sup> In this regard, *Critique and Crisis* works to displace the crisis, removing it from a specifically German context and arguing for its broader European roots. Secondly, it shows a deep suspicion of totalizing historical narratives and the universal, progress-driven philosophy of history that animates them. Philosophy of history, in Koselleck's analysis, refers specifically to secular visions of historical destiny that provide a scheme for that destiny's realization, such as those found in the work of G.W.F. Hegel and Karl Marx. Drawing instead from influences such as Karl Löwith and Carl Schmitt, this mode of thinking—with its utopian aims and promises—is cast by Koselleck as a culprit, as the driving force behind the world-historical catastrophe and crisis that threaten to consume the globe. Third, it evinces a particular historical consciousness on the part of Koselleck—a conception of European history having become world history via the extension of (European) bourgeois society to Russia and North America.<sup>25</sup> The catastrophes which Koselleck experienced are thus world-historical precisely because they are generated by a philosophy of history that holds world-historical aspirations. Finally, it draws a connection that entangles the history of the Third Reich with a deeper history of political and historical thought, and thereby reveals that Koselleck's drive to illuminate the ramifications of utopian philosophy of history is at the same time a drive to understand the catastrophe of National Socialism.

For these reasons, it is essential to read *Critique and Crisis* through the postwar context in which it was produced. Koselleck himself acknowledged as much in his preface to the English-

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<sup>24</sup> In this respect, Koselleck's dissertation occupies an inverse position vis-à-vis other narratives of origin that attempted to explain National Socialism and the horrors of the Second World War, such as William Montgomery McGovern's *From Luther to Hitler: The History of Fascist-Nazi Political Philosophy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941) and William L. Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), which posited causal link between Luther's authoritarianism and Nazi power.

<sup>25</sup> This idea that European history is world history contains an evocation of Spengler, who argued in *The Decline of the West* that the history of Europe had become the history of the world via the global presence of "Faustian" civilization.

language edition, where he writes: “This study is a product of the early postwar period. It represented an attempt to examine the historical preconditions of German National Socialism, whose loss of reality and Utopian self-exaltation had resulted in hitherto unprecedented crimes.”<sup>26</sup> In order to understand the utopianism which had such destructive effects in the twentieth century, Koselleck turned to the Enlightenment. This maneuver is a conservative one, aligned with the work of Carl Schmitt (whose encounter with and influence on Koselleck we examine below), and standing in contrast to positive postwar appraisals of the Enlightenment’s legacy, such as those offered by Peter Gay and Ernst Cassirer.<sup>27</sup> For Koselleck, the link between crisis and philosophy of history is not a bygone configuration of the early modern past, but has remained an animating force in the present. But what, precisely, was the crisis which gave birth to the philosophy of history? And how was this crisis reproduced and perpetuated in modern history? By exploring these questions, we shall be able to illuminate trauma as an implicit theme in Koselleck’s narrative.

For Koselleck, the crisis which faced the postwar world originated in the wars of religion that ravaged Europe in the early modern period. As a response to the breakdown of civil society and the proliferation of violence based on religious confession, Absolutism emerged as a solution. Koselleck employs here a self-consciously functional framework, developed through a reading of d’Aubigné, Barclay, and Hobbes: “How to make peace? On the greater part of the Continent this epoch-making question found its historic answer in the Absolutist State.”<sup>28</sup> This answer was comprised of a simple yet profound division: the separation between morality and politics, which “was not directed against a secular ethic, but against a religious one with political claims.”<sup>29</sup> The

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<sup>26</sup> Koselleck, “Preface to the English Edition,” in *Critique and Crisis*, 1.

<sup>27</sup> See Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946) and Peter Gay, *The Party of Humanity: Essays in the French Enlightenment* (New York: Knopf, 1964).

<sup>28</sup> Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis*, 17.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

crisis of religious civil war, in which morality was weaponized in the form of dogma, is resolved only when politics is freed from morality and made the sole domain of the sovereign: “In the subjects’ domain the ruler was freed from all guilt, but he accumulated all responsibility. The subject, on the other hand, was relieved of all political responsibility but threatened, in exchange, with a twofold guilt: externally when acting counter to his sovereign’s interest...and inwardly by seeking refuge in anonymity.”<sup>30</sup> In order to reestablish a secure and stable social order, morality was delegitimized as a political factor. “Thus it was from out of the cruel experience of sectarian civil war that the order of European states unfolded. The name of the law under which that order came into being was the subordination of morality to politics.”<sup>31</sup>

This, for Koselleck, is the fundamental historical function of Absolutism, but one which held far-reaching consequences. For it is precisely this separation, in his narrative, that generated the Absolutist system’s downfall in the French Revolution, which together with the wars of religion formed the two “epochal events” that bracketed Absolutism’s historical existence. Before examining Koselleck’s account of this development in more detail, it is worth noting the traumatic nature of both events: each saw widespread violence, physical destruction, and social dissolution. Both are seen as turning points in European and world history. That the crisis with which Koselleck attempted to grapple had its origin and world-historical emergence in such traumatic happenings constitutes an initial glimpse into the traumatic dimension of his thought. Furthermore, that Koselleck locates the trauma of the Revolution, not in the tyranny of Absolutism or the aristocracy, as the revolutionaries and their defenders had, but in the overthrow of the social order and the imposition of utopian politics shows again the conservative inflection of his account. For

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 48.

Koselleck, the political crisis borne of utopianism, not the excesses of Absolutist power, was the tyranny to be feared.

The crisis exacerbated by the separation of morality and politics was, in Koselleck's reading, already dormant in the work of Hobbes. "Hobbes's man is fractured, split into private and public halves: his actions are totally subject to the law of the land while his mind remains free, 'in secret free'."<sup>32</sup> This opening up of a secret, interior realm lodged away from the reach or the interest of the sovereign is identified by Koselleck as the initial space into which the Enlightenment emerged: "The exoneration of man placed a burden on the State. That a man was human was his first secret; as such he was bound to escape the sovereign's notice. In so far as a subject did his duty and obeyed, his private life did not interest the sovereign. Here, as we shall see, lay the Enlightenment's specific point of attack. It expanded into that same gap which the Absolutist State had left unoccupied in order to end the civil war in the first place."<sup>33</sup> This sphere beyond politics reveals something of a historical irony: in order to secure its order, Absolutism had to excise morality from politics; but precisely this excision allowed for the growth of a morality that would in turn come to pass judgment on and overthrow that system.

For Koselleck, then, this space of private conscience is the space of the Enlightenment. He writes: "The movement which blithely called itself 'the Enlightenment' continued its triumphal march at the same pace at which its private interior expanded into the public domain, while the public, without surrendering its private nature, became the forum of society that permeated the entire State."<sup>34</sup> Koselleck's derogation of the Enlightenment's "triumphal march" (*Siegeszug*) is notable here, and reveals a dimension of the politics of the work to which we will return later. This

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 53

expansion of the Enlightenment into the public sphere—while still remaining under the private domain of morality—was accomplished, according to Koselleck, through specific social formations, namely the Republic of Letters and Masonic Lodges.<sup>35</sup> In these institutions, notable for the ways in which traditional social rank was suspended or negated in their operation, various social groups were brought together and found common cause in their exclusion from political power.<sup>36</sup> In providing a public sphere for the articulation of private morality, these communities endowed the moral critique of the enlighteners with authority. In Koselleck’s narrative, it was by this means that moral judgments of the private sphere acquired a legal character: “The citizens’ flexibility in arriving at their private verdicts gave them the assurance of being right together with an invisible guarantee of success.”<sup>37</sup> The exclusion of morality from politics thus allowed for the creation of a dynamic whereby the State increasingly became the subject of a stringent moral critique that nonetheless did not conceive of itself as political. This contradiction, for Koselleck, was central: “The tension between their [the social groups comprising the members of Masonic Lodges and the Republic of Letters] socially increasing weight, on the one hand, and the impossibility of lending political expression to that weight, on the other – this tension determined the historical situation in which the new society constituted itself.”<sup>38</sup>

This separation to which the Enlightenment found itself subjected led to the development of the “Reign of Criticism” (*Règne de la Critique*), in which criticism was elevated to the highest calling of reason.<sup>39</sup> This criticism, Koselleck argues, operated by means of dualisms which originated from the foundational dualism between morality and politics. Koselleck writes, “Under

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 62, 65-66, 72.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>39</sup> This elevation, according to Koselleck, was completed by Bayle: “The monumental achievement of Pierre Bayle was to wed the concept of criticism to that of reason.” Ibid., 108.

the guise of universality it [criticism] continued to resort to polar positions. Every dualistic position as such implied criticism, just as criticism for its part gained its incisiveness (and its seemingly unequivocal character) only through the polarity of ideas.”<sup>40</sup> Born of the separation between morality and politics, the Republic of Letters turned that separation into both its strength and its defense, for it allowed the elevation of critique to sovereign status, while at the same time obscuring the political nature of critique. “Therein lay the root of the ambivalence of criticism, an ambivalence that after Voltaire became its historical bench-mark: ostensibly non-political and above politics, it was in fact political.”<sup>41</sup> For Koselleck, this ambivalence was hypocrisy, and constituted the self-produced “delusion” of criticism.<sup>42</sup> The Enlightenment came increasingly to view itself as the judge of the State, while at the same time obscuring the political nature of that judgment in order to protect itself from the State. In the process, it came to be the antipode of the State: “The examination and invocation of established laws of morality, of nature, of common sense, meant the assumption of an absolute, untouchable, immutable intellectual position, which in society assured the same qualities the Absolutist prince laid claim to in the political realm.”<sup>43</sup> This constituted, for Koselleck, a core facet of the crisis which the Enlightenment perpetuated but to which it was blind: the struggle for dominance between the State and society.<sup>44</sup>

In Koselleck’s analysis, this divide between the Enlightenment’s assumption of its moral rightness and its feigned lack of political power generated a corrective: the philosophy of history.<sup>45</sup> The philosophy of history was the force which allowed for and justified this obfuscation: “The

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>45</sup> “As a result there emerged, by way of compensation, a progressive philosophy of history which promised victory to the intellectual elite, but one gained without struggle and civil war.” Koselleck, “Preface to the English Edition,” *Critique and Crisis*, 2.



philosophy of history seemed to bridge the gap between the moral position and the power that was aspired to.”<sup>46</sup> This was accomplished by specifically philosophical-historical reasoning that provided an assurance of the future. Drawing on Löwith’s thesis of secularization, Koselleck argues that “the philosophy of progress offered the certainty (neither religious nor rational but historico-philosophical) that the indirect political plan would be realised and, conversely, that rational and moral planning determines the course of history.”<sup>47</sup> As Koselleck argues, this deferment of success to a guaranteed future intensified the very crisis which it obscured. He writes: “The abolition of the State is planned and indirectly aspired to, but the revolution is not necessary, for the State will collapse anyway. The historico-philosophical identification of plan and history made this paradox a self-evident fact. The assurance of victory ruled out the need for direct conflict. The possibility of revolution is concealed. And it is concealed because the revolution is seen only in historico-philosophical terms.”<sup>48</sup> In short, the philosophy of history “shrouds the possibility of revolution yet it conjures up revolution itself.”<sup>49</sup> Thus, the philosophy of history both hides and escalates the crisis which would come to the fore in the French Revolution.

For Koselleck, this crisis was the reemergence of civil war—which had given birth to Absolutism—as Revolution—which would end it—and it was the utopian character of the philosophy of history which allowed this crisis to come about by concealing it. He writes: “Concealing this concealment was the historical function of the Utopian philosophy of history. It

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<sup>46</sup> Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis*, 130.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 133. The MIT edition throughout renders the various declensions of the German adjective *geschichtsphilosophische* as “historico-philosophical.” In my own translations and throughout this dissertation, I prefer to render it as “philosophical-historical.” Regarding Löwith, Koselleck writes in an earlier passage that “The moral citizen, whether expressly stated or not, was always safe in a philosophy of history which by name alone was an eighteenth-century product. It was largely the successor to theology. Christian eschatology in its modified form of secular progress, Gnostic-Manichaeic elements submerged in the dualism of morality and politics, ancient theories of circularity, and finally the application of the new laws of natural history to history itself – all contributed to the development of the eighteenth-century historico-philosophical consciousness.” *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 133-134.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

was responsible for the further intensification of the crisis because it made evident that the decision yet to come would take the form of a moral judgement. It proved the cogency of a history with which the bourgeoisie identified so as to carry out its moral judgement along the lines of a historico-philosophical approach to history. The philosophy of history gave the bourgeoisie the vitality and certainty needed to bring about the crisis as a moral judgement.”<sup>50</sup> The key figure in this process, in Koselleck’s telling, was Guillaume-Thomas Raynal (1713-1796), the French philosopher and critic of the mistreatment of indigenous peoples, whose influential *Philosophical and Political History of Settlements and Trade of Europeans in the Two Indies (L’Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes)* completed in 1770, exemplified the transformation of world history into both justification and guarantor of success.<sup>51</sup> In Koselleck’s reading of Raynal, the looming civil war is cast as a “moral tribunal,” through which the bourgeoisie will be justified, via philosophical-historical assurance, in its clash against the absolutist state.<sup>52</sup> Koselleck traces this guarantor function of philosophy of history to overseas expansion. He writes:

The expanding discovery, conquest, and control of this outside world is the historical expression of the modern philosophy of history. The belief in progress receives historical substantiation through overseas conquests. This is yet another crucial presupposition of the modern philosophy of history.<sup>53</sup>

And further:

Expansion overseas made for the multitude of Utopias that marked temporal progress, and at the same time society discovered the realm of nature in which all men are equal, in which the ‘morale universelle’ was a reality, the ideal world which furnished the yardstick for the indirect political criticism of the Absolutist States. The consciousness of global unity, the corresponding philosophies of history

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 176n57, 177n57.

and the indirect political criticism of the Absolutist regimes are all part of the same movement.<sup>54</sup>

Here, the concept of natural freedom derived from the encounter with the New World combined with the success of the American War of Independence to form a philosophical-historical expectation of civil war. This coming civil war was endowed by Raynal with “the aura of a transcendent, well-nigh trans-oceanic necessity.”<sup>55</sup> The utopian vision of a new epoch of freedom and equality among men, manifested historically in the American revolution and geographically in the New World, forms, in Koselleck’s narrative, the motivation for the evocation of civil war and revolution, as well as the guarantor of its success.<sup>56</sup> In this way, the crisis itself became the judgement of the Enlightenment: the future was set, secured by history, endowing the coming conflict with eschatological certainty and significance.<sup>57</sup> As Koselleck himself summarizes: “The certainty of victory lay in the extra- and supra-political consciousness which – initially as the answer to Absolutism – intensified into Utopian self-assurance. Bourgeois man, condemned to a non-political role, sought refuge in Utopia. It gave him security and power. It was the indirect political power *par excellence* in whose name the Absolutist State was overthrown.”<sup>58</sup> Thus, the civil war which gave birth to Absolutism returned, exacerbated by Enlightenment criticism and justified by the philosophy of history, to lay it to rest.

In the preceding paragraphs, we have seen how Koselleck, in his analysis of the history of the political crisis of the eighteenth century, posited the philosophy of history as a central force which intensified the crisis and justified its expression as revolution. Additionally, we have briefly established the influence, acknowledged by Koselleck, exercised by the postwar situation upon his

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 176n57, 177n57.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 184.

work in *Critique and Crisis*. However, if we examine Koselleck's narrative more closely, particularly with an eye toward questions of his own judgment, we can unearth deeper strata in which the text and context are intertwined, and which lead us closer to an illumination of the specter of trauma in his thought.

### // **Knowing vs. Knowing Better**

The connections that link the crisis of the eighteenth century with the crisis facing postwar Germany are manifold in Koselleck's thought. This is evident if we turn to his discussion of Rousseau and the *volonté générale* (general will). This concept, which constituted Rousseau's attempt to find a basis for political legitimacy in the will of the people, represents for Koselleck a prefiguration of totalitarianism. Koselleck writes, "The will striving for fulfilment is the true sovereign. This anticipates the metaphysic of the permanent revolution. The end product is the total State."<sup>59</sup> As sovereign, the general will sees no legitimacy outside itself, acknowledges no exception to its decisions.<sup>60</sup> As a result, "...Rousseau's sovereignty turns out to be nothing other than permanent dictatorship. It shares its origins with the permanent revolution into which his State has turned. The functions of the dictatorship are carried out by the one who executes the hypostasised general will."<sup>61</sup> Here, the influence of Carl Schmitt is palpable, particularly in the identification of sovereignty with exception.<sup>62</sup> Koselleck and Schmitt became acquainted in Heidelberg in 1950, around the time of the death of Schmitt's wife, marking the beginning of a conversation between the two which would shape Koselleck's work extensively.<sup>63</sup> Koselleck

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>62</sup> See Schmitt's famous formulation in the opening of *Political Theology*, which first appeared in 1922: "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception." ("Soverän ist, wer über den Ausnahmezustand entscheidet.") Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

<sup>63</sup> Dutt and Koselleck, "Ehrfarhrene Geschcihte," 41.

credited this acquaintance for “instruct[ing] me in the methodological implementation” of his marked interest in the problem of utopia.<sup>64</sup>

The totality of Rousseau’s general will is delineated by Koselleck from the sovereignty of the Absolutist prince. He writes: “The difference between dictatorship and the Absolutist State is exemplified by the effort of the former to bring the private inner space which Hobbes had excluded from the reach of the State under its sway. The Absolutist State was destroyed by the unresolved problems of religious civil war which resurfaced in the altered situation, of the Revolution.”<sup>65</sup> While this passage is pregnant with markers of trauma—language of destruction and resurfacing resonates with Koselleck’s later analysis of *Lavamasse*—our immediate concern lies with this connection between crisis, revolution, and dictatorship. Whereas Absolutism had solved the crisis of the civil wars by separating morality and politics, revolution would resuscitate that crisis by making morality once more the concern of the sovereign, but this time a sovereign located not in a single body but in the people itself, and whose justification comes not from God but from philosophy of history. For Koselleck, the results are clear:

The acceptance of, the possibility and desirability of the indisputable general will brought on terror and ideology, the weapons of dictatorship, as a means of correcting an intrusive reality. This elevated the method of progressive criticism, of taking the rational demand for the true reality (before which the presence disappears) to a political principle. Loans without collateral are constantly being drawn on the future. In pursuit of the fiction of a rationally planned reality the revolution will continue its course, just as it will continue to give birth to dictatorship in order to redeem unsecured bills.<sup>66</sup>

In this passage, we see the clear link drawn by Koselleck between revolution and dictatorship, revealing the unity of the crisis of the eighteenth century and the crisis of the twentieth. The articulation of an amorphous will of the people, channeled through an executor who acts as its

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>65</sup> Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis*, 165.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

embodiment, resulting in an “ideological dictatorship of virtue,” represents Koselleck’s accounting of the profound danger of the utopian impulse at the heart of modern philosophy of history. The metaphor of “loans without collateral” employed by Koselleck demonstrates this evaluation: the justification of the dictatorship lies in the future, its rightness secured by the future it claims to bring about. Here, Koselleck establishes a continuity, indeed an identity, between the Enlightenment and the Third Reich and the Soviet Union. Each movement’s mobilization of philosophy of history positions it as the fulfillment of historical destiny, and with this philosophical-historical ordainment comes moral judgment: in the terror of the French Revolution, in the Nazi genocide, in the Soviet gulags and purges; and, equally relevant at the time of Koselleck’s writing in the 1950s, in the mutual incomprehension of the Cold War. Thus, utopian philosophy of history, instilled with moral righteousness and justified in the future, reproduces civil war down into the present, “whose laws continue to govern us to this day.”<sup>67</sup>

This judgment, this moral certainty of the enlighteners (and those functionaries of totalitarianism whom Koselleck viewed to be their progeny) constitutes the object of fiercest condemnation in *Critique and Crisis*. This is most noticeable in Koselleck’s identification of the enlightener’s hypocrisy, which in his account originates in their inability and refusal to see their criticism as political. As he writes: “Criticism...became the victim of its ostensible neutrality; it turned into hypocrisy.”<sup>68</sup> Unable to see the political nature of their movement, the enlighteners assumed a position of innocence that cast any opposition as morally corrupt and—via the philosophy of history—illegitimate. “From the outset, progress always sided with the bourgeois judges. Nothing and nobody could evade the new jurisdiction, and whatever failed in the bourgeois critics’ judgement was turned over to moral censors who discriminated against the convicted and

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 98.

thus helped to carry out the sentence.”<sup>69</sup> Koselleck’s evaluation of this judgmental hypocrisy was fierce, as demonstrated by the following passages from the chapter entitled “The Process of Criticism”: “Mendacity was the price exacted for their humorlessness, for their inability to use lies as tactical weapons. The essence of that mendacity was the fact that it had no self-insight. It was the price paid for presumption.”<sup>70</sup> And soon after: “The King as ruler by divine right appears almost modest alongside the judge of mankind who replaced him, the critic who believed that, like God on Judgement Day, he had the right to subject the universe to his verdict.”<sup>71</sup> And finally, after an analysis of the *Encyclopedie* article on “Critique,”: “Criticism goes far beyond that which had occasioned it and is transformed into the motor of self-righteousness. It produces its own delusion.”<sup>72</sup>

In these passages, we witness Koselleck’s heated, almost visceral condemnation of the enlighteners’ presumption to act as judges of history—a presumption which he, again, believed to continue to be active in his present: “In using the weapons appropriate to the eighteenth century, all parties became the victim of a mutually intensifying and compulsory resort to ideology which has characterised the modern age ever since.”<sup>73</sup> This presumption to judge history was a continual target of criticism in Koselleck’s work, which he came to express in the maxim “Knowing is better than knowing better” (“*Wissen ist besser als besserwissen.*”).<sup>74</sup> In this phrase, historical knowledge is delineated from historical judgment, the former being the legitimate realm of the historian, and the latter the realm of ideology. However, Koselleck’s very judgment of this presumption represents a contradiction, a tension in his dual position as both historian and contemporary of the

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 117-118.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>74</sup> This phrase was employed by Koselleck in multiple texts, including “Glühende lava.”

crisis. In his introduction to *Critique and Crisis*, he writes, “In narrowing our enquiry to historic situations we do not, of course, mean to present the people of those days with a moral indictment, to find them more or less guilty. This is self-prohibiting, for man as an historic creature is always responsible, for what he willed as well as for what he did not will, and more often, perhaps, for the latter than for the former.”<sup>75</sup> Here, we see Koselleck position himself on the side of “knowing,” against the temptation to “know better.” But how to square this prescription for understanding with his stark condemnation of the “mendacity” (*Verlogenheit*) of the enlighteners, and their characterization as more deluded, more pompous, and more dangerous than monarchs who claimed to be divinely ordained? The answer lies again in the postwar context that suffuses both this particular statement and Koselleck’s entire oeuvre. For the acknowledgment that “man as an historic creature is always responsible, for what he willed as well as for what he did not will” is fully enmeshed within the aftermath of catastrophe and the politics of guilt, acknowledgment, and forgetting that defined German experience after the Second World War.

The dangerous effect of modern philosophy of history, in Koselleck’s view, is the collapsing and combination of the two domains of “knowing” and “knowing better,” in substantiating historical knowledge as historical judgment drawn from a utopian guarantee of the future. For Koselleck, this vision of the future was mistaken and pernicious. This can be seen in the following passage from the introduction to *Critique and Crisis*:

That politics is fate, that it is fate not in the sense of blind fatality, this is what the enlighteners fail to understand. Their attempts to allow the philosophy of history to negate historical factuality, to ‘repress’ the political realm, are Utopian in origin and character. The crisis caused by morality’s proceeding against history will be a permanent crisis as long as history is alienated in terms of philosophy.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis*, 7.

<sup>76</sup> Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis*, 11-12.



Here, we can gain insight into Koselleck's own political philosophy and the framework which allowed him to combine ideologically diverse regimes under a single philosophical-historical tendency. The line "politics is fate," taken from Napoleon's comment to Goethe after Jena, reveals an aversion to rational planning and future surety. The utopian thrust of modern philosophy of history—uniting in Koselleck's analysis the French Revolution, National Socialism, and Soviet Communism—constitutes a rejection of this "truth." For modern philosophy of history, politics is not fate precisely because the future can be manipulated according to its eschatological projections. Koselleck's evocation of Napoleon demonstrates a conviction that history is unplannable, that it exceeds the bounds of rational and technical manipulation, and that to deny this fact is to invite catastrophe. The historical and the political are set off from the utopian and the philosophical-historical. By this maneuver, Koselleck reaches toward a perspective from which to pass judgment on philosophy of history's many adherents in the past and present: judgment from history rather than morality.

As we have seen above, however, this position is unstable. Koselleck's judgment as a historian of this crisis is repeatedly blurred into his judgment as a contemporary of this crisis, as one who has suffered it. Despite his efforts, "knowing" continuously collapses into "knowing better;" "moral indictment," banished at the outset of Koselleck's analysis, returns in force at its climax. This slippage is the effect of trauma. In "Glühende Lava," Koselleck quotes this maxim near the outset of a section devoted to considering the different dimensions of the war's end and different experiences of the "liberation" being commemorated. He writes, "From the respective experience itself, all is unique. Today I know vastly more than I could know then, and I know differently than was possible then. So it goes for the late-born. But the non-interchangeability of a primary knowledge of experience is not possible to surpass. Knowing is better than knowing

better.”<sup>77</sup> The “primary knowledge of experience,” those experiences which “burst out [sich ergießen] in the body like glowing masses of lava,” are superior to the knowledge gained outside of experience. Here, “knowing,” is cast in terms of immediacy, associated with experience, with primacy, with the body and the effects of memory and experience upon it. This is contrasted with the passage from the introduction to *Critique and Crisis* quoted above, in which knowledge is separated from indictment and ideology.

“Knowing is better than knowing better.” The straightforwardness of this maxim is thus belied by its multivalence (in less forgiving terms, its fuzziness and imprecision). This multivalence is a result, again, of Koselleck’s dual position: one the one hand, historian and analyst of the crisis; and on the other, its victim. The slippage between the two positions, despite his efforts to separate them, results precisely from the “burst[ing] out” of trauma in the body, the resurfacing of past experiences in the present.

This maxim must also be understood in light of larger postwar arguments over the comparability of atrocities and the conflicting status of Germans as both victims and perpetrators. This “moral competition,” to borrow Robert Moeller’s phrase, allowed West Germans to redirect historical memory toward the crimes of the Red Army, highlighting the suffering of expellees and prisoners of war at the expense of the victims of the Third Reich.<sup>78</sup> As we see above, Koselleck’s narrative indeed collapsed the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century into a common philosophical-historical phenomenon. Furthermore, Koselleck himself acknowledged that the plight of refugees and air raid victims “overlaid” the extermination of the Jews in German public

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<sup>77</sup> Koselleck, “Glühende Lava.” Original: “Von der jeweiligen Erfahrung selber her ist alles einmalig. Heute weiß ich weit mehr, als ich damals wissen konnte, und ich weiß anderes, als damals möglich war. Und so geht es den Nachgeborenen. Aber die Unaustauschbarkeit eines primären Erfahrungswissens läßt sich nicht überbieten. Wissen ist besser als Besserwissen.”

<sup>78</sup> Robert G. Moeller, *War Stories: The Search for a Useable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 4-5.

consciousness in the immediate postwar years.<sup>79</sup> However, the narrative of identification in *Critique and Crisis* was not an effort to relativize the crimes of the Holocaust, but a historical investigation into the structural causes that made such catastrophes possible. As historians such as Alon Confino and Jaimey Fisher have convincingly argued, postwar Germans' encounters with the past should not be read against binary models of repression and acceptance, guilt and innocence.<sup>80</sup> With this in mind, reading *Critique and Crisis* points us toward a more complicated understanding of postwar Germans' relationship to the past, one that reveals orientations not easily classified under the twin nodes of forgetting or coming to terms. In this complicated interplay between memory, suffering, and historical knowledge, between "knowing" and "knowing better," trauma is an animating force, organizing experience for divergent purposes of remembering, forgetting, and explaining.

To fully illuminate the specter of trauma in *Critique and Crisis*, an inspection of the language through which Koselleck expresses his analysis is necessary. Returning to his examination of the relationship between dualistic thinking and crisis in the eighteenth century, we find the following passage:

It was inherent in the indirect political function of society's moral dualism within the Absolutist State that this very dualism exacerbated the crisis that manifested itself in the confrontation between morality and politics. Dualistic thought made possible the indirect legitimation of revolution beyond the radical critique and beyond the indirect occupation of the State associated with it. Yet Turgot, who was aware of the threatening civil war and legitimised it indirectly, is a typical example, bringing to light the hidden explosive force of enlightened thought as the omen of the coming decision.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Dutt and Koselleck, *Erfahrene Geschichte*, 23-24. Original: "Ich bin mir ziemlich sicher, dass die Primärerfahrung der Flucht von etwa 12 Millionen Deutschen aus dem Osten, von denen zwei Millionen den Westen nicht erreicht haben, dass ferner die Erfahrung der Fliegerangriffstoten – etwa einer halben Million Zivilisten, die dabei umgekommen sind – die Geschichte der Judenvernichtung im Bewusstsein der Zeitgenossen überlagert hat."

<sup>80</sup> Alon Confino, "Traveling as a Culture of Remembrance: Traces of National Socialism in West in West Germany, 1945-1960," in *History and Memory* 12, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2000): 92-93; Jaimey Fisher, *Disciplining Germany: Youth, Reeducation, and Reconstruction after the Second World War* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007), 7-9.

<sup>81</sup> Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis*, 157.

The language here of “hidden explosive force” reveals a connection to the metaphor of “glowing lava” with which this chapter began, and provides an opening into the traumatic inflection of the metaphors that shaped Koselleck’s historical thought. Such language is used repeatedly throughout *Critique and Crisis*. Of particular interest is Koselleck’s representation of the Enlightenment’s relationship to the crisis it avoided. Repeatedly, Koselleck describes how the enlighteners “conjured” or “conjured up” the crisis, employing the German verbs *beschwören* and *heraufbeschwören*. The associations with witchcraft and magic are present in the German as well, evoking connotations of oaths (*Schwüre*). Just as memory can call forth experiences that “burst out in the body,” the Enlightenment called forth the political crisis of the eighteenth century. The masses of lava “congealed in memory” and the crisis “conjured up” by the enlighteners occupy the same metaphoric space, revealing trauma as a foundational signifier that unites them. The geologic metaphors employed by Koselleck—lava, bursting (*sich ergießen*), congealing (*gerinnen*)—are congruent with language of sorcery—conjuring (*beschwören*, *heraufbeschwören*). Both share in larger connotations of eruption, overturning, and upheaval. The history of the eighteenth century, cast in these traumatic terms, becomes a history of trauma, with the crisis and the Revolution forming a world-historical lava mass that burst forth into catastrophe. And the very intellectual apparatus that enabled the “conjuring” of the crisis—the philosophy of history—becomes a source of trauma, the reservoir from which the crisis is conjured and from which the lava mass bursts forth.

The use of such metaphors and the trauma they signify resonate with broad concerns about the past among postwar German intellectuals. As seen in the work A. Dirk Moses, the controversies over the political direction of the Federal Republic in the 1950s and 1960s were inextricably linked to the question of continuity between the Third Reich and the Bonn Republic and the specter of

possible renazification.<sup>82</sup> As far as both point towards the potential for the past to puncture the present through its reemergence, this fear of recidivism is congruent with Koselleck's historical metaphors of bursting, congealing, and conjuring.

## // Conclusion

Our interpretation here has sought to reveal the imprint left by trauma on Koselleck's thought through a reading of his experiences and his historical language. I have argued that Koselleck's identification of the political crisis of the eighteenth century and the catastrophes of the twentieth century as emanations of the same development—philosophy of history—results from his status as both contemporary and historian of this development. This dual position, I maintain, creates a tension in the text of *Critique and Crisis* between historical judgment and political judgment, between “knowing” and “knowing better.” This tension, in turn, generates a metaphors of trauma in Koselleck's narrative in which historical phenomena—revolution, genocide, civil war—are cast in language congruent with the later Koselleck's recollections on his devastating wartime experiences, terms which evoke the (re)emergence of something hidden, contained, suppressed; in short, a language of trauma.

This language of trauma in *Critique and Crisis* is further significant if we consider its effects vis-à-vis the project of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (conventionally translated as “coming to terms with the past” or “mastering the past”) and normative conceptions of trauma and its treatment. In a different manner than we saw in the chapters on Löwith and Voegelin but with congruent results, Koselleck does not “come to terms with” or “master” the past, but delegitimizes it by uncovering the dishonesty and destructiveness of its animating framework. The response to trauma does not occasion reintegration or acceptance, but rather constitutes an attack on its very

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<sup>82</sup> A. Dirk Moses, *German Intellectuals and the Nazi Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 185, 187.

foundations. The wound in Koselleck's narrative—crisis—is not to be come to terms with, for to do so would be to prolong catastrophe. Rather, it is to be excised and rendered anathema. Trauma in *Critique and Crisis* thus operates in a heterodox register, generating pathways of significance that exceed the conceptual boundaries of both clinical accounts of trauma and dominant understandings of postwar German struggles with the past.

As we detailed earlier, Koselleck himself understood his investigation of philosophy of history in *Critique and Crisis* to be fully intertwined with the project of understanding Germany's postwar devastation.<sup>83</sup> Our effort so far has been to read *Critique and Crisis* as a major attempt at realizing that project. However, the trajectory of Koselleck's historical scholarship reveals that his efforts did not end with this text, nor did he only seek to understand the utopian origin of the crisis by which Germany was beset. On the contrary, after identifying modern philosophy of history as a cause of the catastrophe, much of his later work constitutes a series of efforts to resist its influence and its assumptions. It is to this work that we turn our attention in Chapter Six.

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<sup>83</sup> See Dutt and Koselleck, *Erfahrene Geschichte*, 32 and Eric A. Johnson and Reinhart Koselleck, "Recollections of the Third Reich," *NIAS newsletter* 22 (1999), 14. Johnson asks the question "Did the Nazi time somehow influence your personal decision to be a historian?" As part of his answer, Koselleck responded, "My motivation to do it was, of course, to analyse the mentality, the origins and the feasibility of the Utopian dream – as I called it at the time – that Hitler strove to achieve." And in answer to another question: "In principle, the motivation of nearly all historians was to understand what had happened."

## Chapter 4 // Order out of Disorder: Voegelin and the Challenge of the Postwar Present

### // Introduction

As west Germans worked in the postwar years to rebuild physically, culturally, and politically, the topic of emigration and exile became a site of poignant discussion. Many luminaries of the intellectual life of the Federal Republic—including Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Siegfried Kracauer, and Jacob Taubes—were themselves exiles who had returned to Germany. Questions of political formation and education, economic recovery, and mastering the past were of particular meaning to those who had fled political oppression in the preceding decades.

One such investigation into the meaning of emigration took place at the Academy for Political Learning (*Akademie für Politische Bildung*) in Tutzing in the fall of 1966. A two-day conference entitled “Emigration – Betrayal of Germany?” (“Emigration – Verrat an Deutschland?”), it ran from October 10<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup>, bringing together professors and politicians from across Germany.<sup>1</sup> Among them was Eric Voegelin, at the time the director of the Institute for Political Science (*Institut für Politische Wissenschaft*) at the University of Munich and a former émigré who had fled the Gestapo in Vienna after the annexation of Austria in 1938.

While the topic of emigration and its relationship to the German past and present may have been familiar, Voegelin’s particular response was remarkable. Entitled “Emigration – Homecoming from the Shadow Realm” (“Emigration – Heimkehr aus dem Schattenreich”), Voegelin’s presentation constituted a divergence from a dominant theme in discourses on exile: loss. Separated from family, homeland, and language, the figure of the exile is often conditioned

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<sup>1</sup> Material on this conference and Voegelin’s contribution is found in Eric Voegelin Papers, Box 73, Folder 13, Hoover Institution Archives. Additional material was provided by the Akademie für Politische Bildung Tutzing. Unfortunately, no typescript of Voegelin’s presentation is extant in his papers or in the archives of the AfPB.

by distance, longing, absence. Loss represents a foundational trauma of exile, a defining feature of existence outside of the homeland. In the writings of exile intellectuals, loss is often a central theme.

Against this familiar representation of exile as an experience of loss, Voegelin portrayed it as a gain. This is established in the title itself, where emigration—the flight from one’s homeland—is portrayed as a return. Drawing on Plato’s myth of the cave as a metaphor, Voegelin cast the Third Reich as a realm of “shadowy existence” defined by “pneumopathic alienation” and “spiritual and intellectual stupefaction.”<sup>2</sup> As a newspaper report summarized, “Under such circumstances, the emigration to the USA was for Voegelin no abandonment [*Verlassen*], but a finding of the homeland [*Finden der Heimat*]. Where the spiritual climate is rotten, there can be no homeland, and emigration becomes on the contrary a ‘homecoming from the shadow realm.’”<sup>3</sup> Here, the dominant depiction of exile as loss is overturned and the trauma of emigration—detailed in Chapter 2—delegitimized. This inversion is further extended to the act of return, for Voegelin argued for a disturbing continuity in spiritual confusion between the Third Reich and postwar society, which he referred to as “the institutional survival of the authoritarian attitude.”<sup>4</sup> Voegelin’s return to Germany is thus cast as the exile, for despite the collapse of the Nazi regime and the foundation of a republic, Germany remained a *Schattenreich*.

The particular grounds for this argument for continuity will be examined below. At the outset, it is necessary to enumerate the host of questions that come along with the provocation inherent in Voegelin’s formulation. In what respect does the United States constitute his

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Manfred Weber, “Schattenreich Deutschland,” October 19, 1966. A clipping of the article is found in the above folder in the Eric Voegelin Papers. Original: “schattenhafte Existenz,” “pneumopathischen Verfremdung,” and “geistiger und intellektueller Verblödung.”

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. Original: “Unter solchen Umständen war für Voegelin die Emigration in die USA kein Verlassen, sondern ein Finden der Heimat. Wo das geistige Klima verrottet ist, kann es keine wirkliche Heimat geben, die Emigration wird zu ihrem Gegenteil, der ‚Heimkehr aus dem Schattenreich‘.”

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Ibid. Original: “das institutionelle Überleben der obrigkeitsstaatlichen Haltung”.



homeland? What is the relationship between *Heimat* and “spiritual climate,” and why is this category privileged above traditional ties such as language and kinship? Does this reversal of the values associated with exile function as a concealment of trauma? And does this position not lead Voegelin to identify a deeper loss, a truer spiritual exile that constitutes a more fundamental trauma of separation and alienation? This chapter explores such questions in the trajectory of Voegelin’s work in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly surrounding the question of order. For this period saw the beginning of Voegelin’s magnum opus *Order and History*, as well as his return to Germany and his direct confrontation with the tasks of reconstruction that occupied the first decades of the Federal Republic. I argue that Voegelin’s investigations into order in history constitute a project of reclamation, in which the difficulties of the postwar present and the catastrophes of the first-half of the twentieth century find their corrective in the historical discovery of the proper attunement to the order of being. In this project’s narration of the history of order, the trauma of the recent past is delegitimated and reinscribed as world-historical disorder: the trauma of political emigration displaced by the trauma of spiritual emigration. Finally, I argue that Voegelin’s reinscription of trauma into disorder is amplified by a prophetic posture, in which he becomes a voice of reason crying out in the desert of modern disorder.

In order to more clearly elucidate the effects of trauma, order, and disorder in the early volumes of *Order and History* and map their intersections with the broader context of German encounters with the recent past, the sections of this chapter will proceed in reverse chronological order. For in the 1960s, Voegelin staged a provocative and controversial confrontation with German society which is essential for the illumination of the historical and philosophical work that comprises the first three volumes of *Order and History*.

**// Voegelin, Spiritual Decay, and “Mastering the Present”**

In 1958, after 16 years at Louisiana State University, Voegelin was called to the University of Munich to take a chair in political science. There, he founded the Institut für Politische Wissenschaft and served as its director until 1969. Voegelin cited as the reasons for his move the higher salary, the appealing intellectual environment, and the opportunity to run his own institute and direct scholarship.<sup>5</sup> In light of our examination of Voegelin's treatment of emigration, however, we must note that this return to Central Europe did not represent for Voegelin a joyous homecoming. Voegelin's embrace of emigration as *Heimkehr* was reflected not only in rhetoric but in action. Soon after his arrival in the United States in 1938, brief appointments at Harvard and at Bennington College in Vermont instilled a desire to assimilate into American culture and society, in order to differentiate himself from refugees as a group and to avoid the "leftist element" that elicited his distaste.<sup>6</sup> As he described it in 1973, "...I had firmly decided that once I had been thrown out of Austria by the National Socialists I wanted to make the break complete and from now on be an American. This aim, however, I could hardly achieve if I was stigmatized as a member of the refugee group."<sup>7</sup> This desire was actualized officially in 1944, when Voegelin and his wife Lissy became US citizens.

This fear of stigmatization was an effect of the trauma of that preceded emigration. This is attested to by material produced during the early years of his emigration to the United States. On January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1939, Voegelin participated in a dinner and speaking event at the Community Church of Boston. The title of the panel was "The Plight and Problem of Refugees." The outline of his presentation preserved in his papers paints a dark picture of the tenuous existence of those who

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<sup>5</sup> Eric Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, ed. Ellis Sandoz, vol. 34 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 115-116. The material contained in this volume was originally taken down in 1973 and originally published in 1989.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

wished to escape Nazi persecution.<sup>8</sup> A section labeled “Techniques of Persecution” enumerates the methods of economic oppression employed by the regime, including seizure of property, confiscation of funds, and forced unemployment. A subsection entitled “State of anxiety and disintegration of personality” details more direct violence: jails, concentration camps, beatings, stigma and isolation, and the pall of “permanent insecurity.”<sup>9</sup> This account of the tribulations of persecution and emigration are echoed in Voegelin’s autobiographical comments which we examined in Chapter 2, particularly in his recollection of his narrow escape from the Gestapo at his home and his “trembling” fear that he would be arrested at the Swiss-Austrian border.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, Voegelin’s portrayal of emigration as “homecoming” must be understood against this stark depiction of life under National Socialism. Deprived of property, employment, mobility, and sociality after the *Anschluss*, the escape to the United States via Switzerland constituted for Voegelin an escape from deprivation. His desire to avoid the permanent label of refugee constitutes an attempt at escape as well: from the lingering effects and associations of the traumas that preceded emigration.

The taking up of a chair in political science in Munich, then, constituted in part a return to the locus of trauma, to the former homeland that had become inhospitable. Along with the economic and academic motivators for the move to Munich listed above, Voegelin later revealed a desire to infuse “an element of international consciousness, and of democratic attitudes” into the German university.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the eleven years at the Institute for Political Science constituted an attempt to overthrow the “realm of shadows,” to restore to the German university and German society the values that had been destroyed in the catastrophe of National Socialism.

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<sup>8</sup> Eric Voegelin Papers, Box 56, Folder 2, Hoover Institution Archives.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, 71.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 116.

In Voegelin's own later estimation, this attempt was a failure beyond the confines of the Institute for Political Science itself.<sup>12</sup> For during his return to Germany Voegelin became an unrelenting and unforgiving critic of the after-effects of National Socialism in general, and the failures of the German university in particular.

This criticism constituted a significant portion of Voegelin's activity as a scholar and a teacher from the outset of his nine years in Munich. In 1959, Voegelin delivered a lecture at the inauguration of the Bavarian Academy for Political Education on the subject of "Democracy in the New Europe."<sup>13</sup> He began by highlighting the insufficiency of a constitution as the sole guarantor of a democratic society, arguing instead that democracy could only survive if citizens dedicated themselves to self-scrutinization and the upholding of democratic values. In doing so, he warned against the temptation of complacency in a society that, by 1959, was in the midst of an economic boom and swift recovery. He wrote: "A democracy is no Cockaigne in which the peaceful citizen can pursue his affairs and enjoy the economic miracle; rather it is a state of daily, well-exercised, and habitual vigilance and discipline in the fundamental questions of political life."<sup>14</sup> Evoked here are both the collapse of the Weimar Republic and the more recent catastrophe of National Socialism. Despite the bounties of West Germany's economic resurgence, the so-called "economic miracle" (*Wirtschaftswunder*), democracy was not safe unless individuals dedicated themselves to its defense.

This defense, however, was cast by Voegelin as more than respect for the constitution and electoral politics. Beyond the formal structures of democracy, Germans must understand the necessity of rendering anathema those political movements, parties, and ideologies which were

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>13</sup> In Eric Voegelin, *Published Essays: 1953-1965*, vol. 11 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 59-69.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 59.

antithetical to democracy itself. Taking again the example of Weimar, Voegelin contended that democrats of the time failed because they did not assert the right of civil society against the *Volksgemeinschaft*, they did not ban non-democratic parties, and they did not have the gall for civil war, which "...would have been bitter but certainly not as bitter as the alien rule (*Fremdherrschaft*) of the National Socialist sectarian movement, as World War Two and its consequences."<sup>15</sup> The grave stakes of insistence on defense against catastrophe by all means necessary is no oddity for Voegelin, either in his rhetoric or in his evaluation of the recent past. Rather, within the context of the Cold War, the lessons of 1933 and 1945 remain pertinent. In his estimation, democracy in postwar Europe requires European unification: the age of nation-states has passed, and the societies of Europe must form a European system.<sup>16</sup> And along with this unification must come sustained action against those systems which would overthrow democracy from within: "The stability of civil government within the European nations, in every single one, has become the condition for the survival of all of them. The iron suppression of ideological nonsense is today the condition for bare existence."<sup>17</sup>

While somewhat stunning in its metaphor, the dimensions of this "iron suppression" are multiple. Arguing in the same essay that a democracy "can be tolerant only toward those who are willing to submit to the conditions of the civil government", Voegelin cited approvingly the banning of the communist party in the Federal Republic of Germany in August, 1956.<sup>18</sup> However, as we have seen above, for Voegelin the defense of democracy must infuse the interior lives of citizens as well as political institutions. Thus, the project of "iron suppression" of "ideological

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 63-64.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 63.

nonsense” was the responsibility of all postwar Europeans, and one which Voegelin undertook vigorously in its intellectual and spiritual dimensions.

Voegelin’s full-throated attempt at this criticism occurred in the summer semester of 1964, where he delivered a lecture series in the Arts Faculty of the University of Munich entitled “Hitler und die Deutschen.” In these ten lectures, Voegelin set out to diagnose the “central German experiential problem of our time”: namely, the rise of Hitler and the general complicity of the German population in his regime.<sup>19</sup> From the outset of this project, Voegelin established a hermeneutic of experience, insisting that the theorization of political problems is only possible when their experiential bases are recognized.<sup>20</sup> This hermeneutic is essential for our task of understanding his earlier work in *Order and History*. In the case of his lectures, the experiences that frame the problem, along with Hitler’s rise to power, were postwar controversies concerning guilt, responsibility, and criminality. Important among these in Voegelin’s analysis was the debate surrounding the appearance of Percy Schramm’s introduction to Henry Picker’s *Hitlers Tischgespräche*, entitled “Anatomy of a Dictator.” Schramm had served as the official diarist of the German High Command from March, 1943 until the end of the war in Europe. Voegelin eviscerated Schramm for his focus on Hitler’s “aura” and charisma and for his failure to perceive the true nature of the problem of Hitler’s rise (as well as his failure, in Voegelin’s eyes, to adequately respond to scholarly literature).<sup>21</sup>

For Voegelin, attempts to separate Hitler as a phenomenon from German society were wrongheaded. In his estimation, Hitler cannot be isolated: “Instead one can see the phenomenon of his rise to power only in connection with a disposition of the German people, which brought

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<sup>19</sup> Eric Voegelin, *Hitler and the Germans*, trans. and ed. Detlev Clemens and Brendan Purcell, vol. 31 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 52.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

Hitler into power.”<sup>22</sup> The cause of this disposition, and the reason for the failure of German society to comprehend it, was according to Voegelin a malaise of “spiritual illiteracy” and “spiritual decay.”<sup>23</sup> The location of German society as a whole, rather than National Socialists or Hitler in particular, as the host of this spiritual deficiency is expounded upon by Voegelin early in the second lecture. He said: “What we have to deal with is not the National Socialists and their heinous crimes, nor the atrocities, not the unearthing of the past, nor the justified indignation of the victims—these are all phenomena situated in the continuity and causality of history; but our problem is the spiritual condition of a society in which the National Socialists could come into power.”<sup>24</sup> According to Voegelin, the status of this spiritual deficiency as the determining factor is attested to by the numerous scandals surrounding former functionaries and beneficiaries of the Nazi regime: the revelations of industrialists who exploited slave labor, the lack of punishment for lawyers who did not resist the euthanasia program, the apologetics surrounding Hans Globke, and the escape from prison and emigration of a former SS officer.<sup>25</sup> As Voegelin dourly observed, the conditions which allowed National Socialism to attain power are not erased by military defeat and surrender.<sup>26</sup> In his perception, the problems of 1933 persisted in 1964, and only a thorough, ruthless effort of philosophical criticism can they be addressed.

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<sup>22</sup> Voegelin, *Hitler and the Germans*, 59.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 63-69. Voegelin was incensed at the conferral of the Cross of Merit to Heinrich Bütetfisch, a chemist and manager at IG Farben who had been convicted as a war criminal for his use of slave labor. His denunciation of the lawyers who allowed the euthanasia program to continue was heightened by the fact that the program was not simply illegal from the point of view of the Federal Republic, but was illegal at the time of its execution, thus revealing the “spiritual decay” of those who were complicit in National Socialism. Regarding Hans Globke, who served as Chief of Staff for West German chancellor Konrad Adenauer from 1953 to 1963 and had performed various roles in the Nazi legal bureaucracy, Voegelin spoke succinctly: “It was always maintained that he had in various ways alleviated the enforcement of the anti-Semitic Nuremberg Laws. He alleviated nothing. They were all killed.”

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

As we detailed in the introduction and in previous chapters, concerns about complicity, guilt, and continuity were central to postwar German debates about “mastering the past” (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*). The question of what to do with former National Socialists and their fellow travelers was part and parcel of the troubling question of the legacy of the Nazi regime and its crimes. In these lectures, Voegelin waded directly into these debates in an effort to disrupt their foundational presuppositions, namely the concept of “mastering the past” itself. Voegelin undertook this disassembly in the second half of his first lecture. He began by raising the question of whom is understood to be the prospective “master” of the past. For while many Germans may have agonized over the proper understanding of the Hitler years, Voegelin presented it as a simple matter for others, including himself, who were not complicit in National Socialism and saw it as a clear threat from the beginning. As he explained, “That is to say, what is today the unmastered past, for the people at the level of a Schramm or Augstein, was a completely masterable present for the people who lived at the time. I mastered Hitler even before he came to power, and many others did too.”<sup>27</sup> Here, the project of “mastering the past” is reformulated as a marker of failure rather than a sign of moral and historical virtue. The one who needs to master the past is precisely one who failed to master that past when it was present.

With this destabilization of the figure of the prospective “master” in place, Voegelin proceeded to undermine the past as the proper object of mastery. He continued: “Again one can ask, Why should it [the past] be mastered? For it has indeed passed.”<sup>28</sup> This maneuver is remarkable, particularly in light of Voegelin’s contention, examined above, that the problem facing postwar Germans is not the atrocities of the Nazi regime per se, but rather the conditions which made them possible in the first place. This insistence on the pastness of the past is strange, precisely

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 70.



since it emerges within this deeper narrative of continuity of conditions, i.e. the “spiritual decay” that persisted throughout the rise and fall of the Third Reich. For Voegelin, the past is not the proper object of mastery because National Socialism is no more. He argues, “...National Socialism belongs to the past, it is no danger, even when there are again and again National Socialist manifestations from the past, which disagreeably make themselves noticed.”<sup>29</sup>

This contradiction is essential to understanding Voegelin’s historical orientation vis-à-vis the postwar situation. It is also a shadow of trauma. His insistence that National Socialism is “no danger,” despite having enumerated in the previous lecture the detestable social and political amnesty enjoyed by many perpetrators, functions to sever the effectivity of their actions in the postwar present. Furthermore, the language of “manifestations” (*Erscheinungen*) alludes to a deeper problematic of reemergence, in which the pastness of National Socialism is suspended and violated.

Despite its contradictory architecture, Voegelin’s argument is not taken in our interpretation as a failure, but rather as productive of the delegitimizing trajectory of his work. This is more clearly established when we turn to Voegelin’s alternative to the mastering of the past: the mastering of the present. Succeeding his assertion of the pastness of the past in the first lecture, Voegelin continued with the following, which he identified as the “first thesis” of his lectures: “And consequently if there is somehow the feeling that there is still something to master in the past, then we are coming to what I have continually pointed toward in all these examples, that we are living in an unmastered *present*.”<sup>30</sup> But how is this present separated from the past which has so thoroughly shaped it, as evidenced by the very examples of continuity that Voegelin provided? The key to this question is Voegelin’s historicization of the concept of the present as

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 70.

the link between past and future. This concept of the present as temporal link (*Gegenwart*) is denigrated by Voegelin as a “thoroughly ideological notion” born from the eighteenth century.<sup>31</sup> In place of this deformation, Voegelin offers the present in the sense of “the existence of man in his presence (*Präsenz*) under God.”<sup>32</sup> Here, to master the present means to be present, to have presence that gives meaning to the otherwise meaningless sequence of time.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, when we have presence in the present, when we understand our existence as existence under God, we act in accordance with judgment. He explains: “Under mastering the present there is a virtue to be understood, the virtue of placing the present of immanent time under the judgment of the presence under God.”<sup>34</sup> When this judgment is not taken as the measure, as Voegelin argues in the second lecture, the present remains unmastered.<sup>35</sup>

Despite the theological-apocalyptic overtones of this argument, Voegelin was not advocating a doctrinally religious response; he is not calling for sacramental repentance. Rather, he was building from a perspective that avowedly fuses Biblical revelation with Platonic *noesis*. In our examination of the first volumes of *Order and History* below, we will examine this fusion in greater detail. In the context of the “Hitler and the Germans” lectures, it suffices to illuminate the connection drawn by Voegelin between mastering the present and the proper order of society, an order which is only comprehensible if the present is understood as being present under God. Thus, to master the present in Voegelin’s construction is to understand the proper relation between human existence and divine being, and thus to seek to restore order.

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

This concern with order and disorder, voiced in the summer of 1964, contains deep resonances with Voeglin's work in the 1950s in *Order and History*. What its presence in these lectures reveals is the practical angle of the extensive historical and philosophical labor performed in those volumes. The search for order in the past was not simply a lament for a humanity more attuned to the order of being, but a practical exercise in dispelling the disorder of the present. This is stated explicitly in the first lecture: "That is to say, the science of the order of man in society arises from the reaction against not existing in the present."<sup>36</sup>

But what led to the loss of presence in the first place? What places Germans of the 1960s further from the truth of order than ancient Israelites and Greeks? For Voegelin, the fault lay with ideologies, which "erect the prevention of the mastering of the present into a principle."<sup>37</sup> Here, as in the texts studied in our second chapter, Voegelin's opprobrium ranges across the political spectrum, bundling together for condemnation Marxism, National Socialism, positivism, progressivism, and secular liberalism. The means by which such ideologies have hampered the mastery of the present is their dilution and mutilation of language. Indeed, Voegelin goes as far as to argue that, while the problem of mastering the present is a "general human problem," it is particularly difficult for postwar Germans due to the linguistic wounds inflicted by ideology. As he laments at the end of the first lecture, "This entire dimension of meaning, where these expressions were indeed created in order to elucidate and express the presence under God, has been essentially suppressed in the German language."<sup>38</sup> In order to end this suppression and enable the mastery of the present, Voegelin argues for the need to clear away the "ideological junk"

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 73.

(“*Ideologieg[e]rümpe*l”) that stands in the way of a forthright understanding of the “*conditio humana*.”<sup>39</sup>

The ubiquity of this junk, and the preponderance of the ideologies that generate it, signified for Voegelin the depraved “spiritual condition” examined above. In Voegelin’s analysis, this “spiritual condition” generated a crisis of “contemptibility” (*Verachtlichkeit*). That is, postwar society was confronted with the unpleasant question of how a man such as Hitler was able to rise to power. Voegelin enumerated two consequences of this crisis, both related to the problem of continuity between the Third Reich and West Germany. The first consequence is what Voegelin termed the “Buttermelcher Syndrome,” an appellation given by Voegelin in response to a letter written to the *Sddeutsche Zeitung* amidst the Schramm affair which resisted the impugning of an entire generation on Hitler’s account.<sup>40</sup> The “Buttermelcher Syndrome” represents a refusal to admit the extent to which German society was responsible. Voegelin inveighed at length against this refusal in the following passage:

They do not willingly admit that, particularly not because it concerns indeed the entire representative level of German society: the poets and thinkers, the philosophers and writers, the pastors and professors, the industrial leaders and prelates, the politicians and diplomats, the judges and civil servants, and, not least, the generals. That means that all among the German élites were involved in the criminality and stupidity of the National Socialist regime and are burdened with this involvement up to today; for those people are indeed still alive and do not want to admit that what happened was criminal and mad, because then they too would have to admit that they themselves are criminals and madmen.<sup>41</sup>

Here, again, we are faced with the contradiction borne from Voegelin’s demarcation of the mastering of the past from the mastering of the present. Voegelin’s instillation of the “burdened” (*belastet*) status of German elites undercuts this separation. This tension is evocative of his critique

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

of collective guilt presented earlier in the second lecture. Voegelin attacked collective guilt as a misleading and misguided cliché, as guilt is “always something that can be attributed to a person.”<sup>42</sup> He offered as an example of the right understanding of guilt a passage from Ezekiel 18 that rebukes the concept of generational guilt.<sup>43</sup> However, despite disconnecting personal guilt from the guilt of others, Voegelin did acknowledge the social aspect of collective guilt, by which all of society suffers, even those who opposed the regime, and which creates a lingering mistrust that lasts for “generations.”<sup>44</sup> For Voegelin, these social and material consequences, including the partition of Germany, “must be borne,” for reunification will not be allowed short of another world war.<sup>45</sup> Despite these concessions, however, Voegelin went on to critique collective guilt as an alibi. This critique had two dimensions. The first was Voegelin’s claim that collective guilt allows people to “burrow into the past,” applying contemporary history as “a kind of exhibitionism with the emotional aim of an exoneration by means of a generous exhibiting of past atrocities...”<sup>46</sup> The second dimension was again the claim that this “exhibitionism” encourages an ignoring and disavowal of the present.

But once again, the problem of historicity reemerges. This contradiction, between the pastness of the past and the present status enjoyed by criminals, is again the effect of trauma. Voegelin’s employment of the adjective *belastet* carries also connotations of pollution and contamination is of note here as well, as it undercuts Voegelin’s attempt at separation by

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 75. The English translation uses the rendering from the Revised Standard Version. The particular verses are Ez 18: 1-5, 9: “The word of the Lord came to me again: ‘What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, “The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge”? As I live, says the Lord God, this proverb shall be no more used by you in Israel. Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul that sins shall die. If a man is righteous...he shall surely live.”

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 75-76.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 77.

perforating the boundary between past and present.<sup>47</sup> For does not the past which he isolated and distanced remain, via the very “burdened” nature of perpetrators and collaborators, disturbingly effective in the present? The very past which he demarcated from the future remains a burden, a contamination on the present, reflective of the manner in which German elites remain burdened by their criminality.

And again, this marker of trauma in Voegelin’s discourse is attended by a delegitimizing maneuver. After claiming the necessity of the project of uncovering the “contemptibility” that Hitler revealed, Voegelin stated: “And that is the mastering of the present that you are called to and that one cannot escape by taking up the atrocities of the past. For what is at issue, I emphasize once again, is not that atrocities were committed. What is at issue is, not the horrors, but the men who cooperated in these things and their spiritual structure, which up to now has not changed in a convincing way.”<sup>48</sup> The identification of a deeper “spiritual structure” as the plane of action works to displace the trauma of the “horrors,” while at the same time absolutizing their historicity. The past, banished in Voegelin’s analysis, returns in his indignation, in the continuity of the “burden” borne by those who participated in the crimes of the Third Reich.

In this interpretation, Voegelin’s emphasis on *Präsenz* is revelatory of the effect of trauma in the lectures. The detemporalization of the present and its orientation around an eternal standard of order and judgment works to distance the traumas whose exhibition through contemporary history Voegelin found distasteful. The plane of historical concern is thus shifted from the enumeration of atrocities to a foundational stratum of “spiritual” undercurrents. The proper history

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<sup>47</sup> Take for example one of Voegelin’s criticism of the attention given by Schramm to Jodl: “I must say, I would not like to know how this Jodl discussed things with this Hitler, even if I could find out, for then I could in the end experience it and my language would become vulgar.” *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

of the catastrophe becomes then a history that develops on this plane: a history of attunement and rebellion, of order and disorder.

This shift created by Voegelin's historical criticism was abutted by his treatment of the question of how the failure to be present under God creates the catastrophe. For Voegelin, this occurred through a dual process of "dedivinization" (*Entgöttlichung*) and "dehumanization" (*Entmenschlichung*). This degeneration consists in a "loss of reality" (*Realitätsverlust*), in which humanity is no longer understood as participating in the divine, as it was through both classical Greek philosophy and Israelite revelation.<sup>49</sup> Once this connection between humanity and the divine is severed, humanity suffers a "loss of dignity" (*Würdeverlust*): "One cannot dedivinize oneself without dehumanizing oneself—with all the consequences of dehumanization that we shall still have to deal with."<sup>50</sup> Here, the naturalization of humanity borne from the scientific revolution and from enlightenment criticism is marked as the central catastrophe, the originating trauma at the root of the twentieth century's crises. The radical denial of the transcendent in philosophies such as those of Feuerbach, Marx, and Comte becomes a crime that underlies and makes possible the atrocities that defined the Second World War. Voegelin made his belief in this connection clear when, citing Novalis' exclamation that "The world shall be as I wish it!", he offered the following gloss: "there you already have the whole problem of Hitler, the central problem of dedivinizng and dehumanizing."<sup>51</sup>

The symptoms that arise from dedivinization/dehumanization were catalogued by Voegelin under the rubric of "pneumopathology," signifying again the centrality of the spiritual dimension of the crisis.<sup>52</sup> Chief among those that he identified was the creation of a "second

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 101-102. This term was introduced at the outset of the third lecture.

reality,” shorn of humanity’s grounding in the divine and determined by an unfettered application of will.<sup>53</sup> Here, the echoes of Voegelin’s critique of Gnosticism are deafening. In Voegelin’s estimation, these “second realities,” created and imposed by immanentist ideologies, block off the proper realm of order and reduce humans to spiritual “illiterates.”<sup>54</sup> However, not all are held under the sway of the “second reality.” Voegelin throughout the lectures cited thinkers who see through and reveal the absurdity that ideology imposes upon reality. Particular praise was given to the writers Robert Musil, Heimito von Doderer, and Karl Krauss. These figures provided Voegelin with an unusual measure of optimism: “It’s not always a dead loss; when one sees these things, one simply doesn’t have to throw in the towel. But one must do what one can to support those who try to change these horrible conditions.”<sup>55</sup>

Such figures also served for Voegelin as twentieth century prophets. Discussing the role of prophets in Israelite society under the monarchy—a topic to which we return below in our interpretation of *Order and History*—Voegelin argued that “the prophet is first and foremost a social critic, because he must keep the political organization under control, in accord with the standards of the covenant.” The example of Israelite prophets and the covenant with Yahweh is expanded and universalized as a model for all humans and the proper relationship to the divine. Like Isaiah, Musil, Doderer, and Krauss are cast as ones who are crying out in the wilderness.

In this identification of those who defend order against the stupidity and calamity cause by de divinization and dehumanization, Voegelin positions himself in the camp of the ordained. This position, hinted at in his claim, noted above, that he had “mastered Hitler even before he came to power,” was made more directly early in the eight lecture.<sup>56</sup> After expounding the social-critical

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 107-108.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 90-91.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 70.



function of Israelite prophets, Voegelin continued: “As I have said, these problems continue into the modern era, where the prophets are no longer a social institution, but where new prophets must emerge in order to carry out the social criticism.”<sup>57</sup> Here we see a distinct moment of intersection between Voegelin’s scholarship and the crisis of postwar Germans’ confrontation with the past. These lectures on “Hitler and the Germans,” so self-consciously and intentionally controversial, served as a practical attempt, following Musil et al., to “change these horrible conditions,” to call German society back to the covenant that applies to all men, the covenant between the human world and the divine.<sup>58</sup> The abandonment of *Präsenz*, the dedivinization and dehumanization of mankind, are deviations from order, of which Voegelin positions himself as the prophet. And like the prophets of scripture, Voegelin sees the catastrophes of the present not as exclusively mundane affairs, but as manifestations of a deeper spiritual disturbance, as consequences of disorder.

The lectures on “Hitler and the Germans” thus constitute an attempt at restoration. They are also, as we argued above, a practice in the delegitimization of the trauma of the Second World War and its myriad atrocities. For by decentering the hideous events of the recent past as functions of a foundational spiritual disorder, rooted by Voegelin in his earlier work in gnostic philosophies of history, the effectivity of trauma is undercut and circumscribed within a “second reality” that can be resisted. The prophetic act of calling back is thus part and parcel of a historical project aimed at uncovering and recovering the proper order of human society that had been disrupted. And this project of Voegelin’s found its fullest expression in his monumental work, *Order and History*.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 270.

<sup>58</sup> For an example of this controversy, see “Deutschenhaß als ‘neue Wissenschaft,’” in *Deutsche Nationale Zeitung und Soldatenzeitung*, June 26, 1964, which misinterpreted, as its title betrays, Voegelin’s criticism of German society as hatred of Germans. Voegelin also reportedly received personal threats as a response to these lectures. See Detlev Clemens’ introduction, “Eric Voegelin’s ‘Hitler and the Germans’ Lectures in the Context of the Germans’ Treatment of Their Nazi Past,” in *Hitler and the Germans*, 1.

## // Order as Historical Homeland

Although the first volume appeared in 1956, *Order and History* had a somewhat torturous prehistory. The project had originated in 1937 while Voegelin was still at the University of Vienna under the rubric of a “History of Political Ideas.”<sup>59</sup> The plan to produce a textbook, however, was soon expanded, as Voegelin was drawn “deeper and deeper” into texts which required more and more explication.<sup>60</sup> In the process, Voegelin came to view a “history of ideas” as an ideological construct, recalling later his realization that “there were no ideas unless there were symbols of immediate *experiences*.”<sup>61</sup> These experiences of reality, along with the various symbolizations they generated across human societies, became the new focus of the project.<sup>62</sup> The centrality of “order” to this study, exemplified by its inclusion in the title, derived from the object of these experiences and their symbolizations. As Voegelin later recalled in 1973, “By *order* is meant the structure of reality as experienced as well as the attunement of man to an order that is not of his making—i.e., the cosmic order.”<sup>63</sup> The questions of order, disorder, and attunement that Voegelin expounded upon in his lectures on “Hitler and the Germans” in 1964 were percolating as early as 1951, which Voegelin identified as a moment of “breakthrough” via his delivery of the Walgreen Lectures at the University of Chicago, and had their roots in his experience of Central Europe during the rise of the Third Reich.<sup>64</sup> And as we demonstrate below, they were treated in a specifically historical manner that functioned to resuscitate a proper understanding of history and

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<sup>59</sup> Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, 89.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 89. The material produced by Voegelin for this project, but never published in his lifetime, appeared posthumously as *The History of Political Ideas*, vols. 19-26 of the *Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 104-106.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 91. The Walgreen Lectures given by Voegelin provided the material that was published as *The New Science of Politics*.

a proper attunement to order, thereby rendering the trauma of the Second World War and its philosophical-historical underpinnings illegitimate.

“The order of history emerges from the history of order.”<sup>65</sup> This opening passage to the first volume of *Order and History*, titled *Israel and Revelation*, provides an initial glimpse of the connection between Voegelin’s historical work and his social criticism. It is the historical work itself which will reveal the true order of history against its myriad gnostic deformations. Writing in 1956, Voegelin believed the time to be ripe for such a history, as he viewed the ideologies which distorted humanity and its relation to order to be on the wane.<sup>66</sup> Indeed, the presentist inflection of *Order and History* is acknowledged by Voegelin specifically in the preface to the first volume: “*Order and History* should be read, not as an attempt to explore curiosities of a dead past, but as an inquiry into the structure of the order in which we live currently.”<sup>67</sup> This inquiry, by virtue of its participation in the practice of philosophy, is further positioned by Voegelin as one of the “remedies against the disorder of the time.”<sup>68</sup>

Alongside these medical metaphors of diagnosis and remedy, however, Voegelin’s characterization of the stakes of his project reveals a much more portentous conflict. He writes:

Philosophy is the love of being through love of divine Being as the source of its order. The Logos of being is the object proper of philosophical inquiry; and the search for truth concerning the order of being cannot be conducted without diagnosing the modes of existence in untruth. The truth of order has to be gained and regained in the perpetual struggle against the fall from it; and the movement toward truth starts from a man’s awareness of his existence in untruth. The diagnostic and therapeutic functions are inseparable in philosophy as a form of existence.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, vol. 1, *Israel and Revelation*, ed. Maurice P. Hogan, volume 14 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 19.

<sup>66</sup> Writing in the preface, Voegelin claimed, “Their conceptions of man, society, and history are too obviously incongruent with the reality that is within the range of our empirical knowledge.” *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

Here, the image of humanity's fall from grace and eventual redemption is repurposed and made cyclical. The postwar world in which Voegelin wrote is cast as a state of degradation, an "existence in untruth," composed of the "sediments of the millennial struggle for the truth of order."<sup>70</sup> Only by the rediscovery of the "truth of order" can the fall be stayed and order regained. In this construction, Original Sin is transformed into the predilection for disorder, embodied primarily in Voegelin's analysis in the problem of "metastasis." Metastasis was defined by Voegelin as the prophetic belief in the immanent transformation of the world.<sup>71</sup> Once present in the spirituality of certain Israelite prophets, metastasis became a persistent force throughout Western history, active within both religious and secular movements across doctrinal, confessional, and ideological boundaries.<sup>72</sup> Despite its various manifestations, metastasis maintains an identifiable core: "In the variety of symbolic forms is recognizable the common substance of metastatic will to transform reality by means of eschatological, mythical, or historiographic fantasy, or by perverting faith into an instrument of pragmatic action."<sup>73</sup> This narrative is one of secularization, and rings familiar with the arguments of Löwith in *Meaning and History* and Voegelin's own work in *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*. Again, we see how Voegelin's historical work is structured to displace the catastrophe from the level of recent events and relocate it in ancient spiritual developments: the crises of the twentieth century cast as emanations of a millennia-old spiritual deviation.

In order to grasp the significance of Voegelin's critique of metastasis, however, we must first ground it in the context of *Israel and Revelation*. That is, we must understand it within the larger question of why Voegelin's search for order in history found its first culmination in ancient Israel.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 506.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 507-508.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 507.

Voegelin's grand history of order begins with an examination of what he termed the "cosmological civilizations." These civilizations, found in ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, are defined by Voegelin via their means of political symbolization, in which the social is understood to be an analog of the cosmos. He wrote, "Cosmological symbolization is neither a theory nor an allegory. It is the mythical expression of the participation, experienced as real, of the order of society in the divine being that also orders the cosmos."<sup>74</sup> The divine realm and the social realm are thus reflections of one another, with the social order reproducing and participating in the order of being established in the cosmos; the mundane empire constitutes a reflection of the cosmic empire of the gods.

A key element of Voegelin's analytic is the dual concept of compactness and differentiation. The cosmological symbolizations, defined above, are presented as manifestations of compact experiences of order. In this sense they are mythological, pregnant with various "experiential blocs" available for separation and yet welded together by an overarching experience of "consubstantiality."<sup>75</sup> Myth thus contains the potentiality for differentiation into both philosophy of and faith in transcendence, a potentiality that is actualized in Voegelin's narrative in the societies of ancient Greece and Israel, respectively.

Yet within this dynamic of compactness and differentiation, Voegelin was keen to stress his opposition to progressivist narratives regarding myth. For while myth may have limitations, it must not be understood as a mere precursor to philosophy, revelation, or enlightened rationality: "Nevertheless, today it is no longer permissible to regard the myth as having no other purpose in the history of mankind than to provide a stepping stone for more rational forms of symbolization; and by the same token, it no longer makes sense to search for the meaning of myth in its partial

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 123.

anticipation of future accomplishments.”<sup>76</sup> Here, Voegelin strained to prevent older symbolizations of order from being subsumed into their successors. He was also responding to powerful critiques of myth that were produced during the period of the Second World War, most notably that of Ernst Cassirer in *The Myth of the State*. In his posthumously-published study, Cassirer had set out to trace the development of the political myths that had risen with such force in the twentieth century. He saw myth as an explanation of reality that attempts to reveal the unity between the individual, the community, and nature.<sup>77</sup> This mythical yearning for unity, offset in Cassirer’s narrative by reason and philosophy, becomes threatening again in times of social distress and disintegration; myth is “always there, lurking in the dark and waiting for its hour and opportunity.”<sup>78</sup> In this regard, Voegelin’s depiction of the “perpetual struggle” between order and disorder is prefigured by Cassirer’s vision of the ancient forces of myth teeming beneath the surface of rational society. But where Cassirer depicted myth as a force to be contained and overcome, Voegelin interpreted it through a more pluralistic hermeneutic, in which myth represented an alternative, rather than necessarily inferior, symbolization of reality.

For Voegelin, therefore, differentiation was “not an unqualified good” but rather “is fraught with the dangers of radically dissociating the experiential blocs held together by myth, as well as of losing the experience of consubstantiality in the process.”<sup>79</sup> Despite this attempt at magnanimity, however, Voegelin’s critique of progressivist and processual historical narratives is undercut by his central metaphor for the phenomena of differentiation that occurred in ancient Greece and Israel: the “leap in being.” This phrase is ubiquitous throughout *Israel and Revelation*, and gives unique shape to his conception and narration of order in history. Taken from

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>77</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven: 1946/1987), 38.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 280.

<sup>79</sup> Voegelin, *Order and History*, vol. 1, 124.

Kierkegaard's *Sprung*, the term "leap in being" identifies moments in which a radically new understanding of order and the interaction of the human and the divine is achieved.<sup>80</sup> Thus, the movement from compact to differentiated experiences is not regular or mechanistic. Rather, it is predicated upon flashes of insight, moments when the transcendent is made available and humanity's participation in it experienced. The "leap in being," when it occurs, is a moment of revelation for Voegelin—revelation in both the philosophical and the religious senses.<sup>81</sup>

An essential axis upon which the process of differentiation proceeds, and thereby one of the central leaps in being in Voegelin's narrative, is historical time. Writing on the absence of historical time in the symbolizations of cosmological empires, he argued that "a political organization exists in time, and as a recognizable unit originates in time. In the cosmological style of symbolization, however, there is no flow of historical time articulated by an originating event. The foundation of a government is rather conceived as an event in the cosmic order of the gods, of which the earthly event is the expression."<sup>82</sup> This primacy of the divine, cosmic order allowed cosmological symbolizations to weather various instances of social upheaval without a fundamental breakthrough in differentiation. However, while the cosmological civilizations themselves did not produce a leap in being, they did form the context for an "irruption of the spirit" that signified a new understanding of order: the revelation to Moses at Sinai.

This act of revelation signifies for Voegelin the creation of history as a form of existence. "Through the leap in being, that is, through the discovery of transcendent being as the source of order in man and society, Israel constituted itself [as] the carrier of a new truth in history."<sup>83</sup> This

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<sup>80</sup> Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, 105.

<sup>81</sup> Voegelin's concept of revelation encompassed both the achievements of Greek philosophy, especially in Plato and Aristotle, and the more familiar sense of the revelation of God via the Sinai covenant and Jesus of Nazareth. See *ibid.*, 134, and Voegelin, *Hitler and the Germans*, 87.

<sup>82</sup> Voegelin, *Order and History*, vol. 1, 64.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 164-165.

new truth is historical existence, separated intentionally by Voegelin from history in the sense of “objective time” in order to avoid the pitfall of designating certain societies as lacking history.<sup>84</sup> He writes, “Israel alone constituted itself by recording its own genesis as a people as an event with a special meaning in history, while the other Near Eastern societies constituted themselves as analogues of cosmic order. Israel alone had history as an inner form, while the other societies existed in the form of the cosmological myth.”<sup>85</sup> Here, the “leap in being” constituted by the revelation is inhered in Israel’s self-understanding as historically formed and historically destined.

But what does it mean to create history as a “form of existence”? Voegelin’s conception of precisely what is meant by this term is complicated and not altogether unclouded. The answer lies in the creation of a historical present. Let us examine the following passage:

When the order of the soul and society is oriented toward the will of God, and consequently the actions of the society and its members are experienced as fulfillment or defection, a historical present is created, radiating its form over a past that was not consciously historical in its own present. Whether through the radiation of historical form the past receives negative accents as the Sheol from which man must escape, or positive accents as the *praeparativo evangelica* through which man must pass in order to emerge into the freedom of the spirit, the past has become incorporated into a stream of events that has its center of meaning in the historical present.<sup>86</sup>

The historical present, in the historical form of existence, becomes the new “omphalos,” the new navel of the world from which past and future are illuminated. Existence in the historical present, furthermore, points humans beyond the mundane and engenders “not a substantially better order within the world but an increased understanding of the gulf that lies between immanent existence

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 168, 169. Voegelin’s distinction here serves to see all societies and civilizations as having history, but some are understood to be “more historical than other historical societies.” By this maneuver, Voegelin self-consciously collapses this problem of history as both form and as “objective time” into the schematic of compactness and differentiation, in which history as form is a differentiated experience which retroactively illuminates the history of the compact, cosmological civilizations.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 168-169.



and the transcendent truth of being.”<sup>87</sup> This formulation of the historical present prefigures the concept of *Präsenz* championed by Voegelin in his lectures on Hitler in 1966. Indeed, the connection between historical form and existence in the “present under God” is made explicit by Voegelin in *Israel and Revelation*.<sup>88</sup> The form of existence resultant from the “leap in being” instilled by Sinaitic revelation and embodied in ancient Israel therefore provides humanity with its proper orientation toward transcendent being.

Within Voegelin’s appreciation of, and at times even reverence for, the historical achievement of the Israelite leap in being, his analysis remains affected by the contemporary conditions of his writing. The celebration of the leap in being is always in his work colored by the loss of that achievement, by the absence of proper historical existence in the twentieth century. The story of *Order and History* is therefore also a story of how this leap in being—along with its analog in Hellenic philosophy—was undone. The answer lies in the problem of metastasis, to which we will now return, equipped to consider its multivalent ramifications.

Writing in the preface, Voegelin offered the following words of warning: “Metastatic faith is one of the great sources of disorder, if not the principal one, in the contemporary world; and it is a matter of life and death for us all to understand the phenomenon and to find remedies against us before it destroys us.”<sup>89</sup> There are many strands of significance to untangle here. The first is in the blunt seriousness of the claim that metastasis is a matter of life and death. Here are evoked both the shadow of the Cold War and the possibility of nuclear annihilation resultant from an ideological—and thus metastatic—struggle, as well as the medical sense of metastasis as the spread of cancer cells to other areas of the body. In Voegelin’s warning, the power of metastasis-

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<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

as-disorder replicates the deadliness of metastasis-as-cancer on a civilizational level. Like cancer, disorder threatens to spread, but with consequences for the entire social body.

Another layer of significance lies in the origin of metastasis in the Voegelinian sense. The link between metastasis and ideology is made clear in the preface, but the question remains as to the pre-ideological legacy of metastasis, and its link to questions of order, history, immanence, and transcendence. The answer lies in a particular irony of Voegelin's analysis, namely the emergence of metastatic faith in the efforts of the Israelite prophets.

The function of the prophets vis-à-vis order, according to Voegelin, consisted in the dual task of preventing the abandonment of the covenant under the pressure of pragmatic necessity and of resisting legalistic understandings of the law. In Isaiah, Voegelin saw this work come to a turning point, as the prophet faced the conundrum of the defection of Israel and the possibility of Israel's disappearance as the chosen people. Describing this crisis, Voegelin wrote: "For the first time men experienced the clash between divinely willed and humanly realized order of history in its stark brutality, and the souls of the prophets were the battlefield in this war of the spirit."<sup>90</sup> In Voegelin's account, Isaiah's response to this crisis was to envision a metastatic transformation, "to make the leap in being a leap out of existence into a divinely transfigured world beyond the laws of mundane existence."<sup>91</sup> Here, the precariousness of Israel's geopolitical position and the depth, in Isaiah's eyes, of its defection from the covenant leads to a desperate hope for a transformation of the world into a state of perfection, in which the Kingdom of God becomes immanent in history.

As we have indicated above, Voegelin identifies this turn to metastasis as a mistake, a rejection of the order of being and the emergence of a pernicious and persistent force of disorder.

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 514.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 505.

His criticism of prophetic metastasis was softer, however, than his ruthless condemnations of its modern echoes: “If the prophets, in their despair over Israel, indulged in metastatic dreams, in which the tension of historical order was abolished by a divine act of grace, at least they did not indulge in metastatic nightmares, in which the *opus* was performed by human acts of revolution.”<sup>92</sup> Despite this difference of appreciation, however, Voegelin did establish prophetic and revolutionary metastases as emanations of the same phenomenon. The both developed out of an expectation of immanent transfiguration that would occur in the future.

And this expectation, Voegelin warned, would be resilient across centuries. The delayed nature of the transfiguration posed no problems for those who anticipated it: “Once the faith in the metastasis of social and cosmic order through an act of God had achieved the rigidity of full articulation, there was nothing one could do but sit down and wait for the miracle to happen.”<sup>93</sup> How long this wait could last was addressed by Voegelin in a footnote in the chapter on the prophets in *Israel and Revelation*. He wrote:

The time needed for the experiential breakdown can become very long in the modern movements, when the metastasis is operated not by an act of God but by human action in the economic and political sphere. When the metastasis is “in progress” through human action, the expectation can apparently feed on “installments” for centuries, as the progressivist metastatic faith did feed on the stages of the industrial revolution and the improvements of the material standard of living. And a similar duration seems to be in prospect for the communist metastasis and its feeding on realization in “installments.”<sup>94</sup>

Here, the metastatic expectation for historical fulfilment and millennial transformation is difficult, nigh on impossible to eradicate. Metastasis itself is flexible, finding expression in religious or secular prophetisms. “In the variety of symbolic forms is recognizable the common substance of metastatic will to transform reality by means of eschatological, mythical, or historiographic

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 518.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 535.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 535n13.

fantasy, or by perverting faith into an instrument of pragmatic action.”<sup>95</sup> Metastasis, working toward a future transfiguration, is thus destructive of the present. Here we see illuminated a thread uniting Voegelin’s work in *Order and History* and his social criticism in the Hitler lectures. Metastasis is constituted by Voegelin as a spiritual rebellion against order, against existence under God, against the *Präsenz* that alone gives us a proper understanding of human conduct and society.

The crisis of Isaiah and the Israelite prophets was captured by Voegelin as despair over the defection of Israel from order. They were burdened, in his telling, with a knowledge of the truth of order that had no recognition in the material, social, or political worlds. The Chosen People had been replaced by the individual soul as the locus of history.<sup>96</sup> But the soul was a locus of order, and would remain so for Voegelin: “There are times when the divinely willed order is humanly realized nowhere but in the faith of solitary sufferers.”<sup>97</sup> Here, we see a glimpse of Voegelin’s self-positioning as a prophet of order that would become more explicit in his lectures on Hitler. We also see the space in which order can flourish, in the soul of the “solitary sufferers.”

The implications of Voegelin’s discussion of the solitary sufferer are especially reverberant if we read them in continuity with his later criticisms of postwar German society and his inversion of the normative tropes of exile. For if, in the spiritual heroics of the Israelite prophets, the soul became the focus of history and the new “omphalos” of order, then Voegelin had located a precursor for his claim that emigration was no loss of a homeland, but a gain. If Germany, both under the Third Reich and after, was a *Schattenreich*, then the flight to the United States was not primarily a loss of language, culture, and familiarity, but the gaining of an environment in which the soul, as the locus of order, could flourish and serve as the consolation for those “solitary

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 507. The influence of Voegelin’s earlier work on Gnosis, and the work of Löwith and Taubes on philosophy of history and eschatology is palpable.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 520.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 519.

sufferers” whom disorder had cast adrift. The project of unearthing the order of history, then, embodied in the “leaps in being” of the Israelite covenant and Greek philosophy, constitutes the historical analog of this inverted exile: with the present in disorder, order became for Voegelin a historical homeland, a well of proper attunement open to the individual regardless of the hostility of the world around them, be that world Judah of the eight century BC, or Vienna in 1938, or Germany in 1964. This historical exile undertaken by Voegelin thus also served, as did his criticisms of “mastering the past” to distance and delegitimize the traumas of the Second World War by rendering them emanations of an ancient metastatic faith, the perennial opponent of order which had appeared in different guises throughout the ages.<sup>98</sup>

### **// Conclusion: Meaning Beyond History**

“What is experienced and symbolized as reality, in an advancing process of differentiation, is the substance of history.”<sup>99</sup> These words, spoken by Voegelin in 1972, were founded on the work he had undertaken in *Order and History* in the 1950s. This “substance of history,” the experience of reality inhered in symbols and marked in its transformations by the great “leaps in being” provided for Voegelin both evidence of order in history and the framework of the order of history. This discovery of the order of history did not leave Voegelin speechless as to its consequences for the question of meaning. For although he relentlessly critiqued gnostic visions of historical fulfillment throughout his career (see our second chapter), Voegelin did not dismiss meaning in history altogether, as Löwith came to do. Rather, his critiques of gnostic “heresies” were as unforgiving as they were precisely because of their deformation of the proper

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 508. “Throughout the Middle Ages, the Church was occupied with the struggle against heresies of a metastatic complexion; and with the Reformation this underground stream has come to the surface again in a massive flood—first, in the left wing of the sectarian movements and then in the secular political creed movements that purport to exact the metastasis by revolutionary action.”

<sup>99</sup> Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, 106.

understanding of order in history and the meaning it illuminated. What the Israelites discovered in their covenant that modern philosophies of history distorted was a historical existence that pointed those who experienced it beyond the confines of history itself. Describing Israel as a “new genus of society,” Voegelin wrote in *Israel and Revelation*: “It was a people that moved on the historical scene while living toward a goal beyond history. This mode of existence was ambiguous and fraught with dangers of derailment, for all too easily the goal beyond history could merge with goals to be attained within history.”<sup>100</sup> Writing from the vantage of the twentieth century, Voegelin set himself against what he understood to be the catastrophic results of this derailment, the murderous destruction that could result from the conflation of historical and superhistorical goals. This foundational act of disorder, the disruption of the proper attunement to being via immanentization of the transcendent, represents the fundamental trauma of Voegelin’s historical vision, a rewriting of the trauma of exile on a world-historical scale. The work of the early volumes of *Order and History* was an attempt to delegitimize that trauma and recover the homeland that had been lost; a homeland marked not by its language or customs but by its attunement to the transcendent order of being. Only in that attunement, for Voegelin, could the meaning of history emerge and be rightly grasped. The project of outlining the nature of that attunement, and the meaning resultant from it, was the major thrust of Voegelin’s late work.

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<sup>100</sup> Voegelin, *Order and History*, vol. 1, 154.

## Chapter 5 // Contingency and Consciousness: Löwith and the Cosmic View of History

### // Introduction

Karl Löwith's attack on the philosophy of history did not abate with his return to Germany in 1952. Although the argumentative and interpretive potency of *Meaning in History* continued to generate attention throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Löwith's philosophical output after his call to the University of Heidelberg reveals a furthering of his critique and a deepening of the skepticism for which he had become known. Unsystematic in development and fused across numerous essays rather than concentrated in a single treatise, this work represents a turn in Löwith's thought that, when considered in light of its philosophical-historical and social-critical ramifications, fundamentally amplified the stakes of postwar historical thinking.

This chapter interprets Löwith's work in this period as a sustained (if fractured) attempt to make possible an alternative to the restrictive and destructive philosophy of history he famously attempted to discredit in 1949. The object of Löwith's opprobrium underwent a subtle but crucial shift. Whereas the project that materialized in *Meaning in History* constituted the philosophy of history as the primary force of antagonism and the source of the twentieth century's catastrophic experiences of political eschatology, the essays written during Löwith's Heidelberg period took as their target historical consciousness itself, of which the philosophy of history served as a justificatory apparatus. This location of a wider, deeper stratum of error allowed Löwith to construct a narrative that encompassed both the human and the natural sciences, thereby revealing the assumptions that grounded all modern understandings of the world. At the same time, this turn enabled Löwith to argue, at times subtly, at times unabashedly, for a cosmic orientation, drawn

from Greek antiquity, that would reintegrate humans and the historical world into a cosmos that was whole and that existed of-itself and for-itself, independent of human meaning.

In his philosophical work published in the 1950s and 1960s, Löwith worked to establish an anti-historical orientation which I have come to identify as the cosmic view of history. Within this cosmic view of history, trauma is a residual force, structuring both the thrust of his critique and the essential metaphors of his historical language. In the first respect, I argue that Löwith's (re)construction of a cyclical, cosmos-oriented historical vision is inseparable from his experience of catastrophe, namely his persecution on account of his Jewish heritage, the bifurcation of his German and Jewish identity by Nazi racial laws, and his exile in Italy, Japan, and the United States. In this sense, Löwith's work constitutes a response to historical trauma. Furthermore, I argue that the very historical language in which Löwith's critiques of historical consciousness were expressed evince a resurfacing of trauma. In metaphors of breaks, bifurcations, passing away, and volatilization, trauma works as a residue, holding together and imparting meaning to his assaults on historical consciousness. I contend that the trajectory of trauma in Löwith's post-exilic thought constitutes an effect of delegitimization. By displacing and delegitimizing the historical consciousness that gives meaning to history, by attacking and destabilizing the concept of "world history" itself, his critique worked to undermine the very framework that gives events such fateful power. This position, usefully identified as stoic by Habermas and others, functions as an attempt to relativize historical consciousness, revealing it as a phenomenon that arose historically, and that can therefore pass away again, leaving behind the eternal, indivisible cosmos, in which all human affairs are ultimately transitory. This return to nature and the cosmos is thus an effort to reintegrate the twentieth century—with all its upheavals and catastrophes, its death and suffering, its frenzy and chaos—into a proper understanding of the world as eternally ordered and whole. Finally, I



argue that this work of relativization and delegitimization stands as a regime of practice, an attempt to overcome the strictures of historical consciousness and to embody the cosmic orientation.

The question of trauma, particularly as a force structuring his historical thought, is lacking in scholarship on Löwith. In the pages that follow, I attempt to reveal how an attention to trauma can enable a reading of Löwith that recognizes the nuance of his thought vis-à-vis narratives of decline and anti-modernism. The chief recipient of my critique in this respect is Jürgen Habermas, whose profile on Löwith in the 1960s cast his thought as a conservative history of decline and an escape to pure theory.<sup>1</sup> This interpretation is representative of the association of Löwith with conservative dispositions. Building on the work of scholars such as Jeffrey Barash and Joe Paul Kroll, this chapter attempts to reveal the complexity of Löwith's thought that exists beneath straightforward characterizations and appropriations, most importantly on the question of theory and practice.<sup>2</sup> Where I diverge from existing treatments of Löwith's thought is precisely in the identification of trauma as an essential cipher.

The project of delegitimization that emerges from this reading of Löwith's essays was driven by multiple, entangled historical and philosophical arguments. In elaborating my interpretation and clarifying the structure and resonances of Löwith's thought, I have come to identify his anti-historical orientation as the cosmic view of history, in that it reinstates a recurrent, total world, and reduces events to an ephemeral, non-essential, and peripheral status, insignificant due to their contingency. In the articulation of this position and in its mobilization against the

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<sup>1</sup> Jürgen Habermas, "Karl Löwith: Stoic Retreat from Historical Consciousness," in *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), 81-99. The profile on Löwith was written in 1963 and first published in 1971, one year before Löwith's death.

<sup>2</sup> The literature on Löwith is too large to be summarized here. It also focuses mainly on his participation in the secularization debate, an imbalance which this essay seeks to offset. For two fine examples of attention to nuance in Löwith's thought, regarding politics and modernity respectively, see Jeffrey Andrew Barash, "The Sense of History: On the Political Implications of Karl Löwith's Concept of Secularization," in *History and Theory* 37, no. 1 (February 1998): 69-82 and Joe Paul Kroll, "A Human End to History? Hans Blumenberg, Karl Löwith and Carl Schmitt on Secularization and Modernity" (Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton, 2010), 128-131.

effects of trauma, I furthermore argue that Löwith's work represented more than mere reflection on history, but rather constituted a regime of practice, an attempt to embody the very cosmic orientation which he strenuously defended.

## // Two Worlds

Löwith's attempt to dethrone historical consciousness endowed the concept with a set of defining features, each of them historically emergent from fateful shifts in the fundamental bases of European thought. Each contributing characteristic, moreover, can only properly be understood in relation to the entirety of the historical consciousness that Löwith assailed. Despite this difficulty, however, certain lines of interpretation are more fruitful, particularly from our retrospective vantage. That is to say, from the mutual entanglement of the sources and features of historical consciousness in Löwith's work, we can identify the conceptual and historical steps present in the development of his critique. Among these, the most foundational to historical consciousness is the demarcation of separate historical and natural worlds.

“We are accustomed to confront nature with history, and we do so in consequence of a definite historical situation which arose in the sixteenth century with modern natural science.”<sup>3</sup> These words, written by Löwith in 1950 for a conference in Alpbach, set out directly the common-sense nature of the distinction and its historical genesis. The separation of distinct natural and historical worlds is an achievement of the modern period. Specifically, Löwith traced their emergence to the opposed philosophical trajectories of Descartes and Vico. The former's radical demarcation of the knowing subject from the world of sense objects constructed nature as mathematically knowable, leaving history as a domain in which no sure epistemological footing

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<sup>3</sup> Löwith, “Nature, History, and Existentialism,” in *Social Research* 19, no. 1 (March 1952): 79. Originally written in 1950 and first published as “Natur und Geschichte,” in *Die Neue Rundschau* 62, H. 1 (1951): 65-79.

can be gained. This denigration of the man-made was then opposed by Vico, who argued for the knowability of history precisely because it was created by humans, while the realm of nature, constituted and sustained by God, remained beyond terrestrial understanding. However, in his inversion of the cartesian foundation Vico did not challenge, but rather reinforced, the basic distinction between the human and the natural, between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*.<sup>4</sup> This distinction, according to Löwith, is operative at the heart of European thought down to the twentieth century, from Descartes and Vico, through Hegel and Marx, even to Husserl and Heidegger.

This separation, in Löwith's telling, was attended by decisive consequences. In the divorce of the natural from the human, the realm in which humans encountered meaning was also shifted. Writing in 1966, Löwith claimed, "As obvious and apparently incontrovertible are the arguments on the basis of which nature and history are separated, the presuppositions which these arguments hold, namely that reason, meaning, and significance are only effective in the history of humanity, goes however against all reasonable insight."<sup>5</sup> By demarcating separate human and natural worlds, the natural world was cut off from meaning, left as a space of mathematical movement and cold necessity, famously given voice through Pascal's psychological self-examination: "The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me."<sup>6</sup> For humans to find meaning, they would have to turn away from nature and toward the realm of history, in which, as Vico posited, the true and the made intersect. And, just as Descartes found refuge from his skepticism in the necessary existence

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 79-80.

<sup>5</sup> Löwith, "Geschichte und historisches Bewußtsein," in *Sämtliche Schriften*, vol. 2, (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1983), 422. The essay was originally published in *Vorträge und Abhandlungen. Zur Kritik der christlichen Überlieferung* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1966), 119-138. All translations from this essay are mine. Original: "So einleuchtend und scheinbar unwiderlegbar die Argumente im einzelnen sind, aufgrund derer zwischen Natur und Geschichte unterschieden wird, so ist aber doch die Voraussetzung, die diese Argumente trägt, nämlich, daß Vernunft, Sinn und Bedeutung nur in der Geschichte des Menschen wirksam sind, gegen alle vernünftige Einsicht."

<sup>6</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, § 206, trans. W.F. Trotter (New York: Dover, 2003), 61.

of the thinking subject, so did the distinction between nature and history revolve around consciousness. The “prejudice” (*Vorurteil*) that cleaved nature from history was centered on a particular conception of knowing subject: “The entire post-cartesian ontology is an ontology of the conscious being, of consciousness. As a result, spirit (*Geist*) and reason, as well as meaning and significance, were attributed only to humanity and its history.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, the historical world became the world of meaning, and that meaning was centered in the progress, development, and expression of consciousness, whether the “progress in the consciousness of freedom” of Hegel, the revolutionary consciousness of Marx, or Heidegger’s definition of *Dasein* as the being which contemplates Being.

In Löwith’s thought, this orbit around consciousness shaped and was shaped by the development of modern natural science and its counterpart, the human sciences. As meaning was transferred out of the natural world and into the world of human history, the natural world became more and more available to technical mastery. And as mastery of this natural world increased, the domain of meaning withdrew further and further into the historical world. These trajectories were mutually reinforcing: “The exclusive emphasis on our human existence and on the world as a historical one has a concomitant in the lack of sense for that which is natural. This denaturation of human life to a historical existence did not, however, arise with modern historicism and existentialism, but with modern natural science.”<sup>8</sup> The term “denaturation” found here is crucial for understanding Löwith’s eventual correction to the problem of the two worlds. For the moment, it suffices to note that Löwith identifies an epistemological split—between natural sciences

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<sup>7</sup> Löwith, “Geschichte und historisches Bewußtsein,” 426. Original: “Die ganze nachcartesische Ontologie ist eine Ontologie des bewußten Seins, des Bewußtseins. Infolgedessen werden Geist und Vernunft, sowie Sinn und Bedeutung, nur dem Menschen und seiner Geschichte zugesprochen.”

<sup>8</sup> Löwith, “Nature, History, and Existentialism,” 87-88.

(*Naturwissenschaften*) and human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*)—concomitant with the division between nature and history.

As nature comes to be understood as a realm of mathematized constancy, and history as a realm of consciousness and progress, these domains of knowledge become increasingly distinct. In an essay published in the *Eranos-Jahrbücher* in 1953, Löwith argued: “The relatively constant and the repetitive, seen here from the vantage of historical thought, appears not in history, but comes to emergence only in nature, and historical thought does not come into contact with nature. Only on its margin does something like nature arise, as the alien of history.”<sup>9</sup> This status of nature as the “alien of history” is produced and reinforced through the mutual distinction and separation of the natural and human worlds. It also reveals a connection between them: though opposites, they remain linked in a common trajectory of separation. As Löwith contended in an earlier essay, the more that nature, via natural science, became available to technological manipulation and dominance, the more that dominance was used in the service of the historical world—one need only think of past or current paeans to science-as-progress for an example.<sup>10</sup> Thus, while meaning is ensconced safely in the historical world, that world itself expands along with knowledge of nature: “What still remains of natural things seems to be a mere leftover of that which has not yet been thoroughly subjected by man. The historical appropriation of the natural world is at the same time an estrangement from it.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Löwith, “Die Dynamik der Geschichte und der Historismus,” in *Sämtliche Schriften*, vol. 2, 314-315. First published in *Eranos-Jahrbücher*, Bd. XXI: *Mensch und Energie*, ed. Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn (Zurich: Rhein-Verlag, 1953), 217-254. All translations from this essay are mine. Original: “Relativ Konstantes und sich Wiederholendes scheint, vom historischen Denken her gesehen, nicht in der Geschichte, sondern nur in der Natur zur Erscheinung zu kommen, und mit der Natur kommt das historische Denken nicht in Fühlung. Nur an seinem Rande taucht auch noch so etwas wie Natur auf, als das Geschichtsfremde.”

<sup>10</sup> Löwith, “Nature, History, and Existentialism,” 83.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

With these themes of alienation and appropriation before us, Löwith's position vis-à-vis the dualistic construction of the "two worlds" becomes clear. Much of Löwith's effort in his work throughout the 1950s and 1960s was devoted to the denaturalization of the bifurcated world concept. Repeatedly, Löwith dissolved the presuppositions that undergird this bifurcation. His favored weapon in doing so was historicization, uncovering the conditions under which the concept emerged and thereby revealing its contingency. The irony of Löwith attacking the fundamentals of historical consciousness via the very fruits of that historical consciousness was not lost on his critics. Habermas, for instance, remarked wryly in a profile on Löwith that the elder philosopher was rather like a competitor who was driven not by passion for the game but by the desire to defeat an opponent.<sup>12</sup> Löwith was well aware of the subversive nature of his historical analysis, however. In an exchange with a group of scholars which included Paul Ricoeur and Richard McKeon following a presentation at a meeting of the International Institute of Philosophy in Jerusalem in April 1965, Löwith remarked directly: "I would also not deny that, despite my anti-Hegelianism, I am much impressed by Hegel."<sup>13</sup> Löwith's self-awareness regarding this conflict of interests, as it were, reflects an understanding of the historically-conditioned nature of historical consciousness and its dominance.

What Löwith and his critics, including Habermas, do not identify in their comments on his critique is the hidden function of trauma. Löwith's excavation of the modern division of the world

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<sup>12</sup> Habermas, "Karl Löwith," 96.

<sup>13</sup> Löwith, "History and Historical Consciousness," in *The Understanding of History* (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1968), 14-40. Löwith's presentation itself was rather short (pages 14-19 in the published volume), while the discussion generated was extensive. The talk given here by Löwith is an abridged, and perhaps earlier version, of his 1966 essay "Geschichte und historisches Bewußtsein," first published in *Vorträge und Abhandlungen. Zur Kritik der christlichen Überlieferung*, 119-138 and included in vol. 2 of his *Sämtliche Schriften*, 411-432. All quotations from this essay in this chapter are taken from the *Sämtliche Schriften* volume. An even earlier version of the talk was given in August 1964 at the Internationales Forschungszentrum für Grundfragen der Wissenschaften Salzburg, as part of a conference entitled "Versuch zu einer Philosophie der Geschichte," at which Eric Voegelin and Ernst Bloch were attendants, among others. Voegelin's account of this event is discussed later in this chapter.

into incommensurable natural and human/historical domains, as well as his relentless attempt to destabilize this division, is evocative of his remarks on the rending apart of German and Jewish identity effected by National Socialism.<sup>14</sup> Where Löwith refused to legitimize that bifurcation of Germanness and Jewishness, he also consistently denied the legitimacy of the “two worlds.” The separation of these identities and the catastrophes it generated in the twentieth century are both a result and a microcosm of the separation of history and nature brought about by modern historical consciousness; the political horrors, in Löwith’s thought, are derivative of philosophical-historical error. The very language of alienation itself summons up the specter of absence and caesura. What was once whole has been split, and the results of that division form the basis for the modern understanding of history and the self-justification of totalitarian regimes. It also, in my estimation, animates the metaphors of trauma that give shape to Löwith’s criticism. The imposition of this divided world, its dominance and its persistence, represents then an effect of trauma operative in Löwith’s analysis: one that is not to be worked through, but rather revealed as illegitimate. And just as the trauma of a bifurcated identity was traced by Löwith to National Socialism and ultimately the philosophy of history, so too did he establish a genealogy to explain the emergence of the “two worlds.”

Löwith’s location of the source of the historical-natural division was shifting, his excavation of its origin drawn deeper and deeper into the history of European thought. In the narrative arc of *Meaning in History*—the book which more than any other “made him a name,” according to Gadamer—the crucial period of transition from theology of history to philosophy of

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<sup>14</sup> These remarks, found in his memoir *My Life in Germany Before and After 1933*, are examined at length in Chapter 1 of this dissertation.

history, the eighteenth century, was highlighted.<sup>15</sup> In his work after the publication of *Meaning in History*, however, Löwith rooted the fulcrum of decline in earlier and earlier moments. Indeed, even the identification of Descartes, Vico, and the emergence of modern science as the point of emergence for the “two worlds” was only a fateful result of an earlier turn. For while basis of historical consciousness, the separation of the human world from the natural world, was first articulated and conceptualized at the advent of European modernity, the architecture for its emergence was constructed over a millennium earlier.

In the effort to illuminate this architecture, Löwith returned to questions of theology and religion. Specifically, he bent his investigation toward the theological-historical significance of the Judeo-Christian doctrine of creation and its contradistinction to pagan antiquity.

#### **// Break**

The question of the tectonic source of the division of the world into human and natural sphere generated a cluster of related theses in Löwith’s Heidelberg-era work. What are the conceptual preconditions, Löwith asked, for such a bifurcation of the world? What fundamental shifts took place to enable us moderns to think of history in terms of progress, fulfilment, and eschatology? Löwith’s answers centered around a distinct intellectual-historical moment: the adoption of the Judeo-Christian concept of the world as something created. If the modern period gave birth to the separation of the two worlds and the explosion of secularized philosophical-historical eschatologies and historical consciousness, then late antiquity was the moment of the conception of that consciousness.

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<sup>15</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Nachruf auf Karl Löwith,” in *Jahrbuch der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften für das Jahr 1974* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1975), 81. The other books which were identified in the establishment of Löwith’s reputation were *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche* (1941) and *Jacob Burckhardt. Der Mensch inmitten der Geschichte* (1936).



We shall offer an extensive interpretation of Löwith's criticism of the doctrine of creation shortly. First, however, it is necessary to explicate how Löwith arrived at its problematization. In *Meaning in History*, and continuing in some of his work after his return to Germany, Löwith often spoke of classical antiquity and Christian orthodox theology of history, which he identified as parallel counters and correctives to the philosophy of history. For example, in 1960, Löwith wrote, "In antiquity and in Christianity, the experience of history was still bound, ordered, and circumscribed: in Greek thought through the order and the logos of the physical cosmos, *cosmologically*; in Christian faith *theologically*, through the order of creation and the will of God. The faith in history as such, historicism, first came into existence with the dissolution of both of these premodern convictions."<sup>16</sup> In the Greek orientation, history was bound by its subsumption within an everlasting, eternally-recurrent cosmos, in which historical meaning—in the sense of a telos toward which history moves and in which it finds its fulfilment—was unthinkable. Löwith's favorite and most-repeated argument for the lack of historical meaning in Greek thought was an *argumentum ex silentio* regarding the work of Aristotle. Again and again in his essays, Löwith stressed that Aristotle, who wrote about anything and everything under the sun, did not devote a treatise to history.<sup>17</sup> This argument had two rhetorical thrusts. The first drew from Aristotle's status as a foundational Western thinker and giant of the philosophical canon: if Aristotle, who remained

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<sup>16</sup> Löwith, "Mensch und Geschichte," in *Gesammelte Abhandlungen. Zur Kritik der geschichtlichen Existenz* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1960), 159. This essay is also found in Löwith's *Sämtliche Schriften*, vol. 2, 346-376. All translations from this essay are mine. Original: "In der Antike und im Christentum war die Erfahrung der Geschichte noch gebunden, geordnet und begrenzt: im griechischen Denken durch die Ordnung und den Logos des physischen Kosmos, *kosmologisch*; im christlichen Glauben *theologisch*, durch die Schöpfungsordnung und den Willen Gottes. Erst mit der Auflösung dieser beiden vormodernen Überzeugungen kam der Glaube an die Geschichte als solche, der Historismus, zur Existenz."

<sup>17</sup> In the source material that forms the basis for this chapter (which is not exhaustive of Löwith's post-1949 writing), this argument appears in no less than six published essays over a period of nineteen years: "Natur und Geschichte," (1950, published in English as "Nature, History, and Existentialism"), "Die Dynamik der Geschichte und der Historismus" (1953), "Mensch und Geschichte" (1960), "Welt und Menschenwelt" (1960), "Christentum, Geschichte und Philosophie" (1966), and "Wahrheit und Geschichtlichkeit" (1969). The argument also appears briefly in the introduction to *Meaning in History*, 4, proving it to be perhaps the most consistent rhetorical maneuver in Löwith's thought.

a dominant thinker for over a millennium, gave no thought to historical meaning, why should we? The second operated by summoning a contrast with modern historical consciousness. Taking Hegel's identification of Napoleon as an expression of world history as one pillar of the comparison, Löwith asserts that it would be absurd to think that Aristotle would find such consequence in his pupil Alexander, whose claim to world-historical meaning would surely rival that of Napoleon. By establishing this difference, the argument works to confound modern expectations of claims of historical significance, thereby revealing and relativizing the assumptions which animate the concept of historical meaning itself.

In the Christian orientation, according to Löwith, history was contained via two conceptual boundaries: the continuous deferral of the eschaton to a moment beyond time, and the division of history into sacred and mundane realms. The first was elaborated by Löwith in *Meaning in History*, where he wrote that "...since the final fulfilment of Hebrew and Christian destiny lies in an eschatological future, the issue of which depends on man's faith and will and not on a natural law of pragmatic history, the basic feeling in regard to the future becomes one of suspense in the face of its theoretical incalculability."<sup>18</sup> Here, the eschaton is not a completion of history to be achieved by means of actions carried out in service of a philosophy of history. Rather, it is an event beyond time, the arrival of which is not discernible or open to advancement, but is hidden. The second conceptual boundary which contained history in the Christian formulation, the division of history into the sacred and the mundane, was achieved by Augustine. Echoing in 1969 an observation made in *Meaning in History*, Löwith argued, "However, Augustine's City of God is no philosophy of history, but a dogmatic interpretation of Christian faith in the field of world history, whose

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<sup>18</sup> Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 9.

meaning, however, depends altogether on its providential reference to sacred history.”<sup>19</sup> In this construction, world history, contained within the City of Man, gains meaning only by means of its relation to the City of God, the realm of sacred history. What fulfilment is to be expected is found in the latter, not the former. When this wisdom is confused, in Löwith’s analysis, the result is alienation: “The faith in history as such has become the ‘last religion of the educated.’ It is a result of our alienation from the natural theology of antiquity and from the supernatural theology of Christianity, which both gave history a frame and a non-historical horizon of experience and understanding.”<sup>20</sup>

The containment of history by Christianity, however, was not to last, as the entire project of *Meaning in History* testifies. The separation of the City of Man from the City of God was effective, but the walls between the two were poriferous. It was this structural deficiency, so to speak, which Löwith attempted to uncover in his later essays. The core of this deficiency was the doctrine of creation, which foreclosed the recurrence of the cosmos and established the structure for the development of a conceptualization of history as progress.

Löwith began developing this insight as early as 1946. In a letter to Leo Strauss, Löwith gave historical consciousness its due, stating “And whatever one might say against progressive models of history, I do agree however with them inasmuch as I also find that Christianity

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<sup>19</sup> Löwith, “Wahrheit und Geschichtlichkeit,” in *Sämtliche Schriften*, vol. 2, 468. This essay was originally written in 1969 for a conference titled *Truth and Historicity/ Vérité et Histoire*, the material of which was published under the same title, ed. Hans-Georg Gadamer (Den Haag: M. Nijhoff, 1972), 9-21. All translations from this essay are mine. Original: “Auch Augustins Gottesstaat ist keine Geschichtsphilosophie, sondern eine dogmatische Auslegung des christlichen Glaubens im Bereich der Weltgeschichte, deren Sinn jedoch ganz und gar von ihrem providentiellen Bezug auf das Heilsgeschehen abhängt.” The core of the same argument is found in *Meaning in History*, 166.

<sup>20</sup> Löwith, “Der Dynamik der Geschichte und der Historismus,” 320. The phrase “last religion of the educated” is taken from Croce. Original: “Der Glaube an die Geschichte als solche ist zur »letzten Religion der Gebildeten« geworden. Er ist ein Ergebnis unserer Entfremdung von der natürlichen Theologie des Altertums und von der übernatürlichen Theologie des Christentums, die beide der Geschichte einen Rahmen gaben und einen nicht geschichtlichen Horizont der Erfahrung und des Verständnisses.”

fundamentally modified ancient naturalness.”<sup>21</sup> This argument was further developed in 1950. Arguing that the idea of meaning in history comes to us from the Old and New Testaments, he wrote: “Without a purposeful will, divine or human, and without a prevision, there is no what-for, no purpose and end as *telos* and *finis* which together constitute an *eschaton*. The possibility of a philosophy of history and of its quest for an ultimate meaning stands or falls with eschatology.”<sup>22</sup> Here, the historical precedence of religious, i.e. Judeo-Christian, eschatology is the necessary precondition for the philosophy of history. While the secularization of Christian eschatology into modern philosophy of history may have been illegitimate and ultimately catastrophic, it was nevertheless prefigured and ultimately made possible by the very theology which bounded it: “The English, French, and Russian revolutions would not have taken place without the faith in progress, and secular faith in progress would hardly have come into existence without the original faith in an ultimate goal of human existence.”<sup>23</sup> The point here to revolutions, the turning points around which modern historical consciousness pivots, is revealing, as it ties progress and faith to upheaval and violence, and by extension, trauma. The wreckage produced in the modern period by political expressions of secular eschatology thus finds its *prima causa* in the ancient emergence of monotheistic supernaturalism. The limits placed on history by Christian theology, then, were as much a ladder as a wall, eventually providing the framework by which history could be freed and constituted as an independent, self-contained realm of ultimate meaning.

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<sup>21</sup> Löwith to Strauss, August 18<sup>th</sup> 1946, Leo Strauss Papers, University of Chicago Library. The translation here is taken from Karl Löwith and Leo Strauss, “Correspondence Concerning Modernity,” trans. Susanne Klein and George Elliott Tucker, in the *Independent Journal of Philosophy* 4 (1983): 109.

<sup>22</sup> Löwith, “Nature, History, and Existentialism,” 84-85.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 87. See also “Die Dynamik der Geschichte und der Historismus,” 318, for a similar argument: “Die christliche Zuversicht ist dem modernen Geschichtsbewußtsein abhanden gekommen, aber die Sicht auf die Zukunft ist herrschend geblieben. Sie durchdringt alles nachchristliche europäische Denken und alle Sorge um unsere Geschichte, um ihr Wozu und Wohin.”

This critique of the theology of history and the doctrine of creation, while still ameliorated by Löwith's acknowledgment of history's circumscription and containment in some essays, is sharpened and loosed of its concessions in essays appearing in 1960. In a critical essay entitled "Welt und Menschenwelt," Löwith shifted the object of his censure from secularization to the doctrine of creation itself. He wrote:

All secularization of the world in modernity moves on the basis of Christian tradition. Secularization remains dependent on a Christian *saeculum*... But also all later revision and critique of the fundamental cartesian division of world (*res extensa*) and human (*res cogitans*), as fulfilled in Husserl and Heidegger, was not able to win back the natural world concept which Christianity had denatured and anthropomorphized."<sup>24</sup>

In this passage, Löwith links modern historical consciousness—the fruit of the Cartesian division—to the ancient move by which Christianity placed humanity at the center of the world. This reveals a new primary locus of historical trauma at work in his thought. The failure to “win back” (*wieder gewinnen*) and the resulting denatured (*denaturiert*) and anthropomorphized (*vermenschlicht*) world concept point toward a loss, a state of understanding which has been effaced and which is unreachable within the limits of historical consciousness. Amending Habermas' metahistorical critique of Löwith, we must acknowledge that this history of decline is also a history of trauma, for the deviance from the “natural world concept” (*natürlichen Weltbegriff*) is not represented as a natural yet unfortunate development or the consequence of iron laws of historical necessity. Rather, it is the emanation of break in understanding, the consequences of which, in Löwith's estimation, are catastrophic down to the present day. But whereas the

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<sup>24</sup> Löwith, “Welt und Menschenwelt,” in *Sämtliche Schriften*, vol. 1, ed. Klaus Stichweh (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1981), 306. The essay was first published in 1960 in *Gesammelte Abhandlungen*, 228-255. All quotations in this chapter are taken from the *Sämtliche Schriften* volume, and all translations are mine. Original: “Auf dem Boden der christlichen Überlieferung bewegt sich auch alle Verweltlichung der entweltlichten Welt in der Neuzeit. Die Säkularisierung bleibt eine solche des christlichen *saeculum*...Aber auch alle spätere Revision and Kritik der cartesischen Grundunterscheidung von Welt (*res extensa*) und Mensch (*res cogitans*), wie sie Husserl und Heidegger vollzogen, vermag nicht den natürlichen Weltbegriff, den das Christentum denaturiert und vermenschlicht hat, wieder zu gewinnen.”

Christian story of the Fall is one of eventual redemption, Löwith's historical narrative of decline seeks no reconciliation, no salvation, no perfection. His aim was not to reintegrate the natural and the supernatural conceptions of the world, but to historicize and delegitimize the latter.<sup>25</sup>

The essay "Welt und Menschenwelt" evinces this project. The consequences of placing humanity at the center of a world, the creation of that world for humanity, and humanity's status as the measure by which that world gains significance, are what Löwith sought to unearth. He wrote, "The human being, who according to biblical faith, as a likeness of God, is the goal and the lord of creation, becomes once gain the starting point and goal of a creation. The world becomes *our* world. The superhuman physical cosmos falls into oblivion, and from this the world is anthropomorphized. The world becomes a human world. At the same time as this diminution of the world, human nature volatilizes in a historical existence."<sup>26</sup> Here, Löwith's language is direct, his metaphors unyielding. The physical cosmos, which comprised the basis of the "natural world concept," has fallen into oblivion (*gerät in Vergessenheit*). By this Löwith does not mean that the cosmos itself has gone—indeed, he argued vociferously against the conflation of concepts of nature with nature itself, as we examine in more detail below—but that the ability to see the world as a cosmos has been stunted, our appreciation foreclosed by a historical consciousness that finds meaning only within and through human affairs. In the process, human nature "volatilizes" (*sich*

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<sup>25</sup> Löwith spoke quite explicitly regarding this effort at the Jerusalem meeting of the International Institute of Philosophy in 1965. During the discussion of his presentation, Löwith revealed that: "If one wants to trace back the whole dichotomy [between human and natural worlds] to its origin, then I would suggest that the historical origin of the possibility of this dichotomy is not the classical but the *biblical* tradition; only in the first book of Genesis, nature is *depotenziert* to a creation, a creation of God, who willed it to be – for the sake of man. Heaven and earth were not created for the purpose that nature should exist, but for the purpose of man; and man is the only creature created in the image of a transcendent God. That opens up the possibility of the modern dichotomy between man and the world of nature." Found in Löwith, "History and Historical Consciousness," 40.

<sup>26</sup> Löwith, "Welt und Menschenwelt," 302. Original: "Der Mensch, der nach biblischem Glauben, als ein Ebenbild Gottes das Ziel und der Herr der Schöpfung ist, wird damit abermals zum Ausgang und Ziel einer Schöpfung. Die Welt wird *unserer* Welt. Der übermenschliche physische Kosmos gerät in Vergessenheit, und die Welt wird von Grund aus vermenschlicht. Die Welt wird zu Menschenwelt. Zugleich mit diesem Schwund der Welt verflüchtigt sich die menschliche Natur in eine geschichtliche Existenz."

*verflüchtigen*), opening itself up to the upheavals of philosophical-historical progress. This concept of volatility itself is an expression that gains significance only within a metaphoric marked by trauma: the stability, the wholeness, and unity of the “natural world concept”—figured as a preceding, original state by the very concept of volatilization in the present tense—interrupted and destabilized by the abandonment of *Welt* for *Menschenwelt*.

This volatility is expressed in myriad ways. However, in order to properly interpret Löwith’s tracing of its manifestations, we must first elucidate his positive vision of a proper conception of the world, free from the deformations of progress, eschatology, and historical consciousness. That vision was focused on the cosmos.

## // Cosmos

Although already presented by Löwith in *Meaning in History* as the great alternative to the philosophy of history, a cosmological understanding of the world became the central mission of Löwith’s postwar philosophy. The recovery of the cosmos as the central focus of philosophy was the prognostic correlative to the diagnostic historicization and delegitimization of historical consciousness. Already in 1950, Löwith pursued this project by placing into question the bounds of meaning imposed by the “two worlds” concept. He wrote: “We do not ask for the meaning of heaven and earth, the stars, the ocean and the mountains, nor do we ask for the meaning of vegetable and animal life. Our quest seems to be restricted to ourselves and to history as our history. But why do we not ask for the meaning of all that exists, not alone through us but without our devices, by nature? Why does the natural light of stars mean less to us—almost nothing—than a traffic light? Obviously because the meaning of a traffic light is in its purpose, while the light of sun, moon, and stars has no human and artificial purpose.”<sup>27</sup> The sequence of rhetorical questions

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<sup>27</sup> Löwith, “Nature, History, and Existentialism,” 84.

leads the reader back to the unnaturalness of the “two worlds” concept, aiming to remove its sheen of common-sense and reveal its historically contingent and created nature. Once the modern division of the world is destabilized, the reader is then open to the expansion of horizons: the glow of the street lamp, while the focus of our everyday, practical lives shaped by the dominance of technological progress and historical paradigms of meaning, is relativized when placed beside the blazing of the sun. Why is it, Löwith asks, that we ignore the larger, grander luminescence? Because it is not relatable to a human dimension of meaning, it does not exist for us.

To rediscover this non-human dimension of meaning, according to Löwith, we must fundamentally reconsider our being in the world, thinking against an orientation that places humanity at the center and weighs all occurrences by its measure. As this orientation derives from doctrine of salvation developed within the Judeo-Christian tradition, Löwith steers toward that traditions familiar foil/companion, Greek philosophy. Writing in 1953, Löwith stated, “The Greeks did not inquire expectantly and hopefully after the *meaning of history*, but after the omnipresent *logos of physis*.”<sup>28</sup> Attunement to the *logos of physis*, to the animating reason of nature, leads not into a quest for eschatological fulfilment, as the chimerical search for meaning in history does, for what is eternally of itself cannot be fulfilled. Instead, it makes possible an appreciation of the eternal order and beauty of the cosmos. Here, Löwith moves to radically re-broaden the scale by which we interpret the world. Writing in 1960, Löwith argued that, “The physical world cannot be thought without its essential relationship to the Dasein of humanity, but no human is thinkable without world. We come to the world and we part from the world; it does not belong to us, but we

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<sup>28</sup> Löwith, “Die Dynamik der Geschichte und der Historismus,” 318. Original: “Die Griechen frugen nicht erwartungs- und hoffnungsvoll nach dem *Sinn der Geschichte*, sondern nach dem allgegenwärtigen *logos der physis*.”



belong to it.”<sup>29</sup> Within the cosmic view of history that Löwith advocates, which from the perspective of modern historical consciousness is in principle anti-historical, human beings are decentered; no longer created in the image of God and appointed stewards of nature, humans are but one aspect of the physical world, which persists beyond human intentions and purposes.

In this decentering, the specter of trauma is again at work. Returning to Löwith’s 1953 essay “Die Dynamik der Geschichte und der Historismus,” we find an argument that is recurrent throughout Löwith’s postwar oeuvre. He writes, “The eternally-existent and enduring, as it appears in the change of the year, year after year, in the orbit of the heavenly bodies, had for Greek senses a deeper meaning and a higher interest than a radical historical revolution and transformation.”<sup>30</sup> Here, the specificity of Aristotle’s disinterest in history—or at least, for the purposes of Löwith’s broader project, historical meaning—is generalized as an expression of a fully-formed worldview. The upheavals and overturnings of historical life—catastrophes, in the literal sense—are rendered unremarkable, their impact irrelevant when measured against the physical immensity and fundamental eternality (from the perspective of historical time) of the revolutions of moons, planets, stars, and galaxies.

Given the revolutions and transformations that shaped Löwith’s own life, as well as the entire course of the twentieth century, this stance is noteworthy. For Löwith, the inversion of this cosmic hierarchy by historical consciousness is itself a result of a particularly modern conception of the physical universe. At the close of his essay on nature and history, he asked, “And indeed, how can one feel at home in a universe which is conceived as the chance result of statistical

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<sup>29</sup> Löwith, “Welt und Menschenwelt,” 295. Original: “Die physische Welt läßt sich ohne eine ihr wesentliche Beziehung zum Dasein von Menschen denken, aber kein Mensch ist denkbar ohne Welt. Wir kommen zur Welt und wir scheiden aus ihr; sie gehört nicht uns, sondern wir gehören zu ihr.”

<sup>30</sup> Löwith, “Die Dynamik der Geschichte und der Historismus,” 318. Original: “Das Immer-so-Seiende und Beständige, wie es im Wechsel der Jahre jahraus, jahrein am Umlauf der Himmelskörper erscheint, hatte für griechische Sinne eine tiefere Wahrheit und ein höheres Interesse als eine radikale geschichtliche Revolution und Veränderung.”

probabilities, and which is said to have come into existence through an explosion? Such a universe cannot inspire confidence or sympathy, nor can it give orientation and meaning to man's existence in it."<sup>31</sup> Here, the exclusive claim to meaning on the part of historical consciousness is directly resultant from the anxiety and emptiness produced by the results of modern science. Nature as an empty, meaningless collision of particles cannot, for Löwith, provide succor for questioning minds—a recess into which flowed the philosophy of history, to deleterious effect. Rather, what Löwith called for and what he sought to make possible was an understanding of nature that succeeds where modern conceptions have failed. Writing in 1960, he asked: “What binds all beings together to the inimitable unity of the universe or to space? The connection, which holds uniformly together as a whole all that is individual and sundry, can only be an *order*, in which each is related to another.”<sup>32</sup> This passage, reminiscent of Voegelin's attempted excavation of order which we discussed in Chapter 4, allows us to see signposts of trauma. The manifest disorder of the National Socialist period and the Second World War—exile, destruction, partition, genocide—is relativized in this orientation, recast as surface disturbance on an otherwise gentle ocean of cosmic unity. “All that is individual and sundry” (*alles Einzelne und Verschiedene*)—from spinning galaxies, to warring nations, to fractured identities—is maintained in a cosmic unity, its difference negated and delegitimized. What is Alexander to the cosmos? Nothing but an epiphenomenon, a lesson for practical political history rather than a world-historical Prometheus.

With the abandonment of this unity, human beings became torn between separate natural and historical worlds. By 1966, Löwith's narration of decline had become explicit. He wrote, “Modern humanity's loss of the world is complete in this theory of the two worlds, for these two

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<sup>31</sup> Löwith, “Nature, History, and Existentialism,” 93.

<sup>32</sup> Löwith, “Welt und Menschenwelt,” 296. Original: “Was bindet aber alles Seiende zur einzigartigen Einheit des Universums oder zum Weltall zusammen? Der Zusammenhang, der alles Einzelne und Verschiedene einheitlich als ein Ganzes zusammenhält, kann nur eine *Ordnung* sein, in der jegliches einem anderen zugeordnet ist.”

worlds do not supplement one another; they are the decay products of the one and whole world, within which there is, among other creatures, humanity and its self-conscious history.”<sup>33</sup> This “loss of the world” (*Weltverlust*) is the loss of the cosmos, the bifurcation of the whole into parts which in sum cannot replicate it. We are left with the remnants of decay (*Zerfallsprodukte*). Such a tragic sketch of history is noteworthy, given that it came in the wake of the creation of the West German state, the stabilization of the economy, and the so-called economic miracle of the 1950s. While official German narratives were hopeful of a bright future out of a dark and shameful past, Löwith saw the continuity of historical consciousness. The shadow of the bifurcation of his German and Jewish identity, an indivisible and unitary whole before the rise of National Socialism, appears again on a metahistorical scale.

The remarkability of this cosmic position, particularly regarding the experienced disunity and catastrophes of the twentieth century, should not be read purely as an anomaly, however. Instead, we must understand it in relation to Löwith’s lived postwar context, namely the city of Heidelberg and its university. In a letter to Eric Voegelin in 1952, shortly after his return to Heidelberg, Löwith remarked, “Socially and politically the impression is much less pleasant – old resentments, shifting all their own shortcomings onto new scapegoats, moral irresponsibility and a complete lack of general civilized behavior or the *sensus communis*. In short Lederhosen and in the immeasurable Strength Through Joy bus tourists, one still sees everywhere how well Nazism

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<sup>33</sup> Löwith, “Geschichte und historisches Bewußtsein,” 423. Original: “Der Weltverlust des modernen Menschen ist in dieser Theorie der zwei Welten komplett, denn diese zwei Welten ergänzen einander nicht; sie sind Zerfallsprodukte der einen und ganzen Welt, innerhalb derer es, unter anderen Lebewesen, den Menschen und seine selbstbewußte Geschichte gibt.”

suited the German petit bourgeois.”<sup>34</sup> Here, the strangeness of Löwith’s claim in his speech “Curriculum Vitae” that “one becomes what one is and can be within one’s limits” is less strange when considered in light of the postwar history of Heidelberg.<sup>35</sup> Steven P. Remy has shown how the professoriate of the University of Heidelberg was largely complicit in the National Socialist regime, and despite the tumults of defeat, occupation, and denazification, retained an remarkable continuity of personnel.<sup>36</sup> Even Hans-Georg Gadamer, a friend of Löwith from their student days in Marburg who was instrumental in Löwith’s repatriation—who himself was called from Leipzig to the chair of philosophy in Heidelberg in 1949 as the successor of Karl Jaspers and was widely recognized by the time of his death as the preeminent philosopher of the Federal Republic—has been accused of producing scholarship in the service of National Socialist interests.<sup>37</sup> Löwith’s embittered description of the all-too-prevalent remnants of the Third Reich thus give credence to Remy’s critique of the “Heidelberg myth,” which worked to exonerate the professoriate and the university of collaboration with National Socialism—the everyday presence of former Nazis and their fellow travelers, even within the philosophy faculty itself, shows that Löwith’s concern with the underlying continuities of recent history had a basis in experience. Such trends were not limited to Heidelberg, however, but reflected the general incompleteness of the project of denazification

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<sup>34</sup> Löwith to Voegelin, June 6<sup>th</sup> 1952, Eric Voegelin Papers, Box 24, Folder 4. Original: “Sozial + innenpolitisch ist der Eindruck sehr viel weniger erfreulich – alte Ressentiments, Abschieben aller eigenen Unzulänglichkeiten auf neue Sündenböcke, moralische Verantwortungslosigkeit und völliges Fehlen allgemeiner Gesittung + des sensus communis. Dem deutschen Spiesser in kurzen Lederhosen + den zahllosen Kraft durch Freude Bustouristen sieht man allenthalben nach wie vor an, wie gut der Nazismus zu ihm gepasst hat.” The Voegelin-Löwith correspondence is also reproduced in *Sinn und Form* 59, Heft 6 (2007): 764-794.

<sup>35</sup> Löwith, “Curriculum Vitae,” in *My Life in Germany*, 162.

<sup>36</sup> Steven P. Remy, *The Heidelberg Myth: The Nazification and Denazification of a German University* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

<sup>37</sup> For the key texts of the controversy, see Richard Wolin, “Untruth and Method: Nazism and the Complicities of Hans-Georg Gadamer,” in *The New Republic*, May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2000, 36-45 and Teresa Orozco, *Platonische Gewalt: Gadamer’s politische Hermeneutik des NS-Zeit* (Hamburg: Argument-Verlag, 1995). For further commentary see Remy, *The Heidelberg Myth*, 218-233, especially 227.

and the social and political power of Germans-as-victims narratives.<sup>38</sup> Löwith's observations surely found a sympathetic ear in his correspondent Voegelin, who likewise railed against the complicity of West German elites, as we saw in Chapter 4 in our analysis of his lectures on Hitler and German society. In particular, the disgust with the *petit bourgeoisie* is striking, as it further reveals the connections between life on the ground in Heidelberg and Löwith's anti-historical project; it was the *petit bourgeois* themselves that both scholars viewed to be the primary producer and primary audience—indeed, the very subject—of philosophical historical narratives.<sup>39</sup> And both men, surveying decades of catastrophe and destruction, turned their critical powers against a conception of history that remained powerful.

However, despite the dominance of historical consciousness, for Löwith the cosmic orientation was not lost to time. Contra Habermas, Löwith's response to this decline was not to escape into a realm of pure, disinterested theory.<sup>40</sup> To be sure, Löwith did argue in favor of a philosophical inquiry that, precisely because it was attuned to the cosmos, would be elevated above practical, i.e. historical, concerns. But to read that maneuver as escape from or denial of practice would be to efface other influences which shaped Löwith's cosmic orientation, as well as to deny effectivity of Löwith's texts themselves as anti-historical practice. In Chapter 1, we examined at

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<sup>38</sup> See Robert G. Moeller, *War Stories: The Search for a Useable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Norbert Frei, *Adenauer's Germany and the Nazi Past: The Politics of Amnesty and Integration*, trans. Joel Golb (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Jeffrey K. Olick, *The Sins of the Fathers: Germany, Memory, Method* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016) Klaus Naumann, ed., *Nachkrieg in Deutschland* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2001); Konrad Jarausch, *After Hitler: Recivilizing Germans, 1945-1995*, trans. Brandon Hunziker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), and "1945 and the Continuities of German History: Reflections on Memory, Historiography, and Politics," in *Stunde Null: The End and the Beginning Fifty Years Ago*, ed. Geoffrey J. Giles (Washington D.C.: German Historical Institute, 1997), 9-24; Bill Niven, ed., *Germans as Victims: Remembering the Past in Contemporary Germany* (New York: Palgrave, 2006). For an insightful examination of the connection between denazification, trauma, and German victimhood, see Mikkel Dack, "Retreating into Trauma: The Fragebogen, Denazification, and Victimhood in Postwar Germany," in Peter Leese and Jason Crouthamel, eds., *Traumatic Memories of the Second World War and After* (Palgrave: 2016), 143-170.

<sup>39</sup> See Voegelin's enumeration of would-be murderers in his letter to Jacob Taubes, May 15<sup>th</sup> 1953, Eric Voegelin Papers, Box 37, Folder 10, which we examined at length in Chapter 2.

<sup>40</sup> Habermas, "Karl Löwith," 84.

length Löwith's account of his exilic sojourn in Japan at Tohoku Imperial University in Sendai. There, Löwith's encounter with traditional Japanese philosophy provided refuge from and resistance against a West that was being consumed by history, and which in that self-consumption had driven Löwith to exile twice over, from Marburg to Rome, and from Rome to Sendai (with a third yet to come). This exposure, so formative for Löwith in the years 1936-1941, remained effective through Löwith's return to Germany and into his work in the 1960s. Drawing together the antique Western orientation toward the cosmos with "the wisdom of the East," Löwith wrote: "In contrast with this age-old wisdom of the East, the historical consciousness in America and Russia is only an extreme consequence of modern Europeanism."<sup>41</sup> With this passage, Löwith struck two key blows against the universal pretensions of historical consciousness. The first is centered on its geographic specificity. Contra Spengler, for whom European history had become world history precisely through the spread of its historical civilization, Löwith limits historical consciousness as a specifically Western phenomenon, incompatible with and incomparable to Eastern cosmic knowledge. The cosmic unity, destabilized by the doctrine of creation and finally sundered by the "two worlds," cannot be replicated by historical consciousness, which remains always partial. The second blow, and more significant for the purposes of our argument, derives its strength from the chronological dimension of Löwith's argument: his use of the qualifying adverb "only." The historical consciousness which Löwith himself identified as the root cause of the untold suffering of the twentieth century is rendered here as nothing more than an aftereffect. It is this perspective of diminution, of relativization, which allows us to see the first dimension in which Löwith's work can be understood as the practice of the cosmic view of history.

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<sup>41</sup> Löwith, "Christentum, Geschichte und Philosophie," in *Sämtliche Schriften*, vol. 2, 437. This essay was first published in *Vorträge und Abhandlungen*, 37-53. All translations of this essay are mine. Original: "Im Vergleich mit dieser uralten Weisheit des Ostens ist das geschichtliche Bewußtsein in Amerika und Rußland nur eine extreme Konsequenz neuzzeitlichen Europäertums."

## // To Emerge and To Pass Away

In his sorties against the “two worlds” concept, Löwith was often at pains, as we have seen above, to decenter consciousness—i.e. the knowing subject, the cartesian *res cogitans*—and resist its imperialistic claim to primacy. He sought to restore, from beneath the encrustments and sediments of modern historical consciousness, an understanding of and orientation toward the world that was cosmic, rather than anthropocentric. In pursuit of this recovery, Löwith insisted on a distinction between consciousness and reality. Writing in 1953, for instance, after drawing out the three dominant strains of post-Hegelian historical interpretation—the positivist (from Comte), the Marxist, and the “Christian-humanist”—Löwith contended, “History itself, however, is neither Marxist nor positivist nor humanist. It exhausts itself as little in its possible interpretations as does nature in natural-scientific constructions. There is a modern physics, but no modern nature, and there is history before and after all philosophical-historical speculations.”<sup>42</sup> Here, the foundation of the “two worlds” concept is undercut. The worlds that modern historical consciousness would subsume within itself exist beyond, before, and after it: the cosmos cannot be contained by our epistemology. This emphasis on the cosmic as what precedes and what survives gives context to Löwith’s earlier criticism, quoted above, of a construction of the universe that assigns it a beginning—i.e. the “Big Bang.”<sup>43</sup> It also provides the underpinning for a simple yet biting critique of historical consciousness that is at once a practice of the cosmic view of history.

In the same essay in which Löwith separates nature from physics and history from philosophy of history, he writes, “First of all, it should be noted, that historicism itself is a

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<sup>42</sup> Löwith, “Die Dynamik der Geschichte und der Historismus,” 301. Original: “Die Geschichte selbst ist aber weder marxistisch noch positivistisch hoch [sic] humanistisch. Sie erschöpft sich so wenig in ihren möglichen Interpretationen wie die Natur in naturwissenschaftlichen Konstruktionen. Es gibt eine moderne Physik, aber keine moderne Natur, und es gibt Geschichte vor und nach allen geschichtsphilosophischen Spekulationen.” This passage appears verbatim, but with a crucial furtherance, in the 1966 essay “Geschichte und historisches Bewußtsein,” 421.

<sup>43</sup> See again, Löwith, “Nature, History, and Existentialism,” 93.

specifically modern and therefore historically conditioned concern, which emerged some one hundred fifty years ago and, for that reason, can also pass away again.”<sup>44</sup> This short passage has multiple threads to extricate. The first is its undermining of the progressivist assumptions inherent in modern historical consciousness—here manifested in historicism. The linear chronologies at the heart of the modern conception of nature, the philosophy of history, and the doctrine of creation all preclude reversal: the universe will not shrink back to its protean finitude, the consciousness of freedom cannot be erased once manifested in history, and the Fall, while redeemable, cannot be undone. Löwith, drawing from a cosmic orientation, denied the finality assumed by historical consciousness. This also complicates our interpretation of his work as a narrative of decline, for what tragedy takes solace in the eventual fading away of its own driving force?<sup>45</sup> Decline, then, in Löwith’s historical criticism is not merely a lament, but a practical precondition for the recovery of a cosmic position. The second filament of significance in the passage above arises from the verbiage employed by Löwith. Historicism has “emerged” (*entstehen*) and can “pass away” (*vergehen*). Indeed, the very fact of its emergence secures its contingency: precisely because there is a before in which historicism did not exist, we can imagine an after in which it is no more. With emergence and decay as two poles by which to measure historical consciousness, Löwith was able to delegitimize its claims and presuppositions. Our interpretation of Löwith’s metanarrative then must move from decline—with its trajectory taken as the opposite of progress, yet no less linear—to a cyclicity based metaphorically on the circuits of plant life, seasons, and stellar revolutions. Löwith’s history is not one of decline, but of endurance, enabled by the cosmos which always ways and always will be.

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<sup>44</sup> Löwith, “Die Dynamik der Geschichte und der Historismus,” 312.

<sup>45</sup> The identification of Löwith with decline is deftly assessed by Jeffrey Andrew Barash in his work on Löwith. See Barash, “The Sense of History: On the Political Implications of Karl Löwith’s Concept of Secularization,” in *History and Theory* 37, no. 1 (February 1998): 72.



A view of history which is framed by emergence and passing away serves to erode trauma. In a maneuver wildly different from Koselleck's later enumerations, examined in Chapter 3, of the many ends of the war—and thus its perpetual resurfacing—Löwith articulated a vantage from which the catastrophes of the war and the regime that inflicted them could be outlasted. Rather than irreversible breaks, ruptures, fissures, etc.—the metaphors of discontinuity which we associate with traumatic narratives—Löwith put forth a historical language of cyclicity. Within this orientation, again, trauma is not denied *per se*, but is delegitimized, its power to define chronology dismissed.

The language of emergence and passing away remained as a crucial theme throughout Löwith's postwar historical-critical work. It was also brought to bear by Löwith on the present, for after all, in his estimation, historical consciousness remained as dominant as ever into the 1960s. He cast as clear-seeing those who still had recourse to the classical sensibility, embodied in the canonical Greek historians, that all histories provided no real, lasting, philosophical knowledge.<sup>46</sup>

Such wisdom, however, was hard to come by:

And where classical feeling remains ever alive, there is the last wisdom of the historian and the politician who can act and think without illusion. One can hardly conceive of a modern statesman, whether in the West or in the East, who after the victorious cessation of the last World War could have remarked that the very fate which now faces Berlin [check this again] will one day meet Moscow and Washington! Then the historical consciousness that was trained in Marx or Comte no longer has the understanding to think the once of the future together with the once of the past, because it refuses to accept that all earthly things emerge and pass away.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Löwith, "Mensch und Geschichte," 155.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 156. Original: "Und wo immer klassisches Empfinden lebendig blieb, ist dies die letzte Weisheit des Historikers und Politikers, der ohne Illusionen handeln und denken kann. Man kann sich aber schwerlich einen modernen Staatsmann, es sei im Westen oder im Osten, vorstellen, der nach der siegreichen Beendigung des letzten Weltkrieges hätte äußern können: dasselbe Schicksal, das wir jetzt Berlin bereitet haben, wird einst Moskau und Washington treffen! Denn das historische Bewußtsein, das an Marx oder Comte geschult ist, versteht nicht mehr das Einst der Zukunft mit dem Einst der Vergangenheit zusammen zu denken, weil es nicht wahrhaben will, daß alle irdischen Dinge entstehen und vergehen." See also "Die Dynamik der Geschichte und der Historismus," 321, where this argument appeared in an earlier form.

Here, we see the outlines of a practical application of the cosmic view of history. The pressing, totalizing nature of the Cold War is given distance. The antagonism of the superpowers is read not through the lens of an apocalyptic expectation of the end of history—whether in the Marxist or Kojévian senses, or in terms of nuclear annihilation—but rather is interpreted through a hermeneutic of contingency. The two combatants, each laying claim to a philosophical-historical destiny that can only be achieved via the defeat of the other, are relativized; their emergence traceable, their passing away assured. This position is even more remarkable given Germany’s position within the global ideological struggle. The division of occupying areas in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, followed by the partition of the country into a capitalist West and a communist East, situated Germany as both a literal borderland between the first and second worlds and as a site in which both systems vied to prove their superiority side by side.

Within such a context of immanent danger, the articulation of a cosmic viewpoint reveals a politics that, while not apolitical in and of itself, appears disconnected from politics when viewed from within the boundaries of historical consciousness. Löwith himself recognized the alterity of his position, arguing that “Such a view of humanity and of history from the viewpoint of the everlasting and that which proves itself in time is today untimely, because our thinking, obsessed with historical consciousness, cannot accept the always-being and the eternal and wants to dispense with it.”<sup>48</sup> The identification of the cosmic orientation as “untimely” (*unzeitgemäß*) is both a signal of affinity with Nietzsche, who also sought a return to cosmic unity and offered his own *Untimely Reflections*, and a denial of the chronology inherent in the logic of historical consciousness. A relativization of the crisis of the Cold War in favor of a turn toward “the always-

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 162. Original: “Eine solche Betrachtungsweise des Menschen und der Geschichte unter dem Gesichtspunkt des Immerwährenden und sich in der Zeit Bewährenden ist heute unzeitgemäß, weil unser vom historischen Bewußtsein besessenes Denken das Immerseiende und Immerwährende nicht wahrhaben will und es entbehren zu können meint.”

being and the eternal” (*das Immerseiende und Immerwährende*) is untimely precisely because it resists the eschatology embedded within the conflict.<sup>49</sup> Here again, Löwith’s work against historical consciousness is not a move toward pure theory, but the instillation of a practiced anti-historical consciousness.

The hermeneutic of contingency underlying Löwith’s framework of emergence and passing away engendered a further critique of a basic expression of historical consciousness: the focus on events and their consequences. Löwith elucidated the basis of our beholdenness to events in the following manner: “We exist and think today all in the horizon of history and its fortunes, we live no longer in the ambit of the natural world. We know furthermore about historical worlds of many kinds, while our own traditional European world decays.”<sup>50</sup> As our focus is limited ever increasingly by history, the traditional European (*alteuropäische*) world—the cosmos—recedes from view. Within this historical horizon, we are taken in by history’s “fortunes” (*Geschicke*). From the perspective of the cosmos, this concern with the fortunes of history is misplaced. As Löwith argued as early as 1953, “The Greek philosophers left it to the political historians to investigate and report these factual happenings and histories. They themselves did not make them an issue, because as philosophers they were concerned with the always-being, not with the changing fortunes of history.”<sup>51</sup> For Löwith, our obsession with the “fortunes of history” emerged

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<sup>49</sup> Löwith’s understanding of his views as “untimely” may also help explain the political diffidence of *Meaning in History*, examined by Barash. Barash argues convincingly that the critique of secularization in *Meaning in History* is intimately connected to Löwith’s critique of decisionism in Schmitt, Heidegger, and Gogarten. See Barash, “The Sense of History,” 75-82. Löwith’s identification of a shared eschatological genealogy between Marxism and advocates of decisionism gives context to his self-characterization as “untimely,” for even within the fundamental ideological oppositions of the twentieth century, Löwith found an all-encompassing eschatology.

<sup>50</sup> Löwith, “Welt und Menschenwelt,” 295. Original: “Wir existieren und denken heute alle im Horizont der Geschichte und ihrer Geschicke, wir leben aber nicht mehr im Umkreis der natürlichen Welt. Wir wissen ferner um vielerlei geschichtliche Welten, während unsere eigene, alteuropäische zerfällt.”

<sup>51</sup> Löwith, “Die Dynamik der Geschichte und der Historismus,” 296. Original: “Diese tatsächlichen Geschehnisse oder Geschichten zu erkunden und zu berichten, überließen die griechischen Philosophen den politischen Historikern. Sie selbst habe sie nicht zum Thema gemacht, weil sie als Philosophen nur das Immer-so-Seiende anging, aber nicht die wechselnden Geschicke [sic] der Geschichte.”

along with the division of the world into natural and historical/human spheres. Greek wisdom had no place for them, for they offered no true knowledge of the *logos* of *physis*. The divination of these fortunes under historical consciousness is enabled by an unreflective hermeneutic in which the separation of events into remarkable and unremarkable, important and unimportant is carried out with reference to ourselves, rather than in fealty to what those events are in themselves.<sup>52</sup> These anthropocentric interpretations of events are in turn built from the foundation of the idea of progress, which inspires a search for “epochal events” (*epochales Geschehen*)—that is, events which reveal a shift in the fortunes of history and presage the coming philosophical-historical eschaton.<sup>53</sup>

Löwith framed this argument using examples conventionally identified as epochal moments. In an interesting passage concerning the changing significance of events, he argued:

World history does not move according to the requirements of individual events, and the historian, in contrast to the philosopher of history, will therefore rightly refuse to determine, in a significant sense, what happened between 1789 and 1914. Already today, after seven years, what happened between 1933 and 1945 looks very different for all parties involved than it did during the war, and the meaning of the events will change, unfold, and contract even further as the event remains historically impactful and continues to have an effect in unpredictable ways.<sup>54</sup>

Löwith here uses the familiar metonymy of year as event—with the French Revolution, the First World War, the establishment of the National Socialist Regime, and the end of the Second World War as the respective referents—but overturns the conventional wisdom which it reflects. The proper historian does not seek in these events the change of an epoch, for what the event signifies

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 299.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 299.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 301. Original: “ Die Weltgeschichte bewegt sich nicht nach Maßgabe der einzelnen Ereignisse, und der Historiker wird sich deshalb, im Unterschied zum Geschichtsphilosophen, mit Recht weigern, bestimmen zu wollen, was etwa zwischen 1789 und 1914 im bedeutenden Sinne geschah. Schon heute, nach sieben Jahren, sieht das, was zwischen 1933 und 1945 geschah, für alle Beteiligten sehr anders aus als noch während des Krieges, und die Bedeutung des Geschehenen wird sich so lange weiter verändern, entfalten und zusammenziehen, als das Geschehene geschichtsmächtig bleibt und sich in unberechenbarer Weise auswirkt.”

can never be fixed, despite the efforts of philosophical-historical constructions to read into events progressivist and eschatological meaning.

Löwith referred to this process of inserting meaning into events as “overinterpretation” (*hinüberdeuten*). Following the passage above, he wrote: “We over-interrogate and overinterpret history for its possible significance, and the sole essential question remains unposed: what history is, before all interpretation, in itself and according to its own nature.”<sup>55</sup> Löwith’s own answer to this question derives from his vociferous promulgation of the cosmic view of history, which alone, due to its attunement to the world as cosmos and its antecedence to historical consciousness, can reveal what history is “before all interpretation” (*vor aller Deutung*).

Once more, we can see the stirrings of trauma beneath the surface of Löwith’s criticism. Historical consciousness conditions us to overinterpret events, to find in them not history as it truly is, but history as it is made by the philosophy of history. Overinterpretation is precisely the infusing of eschatological significance into events that, in and of themselves, reveal no lasting truth. Within Löwith’s anti-philosophy of history, the language of overinterpretation and the hidden language of trauma overlap. Discourses of trauma too find in events epochal shifts, ascribing to them fateful status, constructing them as Rubicons, the crossing of which alters the course of a life, a nation, or a civilization. The years of significance listed by Löwith above—1789, 1914, 1933, and 1945—are such moments which historical consciousness has established as epochal, and also which are associated with tremendous political violence. By denying the givenness of their historical significance, Löwith delegitimizes the historical-cum-traumatic consciousness that frames them. If events have no significance that is not imposed by the philosophy of history, then events lose their power to determine lives and their meaning. Within this context, Löwith’s insistence on the

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 301. Original: “Wir überfragen und überdeuten die Geschichte auf ihre mögliche Bedeutung hin, und die einzig wesentliche Frage: was sie, vor aller Deutung, an ihr selbst, ihrer eigenen Natur nach ist, bleibt ungestellt.”

continuity of historical consciousness despite the myriad catastrophes of the twentieth century—catastrophes which forced him bodily from his homeland and literally around the globe—should be read not as denial of trauma but as delegitimization, the embodied practice of a cosmic view of history that, against all vicissitudes, remains focused on the cosmos. This connection between philosophy and biography was noted by Koselleck in his foreword to Löwith's memoir, where he related in a passage of admiration that, faced with exile, "...Löwith does not utter a word of fear," displaying an endurance of the vicissitudes of history that is given strength by an orientation toward that which is unchanging beyond all history, beyond all revolutions and political upheavals, beyond all supposed teleological ends: the natural cosmos.<sup>56</sup> For as nature itself, in Löwith's philosophy, resists reduction to historical meaning, so too does the eternal *logos* of the cosmos resist chronologies of trauma: "Nature resists in fact history that is only historically understood, because it cannot be reduced to historically-conditioned significance and interpretation. It stands also on this side of the question of meaning and nonsense, which keeps the philosophy of history busy and in which it behaves."<sup>57</sup>

The resistance of nature against history had distinct ramifications in Löwith's thought. The critique of that which emerges and passes away, by clearing away the rubble of historical consciousness, enabled Löwith to recover from that consciousness aspects of the cosmos which had been historicized. Among these, as we saw above, was nature itself, which Löwith contended was not contained in the scientific apparatuses which we employ in order to comprehend and manipulate it. And just as science could not change nature, for Löwith, history could not change

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<sup>56</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, "Foreword," in Karl Löwith, *My Life in Germany Before and After 1933*, trans. Elizabeth King (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), xii.

<sup>57</sup> Löwith, "Die Dynamik der Geschichte und der Historismus," 315. Original: "Die Natur widersteht in der Tat der nur historisch verstandenen Geschichte, weil sie sich nicht reduzieren läßt auf historisch bedingte Bedeutung und Interpretation. Sie steht auch diesseits der Frage nach Sinn und Unsinn, die die Geschichtsphilosophie in Atem hält und ihr den Atem benimmt."

the human. In the important 1960 essay “Mensch und Geschichte,” he wrote, “The most trivial expression for the contemporary historical consciousness of contemporary humanity is the talk of ‘transition’ to a new epoch and the corresponding talk of a ‘previous’ and ‘future’ humanity, as though history had ever taught humanity to become something else and to change oneself.”<sup>58</sup> The claims of various philosophies of history to progress are undercut: no perfect new human—whether socialist, positivist, or even Nietzschean—will arise: humanity will remain what it has been. Historical consciousness, which itself emerges and passes away, thus collides against something that is eternal. The unchanging nature of humanity is professed directly by Löwith on the same page as the passage above: “Humanity has already survived and endured many kinds of transitions, without ever having ceased to be what it always already was. The difference between culture and barbarism also disclosed, under different conditions, this same nature of humanity, which was no less human at the beginning of history as it will be at the end. Their difference lies only in that the more advantageous conditions of a legally ordered situation appears to make humanity better.”<sup>59</sup> The futurity rooted in philosophical-historical constructions of progress is corrected, the possible revolutions to come rendered no greater than the transformations already endured. This passage itself was challenged by Habermas, who asked whether humans’ shifting self-understanding did not itself constitute a necessarily plastic component of their nature, and whether the humanity of humans was available for recovery in industrial society.<sup>60</sup> It also enables

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<sup>58</sup> Löwith, “Mensch und Geschichte,” 160. Original: “Der trivialste Ausdruck für das zeitgeschichtliche Bewußtsein des heutigen Menschen ist die Rede vom „Übergang“ zu einer neuen Epoche und die ihr entsprechende Rede von einem „bisherigen“ und „künftigen“ Menschen, als ob die Geschichte den Menschen jemals gelehrt hätte, ein anderer zu werden und sich zu verändern.”

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 160. Original: “Der Mensch hat schon vielerlei Übergänge bestanden und überstanden, ohne daß er je aufgehört hätte zu sein, was er immer schon war. Auch der Unterschied von Kultur und Barbarei offenbart unter verschiedenen Bedingungen dieselbe Natur des Menschen, der am Anfang der Geschichte nicht weniger Mensch war, als er es am Ende sein wird. Ihr Unterschied liegt nur darin, daß die günstigeren Bedingungen eines gesetzlich geordneten Zustandes den Menschen besser zu machen scheinen.”

<sup>60</sup> Habermas, “Karl Löwith,” 91.

a reconceptualization of a human-nature problematic that Henning Trüper, following Habermas, identifies.<sup>61</sup> The irreconcilability of Löwith's concept of human nature and his elaboration of "nature's nature," to borrow Trüper's phrase, is less apparent if we note Löwith's insistence on contingent nature of historical consciousness. While human nature may conceive of itself as separate from the cosmos, a proper (i.e. cosmic) orientation would reintegrate humanity into a wider, eternal world. Thus, human nature's own opposition or distance from nature is itself a historical phenomenon that, because it has emerged, must by necessity pass away again. It is a historical, rather than ontological, diversion from the cosmic norm that will see an end. What Trüper argues to be an "insurmountable" antagonism between history and nature in Löwith's thought is, I would argue, already configured in Löwith's historical metaphors as a contingent state of affairs.<sup>62</sup> The very historicity of the tension between history and nature—a tension borne out of the separation of mind from body and human from nature—is the guarantor of its surmountability, expressed in a metaphors of emergence and passing away. That Löwith's assertion moved against conventional wisdom—whether philosophical-historical or critical-theoretical—demonstrates again a self-conscious politics, a refusal to grant to the geopolitical powers that be the world-historical legitimacy which they claimed.

This connection between the threat of nuclear annihilation, the eschatology of historical consciousness, and the purported stability of human nature is essential for the understanding of Löwith's cosmic perspective. In an essay from 1966, after repeating the argument above concerning barbarism, culture, and humanity, Löwith argued: "Even a nuclear war cannot alter this essence of humanity, and supposing that we get so far as to make the earth uninhabitable, this

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<sup>61</sup> Henning Trüper, "Löwith, Löwith's Heidegger, and The Unity of History," in *History and Theory* 53, no. 1 (February 2014): 64-65.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.



would only accelerate the natural end of its inhabitability that is foreseen by the natural sciences.”<sup>63</sup> The extent to which the cosmic view of history relativizes events, and even eschatology, is laid bare. Even the extinction of humanity via nuclear weapons is relativized, made impotent to change the unavoidable course of nature and the perpetual order of the cosmos. This unyielding insistence on an eternal human essence positioned Löwith as an ally of Eric Voegelin, whose own immense distrust of eschatology we examined in Chapter 2. In a complex and contentious review of Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in *The Review of Politics* in 1953, Voegelin chastised Arendt for entertaining the possibility of a change in human nature, going as far as to claim that her misconception revealed the “essential immanentism” shared between liberalism and totalitarianism.<sup>64</sup> Löwith thus occupied a strict essentialist position cognate to Voegelin’s, with both insisting on the non-plasticity of human nature despite the most extreme pressures, however apocalyptic. This similarity is interesting, not only in that it makes strange Voegelin’s later claim after a 1964 conference on the philosophy of history attended by both thinkers that Löwith “displays no intention whatever to do a little thinking of his own,” but also because it reveals a common link between distrust of philosophical-historical eschatology and the construction and defense of a realm of permanence—for Löwith, cosmos; for Voegelin, order—that exists and persists beyond the transformations of that eschatology.<sup>65</sup>

The assertion of the constancy of human nature on Löwith’s part, however adamant, was not without its own internal tensions. Recalling a passage from “Welt und Menschenwelt” quoted

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<sup>63</sup> Löwith, “Christentum, Geschichte und Philosophie,” 440-441.

<sup>64</sup> Eric Voegelin, “Review of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*,” in *The Review of Politics* 15, no. 1 (January, 1953): 68-76. For an insightful analysis of the Voegelin-Arendt exchange, as well as a reproduction of their correspondence concerning their disagreement, see Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells, “Debating Totalitarianism: An Exchange of Letters Between Hannah Arendt and Eric Voegelin,” in *History and Theory* 51, no. 3 (October, 2012): 364-380.

<sup>65</sup> For Voegelin’s remark, see his letter to Robert Heilman of August 13<sup>th</sup>, 1964, in his *Collected Works*, vol. 30, *Selected Correspondence 1950-1984*, ed. Thomas A. Hollweck, trans. Sandy Adler, Thomas A. Hollweck, and William Petropulos (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007). Voegelin’s caustic observation marked a divergence from his earlier, favorable opinion of Löwith.

above, Löwith explicitly critiqued historical consciousness for the volatilization of humanity which it effected.<sup>66</sup> But we must ask: if human nature can volatilize (*sich verflüchtigen*), how can it also persist as an emanation of an unchanging cosmos? If human nature is the same now, as it was and ever will be, what threat does historical consciousness pose? Our goal here is not to resolve this contradiction by an appeal to a higher plane of consistency, but to show how the tension itself creates a space for trauma to reside in the architecture of Löwith's thought. For Löwith, historical consciousness and the concomitant "two worlds" concept do not merely ascribe to humanity a history. Instead, it attempts to establish historicity as our fundamental nature, to make human being and historical being equivalent.<sup>67</sup> The project goes beyond the changing of human nature, in order to reconstitute human nature as change. It is in this distinction that volatilization attains its full sense of danger in Löwith's analysis. If volatilization is articulated within a metaphoric of trauma—as we have argued above—then the effect of historical consciousness is the inscription of trauma into the very essence of the human. Human nature is not only buffeted by the volatility of a consciousness that seeks epochal and eschatological significance at every turn, but also takes that disorder as the law of its own being. Identities and lives are severed from any constant ground, and the meaning of human being is captured within a self-referential historicism, unmoored from any pretense of eternity, whether cosmic or supernatural. The resonances here within the context of the history of the twentieth century are deafening. Death and destruction, persecution and exile, atomic bombings and mechanized genocide become then eschatological moments of the self-revelation of our volatile essence. In making ourselves historical, every crime becomes an act of apotheosis, a lunge toward an eschaton in which we ourselves would sit as judge.

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<sup>66</sup> See again, Löwith, "Welt und Menschenwelt," 302.

<sup>67</sup> Löwith, "Mensch und Geschichte," 158.

In other words, historical consciousness, under Löwith's accusation, would read the catastrophes of the twentieth century as expressions of human nature, as the very volatility that defines our being in the world. And Löwith's attack on that consciousness, sustained for over twenty years, must be interpreted as more than a return to the cosmos and an anachronistic championing of Greek theory. It was instead, as we have argued, an attempt at delegitimization, an effort to deny to historical consciousness the power of upheaval and fatefulness—of eschatology—that it claims and that philosophy of history, in all its myriad forms and ideological manifestations, seeks to bring about. And it was a project, as Habermas observed, that was only possible from within that consciousness; eschatology can only be critiqued after it has cast down the cosmos as the navel of human orientation.<sup>68</sup> Löwith's admission in his memoir that his life had been shaped by the bifurcation of German and Jewish identity, and his immediately-following assertion that one's own life and the world in general are too large to orbit one such event, here become even more significant, and speak to the central organizing principle of his thought.<sup>69</sup> For in his unyielding criticism of historical consciousness and his relentless delegitimization of the trauma inflicted by it, Löwith constructed that consciousness as the underlying cause of the catastrophes which beset not only his life, but the lives of tens of millions of others.

The volatilization of human nature effected by historical consciousness was a lived experience, extending beyond the treatises and tomes of philosophers of history into the very bodily existence of those who felt the disturbances of its eschatological heavings—again, Löwith's

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<sup>68</sup> Again, contra Habermas and Trüper, I would here argue for the possibility (not the necessity) of interpreting Löwith's location within historical consciousness as an advantage rather than as a hindrance to his project.

<sup>69</sup> This autobiographical and cosmic-historical maneuver by Löwith leads us to problematize Trüper's reading of an opposition between the cosmos and an individual life in Löwith's thought. Understood from within Löwith's own hermeneutic, this opposition was only a contingent result of the dominance of historical consciousness, which his own historical orientation was attacking. See Trüper, "Löwith, Löwith's Heidegger, and The Unity of History," 63.

own literal displacement testifies to this. Löwith's work to undermine that consciousness is thus also inseparable from that embodiment: it is the very practice of the cosmic view of history.

## // Conclusion

The tension between the vicissitudes of a life and the unchanging logos of the cosmos was not resolved in Löwith's thought but was borne. This is the tension that the critique of the philosophy of history and historical consciousness generated in the postwar period: the strain between the manifest changes—cities destroyed, states and empires overthrown, millions killed, wounded, and displaced—and the continuity of historical-eschatological expectations. Between the contingent and the eternal, between nature and history, between a totalitarian past and a democratized future, between stability and the pall of nuclear warfare—these are the tensions that Löwith's thought illuminates. They reveal the lines of connection between intellection and everyday life, for Löwith's critique was inseparable from his experience. In this regard, we disagree with Trüper's characterization of Löwith's overt political quietude as an avoidance or a failure to speak.<sup>70</sup> To read the lack of explicit discussion of politics in Löwith's late work as an avoidance of politics *in toto* would be to limit our hermeneutics to the textual surface. As the above investigation of his Heidelberg-era work has sought to show, through the presence of trauma and the unavoidable experiential bases of his thought, Löwith's work was in a central way always talking about the real, material political catastrophes that marked his life and his world.

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<sup>70</sup> Trüper, "Löwith, Löwith's Heidegger, and the Unity of History," 68. "In its plain refusal to talk about concrete, detailed, politically charged, complicated, and convoluted contemporary history, Löwith's late work conceded the explanatory poverty of the atrophic histories that figured in philosophies of history—including his own."

## Chapter 6 // Against the Singular: Koselleck's Corrective to the Philosophy of History

### // Introduction

From June 18<sup>th</sup> to June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1970, the interdisciplinary research group *Poetik und Hermeneutik* met on Lake Constance for a colloquium on the topic “Histories and History” (*Geschichten und Geschichte*).<sup>1</sup> This group, which brought together young scholars from theology, literature, history, philosophy, and other disciplines, counted Koselleck as one of its members, along with the provocative religious studies scholar Jacob Taubes. Koselleck’s contribution, which we examine in detail below, was an essay entitled “Geschichte, Geschichten, und formale Zeitstrukturen,” later included in the collection *Futures Past* and translated as “History, Histories, and Formal Time Structures.”<sup>2</sup> The published volume, which arrived three years after the colloquium as *Geschichte – Ereignis und Erzählung*, included formal responses to the original contributions, in place of a transcript of discussions.<sup>3</sup> Among these was a response by Taubes to Koselleck’s essay, entitled “Geschichtsphilosophie und Historik. Bemerkungen zu Kosellecks Programm einer neuen Historik.”<sup>4</sup> There, referring to Koselleck’s distinction between an older conception of multiple histories (*Geschichten*) and a modern concept of a singular, unifying history (*Geschichte*), Taubes famously wrote: “In truth, however, Koselleck stands for the old party. But

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<sup>1</sup> See the foreword in Reinhart Koselleck and Wolf-Dieter Stempel, eds., *Geschichte – Ereignis und Erzählung*, vol. 5 of *Poetik und Hermeneutik* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1973), 7. Translations from this foreword, and from Taubes’ contribution, are my own.

<sup>2</sup> Koselleck’s essay was first published in *ibid.*, 211-222.

<sup>3</sup> Koselleck and Stempel, “Vorwort,” in *Geschichte – Ereignis und Erzählung*, 8. Original: “Entgegen der bisherigen Gepflogenheit wird diesmal darauf verzichtet, den Gang der Diskussion wiederzugeben. An dessen Stelle treten selbständige Beiträge, die zum Teil erst später hinzukamen, aber gleichwohl den Schwerpunkten der Diskussion entsprechen. Es ist zu hoffen, daß der geschlosseneren thematische Zusammenhang die Verselbständigung einzelner Voten aufwiegt.”

<sup>4</sup> Found in *Geschichte – Ereignis und Erzählung*, 490-499.

that is still said too fuzzily and too approximately. R. Koselleck is a modern partisan of those ‘many histories in the plural, of which one used to tell.’”<sup>5</sup>

Following Niklas Olsen, I take this characterization as accurate, for the most part.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, I contend that, when considered alongside trauma, it provides insight into the impetus behind Koselleck’s partisanship: as a response to trauma, a corrective to the catastrophic effects of modern philosophy of history. In *Critique and Crisis*, Koselleck explored how the crisis came about. In later essays, many of them collected in *Futures Past*, he worked towards undermining that crisis (and the trauma it generated), showing how it emerged out of a distorted view of historical time and a distorted philosophy of history that assumes its own totality and its own invincibility. The new historical orientation constructed by Koselleck in this period is pluralistic, aimed at destroying the hold of “history as such” and supplanting utopian conceptions of history. His semantic-historical work on temporality, history in the singular/plural, the makeability of history, acceleration, and other key concepts, all work towards an orientation that demands the recognition of the plurality of pasts and futures and that insists not on the meaning of history, but the absurdity. I argue that this work toward the plurality and absurdity of history—its multiple possibilities rather than its unity and telos; its rescission of meaning rather than its transcendent significance—is driven in part by trauma as a background frequency, further delegitimizing the philosophies of history that inflicted catastrophe and instituting a historical vision in which trauma is circumscribed and depotentiated. What follows is an attempt to reconstruct Koselleck’s

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 493. Original: “In Wahrheit aber nimmt R. Koselleck für die Alten Partei. Doch das ist noch unscharf und zu grob gesagt: R. Koselleck ist ein moderner Partisan jener »vielen Geschichten im Plural, von denen man früher zu erzählen wußte«.”

<sup>6</sup> Niklas Olsen, *History in the Plural: An Introduction into the Work of Reinhart Koselleck* (New York: Berghahn, 2012), 4. Olsen describes this partisanship as an “...ambition of outlining an alternative concept of history: in opposition to historical-philosophic ideas of history as one, unified and progressive project, which human beings can program and direct toward a final aim, he wanted to thematize a mode of historical writing that view [sic] history as composed by a plurality of non-convergent histories that can never be shaped entirely according to human desire.”

pluralistic historical theory with an eye to its inseparability from the postwar contexts of destruction and (meta)historical guilt. Building from this reconstruction of plurality, this chapter will then turn to an investigation of Koselleck's positive argument for the absurdity of history, linking his "partisanship" for plurality and absurdity to the interstitial effects of trauma in his texts.

### **// Disunity and Historical Semantics**

The project of resuscitating the plurality of histories began relatively early in Koselleck's career. In his inaugural lecture as professor of history at the University of Heidelberg in 1965, Koselleck laid the foundations for his critique of philosophical-historical temporality. Opening with his well-known interpretation of Altdorfer's *Alexanderschlacht*, Koselleck establishes a gulf between modern conceptions of historical time and the traditional conception which was dominant until the early modern period. Describing the many anachronisms of the painting, such as the garb of the soldiers and the depiction of the Persians as Turks, Koselleck argues that "temporal difference" was no concern for Altdorfer and his contemporaries.<sup>7</sup> In contrast to this absence of distance, Koselleck recounts Friedrich Schlegel's interpretation of the painting as a work of a bygone age.<sup>8</sup> This difference, for Koselleck, reveals a seismic shift in the understanding of historical time. He writes: "For him [Schlegel], history had in this way gained a specifically temporal dimension, which is clearly absent for Altdorfer. Formulated schematically, there was for Schlegel, in the three hundred years separating him from Altdorfer, more time (or perhaps a

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<sup>7</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, "Modernity and the Planes of Historicity," in *Futures Past: On The Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 10. The volume was originally published as *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979). The essay itself was first given as the inaugural lecture in Heidelberg in 1965, and first published as "Vergangene Zukunft der frühen Neuzeit," in H. Barion, E.W. Böckenförde, E. Forsthoff, and W. Weber, eds., *Epirrhosis. Festgabe für Carl Schmitt*, vol. 2 (Berlin: 1968), 549-566. All quotations here are taken from Tribe's translation unless otherwise noted.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

different mode of time) than appeared to have passed for Altdorfer in the eighteen hundred years or so that lay between the Battle of Issus and his painting.”<sup>9</sup>

It is this shift in temporality that Koselleck is concerned with in the essay. Focusing on the early modern period (*frühe Neuzeit*), Koselleck argues that “in these centuries there occurs a temporalization [*Verzeitlichung*] of history, at the end of which there is the peculiar form of acceleration which characterizes modernity.”<sup>10</sup> Key to this shift in Koselleck’s narrative is the concept of eschatology. Traditionally, according to Koselleck, “the end of time can be experienced only because it is always already sublimated in the Church.”<sup>11</sup> However, this containment of the eschaton is disrupted by the Reformation, which was accompanied by a “foreshortening of time” in which the eschaton began to approach more and more rapidly.<sup>12</sup> As the Reformation passed into religious civil war, religious projections of the end of the world became another target of subjugation by the Absolutist state, which “enforced a monopoly on the control of the future by suppressing apocalyptic and astrological readings of the future.”<sup>13</sup> This suppression, in turn, cemented the basic temporal division of Western history into ancient, medieval, and modern periods which remains with us in the present.<sup>14</sup>

In Koselleck’s narrative, this subjugation of religious futures by the state was concomitant with the emergence of two new conceptions of futurity: rational prognosis and the philosophy of history.<sup>15</sup> The former remained confined to politics and was concerned with prediction and

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 17-18.



possibilities, but still shared the traditional conception of history as a domain in which nothing is new.<sup>16</sup> The latter, however, represented a new historical temporality. Koselleck writes:

It was the philosophy of historical process which first detached early modernity from its past and, with a new future, inaugurated our modernity. A consciousness of time and the future begins to develop in the shadows of absolutist politics, first in secret, later openly, sustained by an audacious combination of politics and prophecy. There enters into the philosophy of progress a typical eighteenth-century mixture of rational prediction and salvational expectation. Progress occurred to the extent that the state and its prognostication was never able to satisfy soteriological demands which persisted within a state whose own existence depended upon the elimination of millenarian expectations.<sup>17</sup>

The trajectory of Koselleck's analysis in *Critique and Crisis* is palpable in the above passage. So too can we see traces of Löwith's secularization thesis: philosophy of history, while rejecting outright religious expectations of the future, nevertheless retains a framework centered on eschatology and soteriology. The Absolutist state, suppressing eschatology, is eventually overthrown by the reemergence of eschatology in the form of a philosophical-historical conception of progress. The future articulated by progress constitutes a break with the temporal frameworks of both the state and the Church.<sup>18</sup> This future, furthermore, is marked by two main features in Koselleck's view: its acceleration and its "unknown quality." Extrapolating on these aspects, Koselleck writes: "This self-accelerating temporality robs the present of the possibility of being experienced as the present, and escapes into a future within which the currently unapprehendable present has to be captured by historical philosophy."<sup>19</sup>

Here, the very possibility of philosophy of history is tied to changes in temporal experience. As the present is shrunk by the ever-accelerating upheaval of modernity, philosophy of history emerges as both explanation and justification—in other words, as eschatology. And for Koselleck,

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 20-21.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 21.

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

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 22.

again, this displacement into a justified future is catastrophic: “It has been possible since Hegel’s time to convey into historical reality fictions such as the Thousand-year Reich or the classless society. This fixation on an end-state by historical actors turns out to be the subterfuge of a historical process that robs them of judgment. Needed, therefore, is historical prognostication that goes beyond the rational prognoses of the politicians and, as the legitimate offspring of historical philosophy, can moderate the historical-philosophical design.”<sup>20</sup> Koselleck’s judgment here is as explicit as that of his mentor Löwith: the link between philosophy of history and the horrors of the Nazi and Soviet regimes is causal, not coincidental. Again, this works to refigure philosophy of history as a traumatic discourse, the intellectual seed from which the myriad sufferings of the twentieth century sprouted—sufferings which Koselleck himself endured.

Koselleck worked toward this moderation of the “historical-philosophical design” by investigating its semantic structure. He argued that the emergence of this new temporality was accompanied by a shift in historical language. In an essay tracing the history of the maxim *historia magistra vitae*, Koselleck depicted the shifting uses of the words *Historie* and *Geschichte*, which prior to the eighteenth century referred to a report or account and to an event or happening, respectively.<sup>21</sup> However, over the course of that century, *Historie* was displaced, and *Geschichte* came to refer to both events and their representation.<sup>22</sup> This coalescence was accompanied by a further semantic development: the emergence of history as a singular. In Koselleck’s chronicling, prior to the eighteenth century, history always implied a particular history.<sup>23</sup> However, after 1780,

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>21</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, “Historia Magistra Vitae: The Dissolution of the Topos Into the Perspective of a Modernized Historical Process,” in *Futures Past*, 32. The basis of the essay was a faculty lecture given in Heidelberg, and was first published in H. Braun and M. Riedel, eds., *Natur und Geschichte. Karl Löwith zum 70. Geburtstag* (Stuttgart: 1967), 825-838.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>23</sup> Koselleck, “On the Disposability of History,” in *Futures Past*, 194. First published as “Über die Verfügbarkeit der Geschichte,” in *Schicksal? Grenzen der Machbarkeit* (Munich: 1977), 51-67.

*die Geschichte* shed its plural declension and began to signify a universal singular.<sup>24</sup> This development represented for Koselleck “a semantic event that opens out our modern experience.”<sup>25</sup> History in the singular “made possible the attribution to history of the latent power of human events and suffering, a power that connected and motivated everything in accordance with a secret or evident plan to which one could feel responsible, or in whose name one could believe oneself to be acting.”<sup>26</sup> Here, history as a singular totality is cast as a philosophical-historical invention rather than as a metahistorical truth. This allows Koselleck to undermine the utopian claims of philosophy of history by revealing fictive—in the sense of created—nature of its basic assumption of a unified, universal subject. Philosophy of history, in this depiction, rests on a fabrication.

The semantic shift from plural histories to history as a totality was therefore central to the emergence of philosophy of history in Koselleck’s analysis. Indeed, to say that, in Koselleck’s account, the philosophy of history and the use of history in the singular are contemporary developments is an understatement. For him, they are the same phenomenon. He writes: “It is no accident that in the same decades in which history as a collective singular began to establish itself (between 1760 and 1780), the concept of a philosophy of history also surfaced...It is linguistically one and the same event which constituted history in the sense customary today, and on this basis gave rise to a philosophy of history.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, the possibility of justification and progress in history, the eschatological core of modern philosophy of history, rests on the conceivability of history in

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 194-195, and Koselleck, “*Historia Magistra Vitae*,” 32-34.

<sup>25</sup> Koselleck, “History, Histories, and Formal Time Structures,” 92.

<sup>26</sup> Koselleck, “*Historia Magistra Vitae*,” 35. Interestingly, Koselleck identifies here parallel developments in Enlightenment thought, citing the singularization of freedom over particular freedoms, justice over particular rights and obligations, progress over progressions in the plural, and Revolution out of many revolutions.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

general, as a unified space of experience and meaning that both subsumes and is reflected in each individual history.<sup>28</sup>

A further consequence of history's metamorphosis into a singular, unified concept, according to Koselleck, was the conception of history as something that could be made. This conception, for Koselleck, was central to the appeal of philosophy of history. Writing in his initial contribution to volume 5 of *Poetik und Hermeneutik* introduced above, Koselleck argued that "The concept of 'history pure and simple' laid the foundation for a historical philosophy, within which the transcendental meaning of history as space of consciousness became contaminated with history as space of action."<sup>29</sup> Put more directly in a late essay: "My first, historical thesis is that history first appeared to be generally at the disposition of men; that is, conceived as makeable, following the emergence of history as an independent and singular key concept. The step from a plurality of specific histories to a general and singular history is a semantic indicator of a new space of experience and a new horizon of expectation."<sup>30</sup> The ancient and medieval concept of history as *magistra vitae*, tied as it was to naturalistic conceptions of time and fate/providence, was replaced by a vision of history as a "concept of action," in which world history is itself makeable through, planning and foresight according to philosophical-historical schema.<sup>31</sup>

Koselleck's relationship to this concept of the makeability of history was ambiguous. This ambiguity stands as a reflection of both his dual position as one who experienced and narrated the catastrophes of the twentieth century and of the deep anxieties surrounding guilt, responsibility, and culpability in postwar West Germany. After a discussion of Hitler and National Socialism's

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<sup>28</sup> Regarding this latter point, see Koselleck's comment on Wilhelm von Humboldt: "The centuries-old dispute between history and poetics was finally dissolved by Humboldt when he derived the peculiarity of 'history in general' from its formal structure." *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>29</sup> Koselleck, "History, Histories, and Formal Time Structures," 92.

<sup>30</sup> Koselleck, "On the Disposability of History," 195.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

inconsistent relationship to the makeability of history—according to Koselleck, National Socialism viewed history as fate and as the product of will simultaneously—Koselleck offered the following words of warning: “We should guard against completely rejecting the modern turn of phrase concerning the makeability of history. Men are responsible for the histories they are involved in, whether or not they are guilty of the consequences of their action. Men have to be accountable for the incommensurability of intention and outcome, and this lends a background of real meaning to the dictum concerning the making of history.”<sup>32</sup> This passage is ripe with significance on several levels. Firstly, through its appearance in an essay originally published in 1977 and republished in *Futures Past* two years later, it demonstrates that the question of historical judgment and historical guilt with which Koselleck grappled in his dissertation in the 1950s remained salient into his mature career. Secondly, through its delineation of being responsible (*verantwortlich*) from being guilty (*schuldig*), it reveals an awareness of the specter of Nazi crimes and the need to acknowledge and confront them while also foreclosing the moral dimension of judgment. Thirdly, in its separation of intent from result and casting the latter as disconnected from the former and thus out of human control, it reveals Koselleck as a continued “partisan” (to again borrow Taubes’ phrase) for histories in the plural, despite his concession to the modern conception.<sup>33</sup> Finally, and most importantly for us, it reproduces the language of trauma established in *Critique and Crisis*. For just as the enlighteners of the eighteenth century proved, through their continual conjuring of the crisis, unable to control the future, so too does Koselleck argue for the volatility of history in the twentieth century. This binary between intention and

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>33</sup> Despite his criticisms of the modern concept of a singular history, Koselleck did not advocate a return to the ancient concept of history, as Löwith did. Rather, he stressed the importance of determining history’s structure: “In other words, a justifiable critique of the voluntaristic self-assurance of utopian planners of the future can be effected only if history as a *magistra vitae* draws instruction not from histories (*Geschichten*); but rather from the ‘structure of movement’ of our history.” Reinhart Koselleck, “Representation, Event, and Structure,” in *Futures Past*, 114. This piece was originally published as Koselleck’s contribution to the discussion in *Geschichte – Ereignis und Erzählung*.

outcome functions in his work as the traumatic reminder of the danger and failure of philosophy of history: promising progress and salvation, it delivers catastrophe; promising to secure the future, it causes the past to erupt into the present.

The link between these historical conceptualizations and trauma becomes more resonant if we take closer note of Koselleck's work on temporality. Essential here is Koselleck's unwieldy phrase *die Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen*, or "the contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous." This concept identifies overlapping temporal structures that surpass the linear temporality of past/present/future (and also ancient/medieval/modern) that determines the modern conception of history.<sup>34</sup> Koselleck takes as an example of temporal relationality the theorization of different stages of constitutions in ancient Greek thought, which allowed for the simultaneous existence of political forms that embodied different temporalities.<sup>35</sup> This concept, drawn from the work of Ernst Bloch and other Marxist theorists, undermines the teleology of utopian historical constructions by revealing the unevenness of historical change in resistance to philosophies of history that would subsume all complications of the present under an assured and total future. It also evinces a theoretical prefiguration of Koselleck's deeply personal recollections of his wartime experiences and their "many ends" examined in detail above in Chapter Two. For his evocation of "glowing lava" that bursts out from memory into bodily experience is a personal instance of the contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous—simultaneous temporalities, multiple endings, the past never banished but always resurfacing. Thus, there exists a semantic link—constituted by a metaphoric of trauma—connecting the theoretical category of the contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous with the experience and reexperience of the catastrophes surrounding the Second World War.

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<sup>34</sup> Koselleck, "History, Histories, and Formal Time Structures," 98-99.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 97-99.

Furthermore, and central to our analysis here, Koselleck's configuration of contemporaneity/non-contemporaneity is couched, much as the "glowing lava" described in his reflection in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in 1995 and the "conjuring" employed throughout *Critique and Crisis*, in spatial and geological metaphors. Agreeing with Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann and Sean Franzel, I interpret contemporaneity and non-contemporaneity as deployed by Koselleck to be always aimed at the irreducible spatiality of historical temporality.<sup>36</sup> As such, a central corollary to the contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous is Koselleck's concept of "sediments of time" (*Zeitschichten*).

*Zeitschichten* were construed by Koselleck as a theoretical framework for the understanding of overlapping experiences of temporality. While each of us experiences events in their singularity, he explains, those events are only possible through their participation in larger cycles—he gives the example of a mail carrier bringing news of a loved one's death, only made possible by recurrent habits of mail delivery.<sup>37</sup> In turn, the larger structures which we perceive to be ahistorical themselves become singularities when examined on larger time scales.<sup>38</sup>

*Zeitschichten* as a category allows for the differential analysis of these overlapping temporalities, particularly their intersection in experience. It is in the illumination of this domain that Koselleck's mobilization of *Zeitschichten* as a concept and the ramifications of *Zeitschichten* as a metaphor collide. Exploring the surprise as a moment in which sequences of events can be experienced as a singularity (through the unexpected disruption, and thus historicization, of the sequence), he wrote: "The continuum between previous experience and the expectation of coming

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<sup>36</sup> Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann and Sean Franzel, "Introduction: Translating Koselleck," in Reinhardt Koselleck, *Sediments of Time: On Possible Histories*, ed. and trans. Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann and Sean Franzel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), xii-xvi.

<sup>37</sup> Koselleck, "Sediments of Time," in *Sediments of Time*, 5. This essay was first published in German in 1994.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

events is breached and needs to constitute itself anew. It is this temporal minimum of an irretrievable before and after that inscribes surprises into our bodies, which is why we are always trying anew to interpret them.”<sup>39</sup> Here, historical temporality is branded into the body, brought out of a theoretical delimitation of experience and made material in human physicality. The sediments of time that Koselleck inaugurated as a conceptual-historical category are also embodiments, the scars that history leaves on those through whom it passes. *Zeitschichten* as changes to the body necessitates an interpretation of its relationship to the experience of the twentieth century. The implosion of historical visions in the catastrophes of the Second World War and the physical, material sediments of history laid bare by rampant destruction reveal another register through which *Zeitschichten* is metaphorically grounded in experience. The experience of history as catastrophe, palpable in the work of postprogressive thinkers, connects *Zeitschichten* to both Koselleck’s other geological metaphors of the volatility of historical experience—lava, evocation, eruption—and to the situation of ruin in which those metaphors were espoused. For although the physical rubble had long been removed by 1994, the spiritual, intellectual, moral, and philosophical-historical rubble still shaped the landscape of historical thought, as this explication of *Zeitschichten* has testified.

The question that remains further unavoidable for the intellectual historian, however, concerns the resulting effectivity of the bodily inscription of historical temporalities. What are the philosophical-historical consequences of an awareness of *Zeitschichten* and their indelible imprint on the body? How is the question of the meaning of history—with which postprogressive thinkers such as Koselleck were engaged so earnestly after the Second World War—reformulated if we

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 7.



think with and through *Zeitschichten*? In terms of Koselleck's thought, these questions lead us to his formulation of the absurdity of history.

Koselleck directly addressed the question of the meaning of history in an aptly-titled essay "On the Meaning and Absurdity of History."<sup>40</sup> Koselleck begins the essay by arguing for the irrationality of history through a multifaceted examination of the meanings—or in some cases the lack of meaning—attributed to the Battle of Stalingrad. Any rationality of history is only ever attributed after the fact.<sup>41</sup> This argument evokes Koselleck's longtime criticism of historical judgment and his ironic maxim that stated "Knowing is better than knowing better." It also generated a "paradox" identified by Koselleck, which held together the unavoidable variance between a history as it occurs and a history as it is narrated when it comes to be identified as "history."<sup>42</sup> This paradox is obscured and erased by the philosophy of history and by the development of a concept of history in the singular: "What was once the realm of human action, activity, and suffering is transformed into a power that manifests itself as necessary and just, in analogy to God. History then coalesces into a collective singular that devours all individual histories."<sup>43</sup> The verb "devour" (*verschlucken*) here points again toward the bodily-traumatic metaphoric fundament of Koselleck's historical criticism: in swallowing up plural histories, history in the singular also swallows up bodies—acting, suffering human beings.

What is to be done in response to this devouring? What theoretical possibilities exist for the escape from history in the singular? In exploring these questions, Koselleck turned to Nietzsche's attempts to deny historical meaning. In particular, he traced Nietzsche's attacks upon

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<sup>40</sup> Originally published as "Vom Sinn und Unsinn der Geschichte," *Merkur* 51 (April 1997): 319-334. Quotations here are taken from Hoffmann and Franzel's translation in *Sediments of Time*, 177-196.

<sup>41</sup> Koselleck, "On the Meaning and Absurdity of History," in *Sediments of Time*, 183, 185-186.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

teleology, necessity, and justice in history.<sup>44</sup> In Koselleck's view, Nietzsche's efforts were ultimately unable to free history from its singularity. A telling passage on the difficulty of escaping narratives of justice in history captures the severity of the challenge in Koselleck's thought: "But an abyss opens up for Nietzsche here, the first step into a tragic situation that prohibits modernity from transforming the Furies into the Eumenides. Nietzsche can no longer trace this kind of encoded message of mercy: whoever seeks today to realize love, magnanimity, and leniency becomes enmeshed in the meaninglessness of failure. Even the pre-givens of meaning that determine just action bring with them the suspicion that they will end in absurdity."<sup>45</sup> Here, Koselleck critiques Nietzsche from a historical standpoint, judging by the weight of a century of terror, destruction, and murder. "The meaninglessness of failure" that meets any attempt at love is a phrase that cannot be interpreted apart from the experiences of catastrophe that have ensured that meaninglessness and that failure. The very assumptions of notions of justice, mercy, compassion, and the like have been cast into doubt by the events of the twentieth century. Absurdity has seeped into the core not only of historical events, but the conditions of historical meaning. In this furtherance of Nietzsche's critique of meaning, we can trace the effectivity of trauma. The unavoidable termination in absurdity and the impossibility of a non-compromised experience of love and leniency resonates within a traumatic register. It is history itself—history in the singular and its guarantee of historical meaning—that severs the potential of such positive efforts and reroutes them into a singular failure.

Where Koselleck sought to go beyond Nietzsche, where he worked to succeed where he perceived Nietzsche to have failed, is in the elevation of the plurality of histories as a warden against the imposition of historical meaning. Channeling Löwith, Koselleck wrote, "The need for

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 190-191.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 192.

meaning is no guarantee that what happens in and through us is meaningful in and of itself. Every historical statement remains philosophically historically malformed as long as its justification is unwittingly taken from metaphysics, religion, or theology.”<sup>46</sup> Nietzsche had laid the ground for this recognition of the burden of meaning, which Koselleck recognized and sought to further through an insistence on the necessary impossibility of meaning due to the dual nature of history as event and as account that ascribes meaning after the fact. “History is composed of a multiplicity of meanings. There is no ‘history in and for itself,’ no ‘history in general.’”<sup>47</sup>

The argument for the absurdity of history is cemented in Koselleck’s piece through a reflection on Verdun. Taking as his example Mitterand and Kohl performing reconciliation at the site of the battle, Koselleck wrote the following: “To suggest that hundreds of thousands of people had to kill each other in order to make a kind of understanding possible on this blood-soaked ground of mass murder is nothing other than retroactively imposing teleological meaning onto constellations of events that had been experienced by those involved as increasingly meaningless.”<sup>48</sup> Here, the imposition of meaning and fulfilment on an event so destructive, an event that was recognized by those who suffered it as meaningless, is to inflict a historical wound. The indignation embodied by Koselleck here continues to build in his critique of Kantian and Hegelian historical teleology, a teleology that he had in many instances argued to be operative in the present in the form of utopian historical visions. He argued: “To translate the absurd mass slaughter of hundreds of thousands in the space of several square kilometers and in just a few weeks into meaningfulness is truly to declare the absurd itself to be meaningful. This certainly surpasses the experiential ability of our generation. Absurdity having become event, it should not

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 193-194.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 194.

also receive some kind of absolution via attributions of meaning after the fact.”<sup>49</sup> The repeated enumeration of the victims and the intense locality of their suffering forces a recognition of the bodily evidence of absurdity that must be overcome and transgressed by any imposition of meaning. The reference to his generation’s horizon of experience, in turn, figures that horizon as one determined by absurdity. The experience of those who suffered the catastrophes of the twentieth century is one constituted by absurdity, to the point that absurdity is the event experienced. Thus, it is bodily experience and bodily suffering that instills absurdity as the horizon of experience. It is the wounds inflicted by violence driven by visions of history in the singular that makes absurdity into a generational experience and an event. And the “translation” of meaning after the fact, in the attempt to give historical justification to the destruction and mutilation of those bodies, is an instance of trauma, forcing a renewed confrontation with the source of the wound.

Plurality, then, as formulated in essays and speeches over the decades of his career, functions in Koselleck’s thought as the historical orientation properly attuned to the absurdity of history. Histories in the plural are the embodied alternative to utopian philosophies of history.

### **// Delegitimization and Trauma’s Adhesion**

Taken together, each of these interconnected theoretical thrusts—the plurality of history, the makeability of history, the contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous, the sedimentary nature of historical temporality—constitute an attempt to fracture the hegemony of utopian historical projections. They also, however, embody a positive historical orientation created in response to the distinct challenges facing postwar Germans, not least practicing historians and historical theorists. The privileging of the plural against the singular and the possible against the destined evince a vision of history driven by a distinctively non-teleological futurity, an attempt to

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 195.

sever what can be from the projections of what has been. The project of uncovering past futures cannot be read apart from the existential moral stakes at play in West Germany in the postwar decades. To excavate past futures from the sediment of historical time in the *Sattelzeit* was not a purely scholarly or non-political endeavor. Rather, it was a value-laden attempt to give life to a pluralistic conception of history that would not only recognize alternative futures in the past, but also prevent the many futures of the present from being buried and forgotten under the ever-accumulating sediments of history. In this orientation, the catastrophes of the recent past are (in historical-theoretical terms) depotentiated, rendered unable to impose meaning—and thus fulfillment—on the nascent futures at hand in the present. The crimes and suffering of the Second World War, then, are reinterpreted through a pluralistic vision of historical temporality that undermines the monologic visions that drove them. They are denied philosophical-historical significance; they are blocked from imputing eschatological significance onto the bodies of millions of victims. Delegitimized thusly, the trauma they inflicted is contained, its metahistorical spread checked.

However, through this delegitimization, that trauma returned in the very architecture of Koselleck's thought. The attempt to secure a pluralistic historical orientation was embodied through language that bore the marks of those wounds. What is preserved in sediment is not gone, but is always available for excavation. Just as memories of the war can burst out like lava in the body, the sediments of history can accumulate in the present. It is trauma, even in its banishment—or rather, precisely through its banishment—that organizes on a metaphorical level the philosophical-historical criticism embodied by Koselleck. That the plural orientation toward history is expressed through traumatic-geological metaphors—sediments, lava, bursting—reveals the background function of trauma in Koselleck's work. It also reveals once more the extent to

which catastrophe formed the background of postwar historical thinking, even after the postwar “era” was perceived by many to have ended with the reunification of Germany in 1990. The catastrophe—the rubble as we have thematized it here—was not only the environment in which postprogressive historical criticism emerged; it was also the very ground of that criticism, its condition of possibility, animating it and shaping its trajectories even as it sought the rubble’s delegitimization and supercession. It is against this background that we can interpret, albeit hesitantly, something of the radicality of Koselleck’s partisanship for plurality. Although he was well at home within the disciplinary and academic structures of history—a storied career, international recognition, a corpus of thought that remains relevant and alive even after his death—his position within the intellectual tradition of historical thinking—that is, within the confines of historical consciousness—was less comfortable. Rather, it comprises a story of conflict, of an attempt to test and ultimately escape the confines of a monolithic historical orientation that imposed its meaning and its eschatology upon a vast field of suffering and an innumerable procession of victims. In this sense, Taubes’s description of Koselleck as a “partisan” was more than a nod to the underlying consistency of his conceptual-historical work. It also captured the stakes of the contest inherent in Koselleck’s texts: a struggle against singularity that had the bodies of human beings rather than the dryness of academic speculation as its referent.

### Thinking Through Trauma // A Conclusion

The philosophy of history was a matter of bodies in postwar Germany. The destruction of cities, landscapes, political futures, and bodies were all material, physical wounds. The battle waged by postprogressive thinkers against what they saw to be the pathological framework of historical eschatology by necessity spread beyond the pages of their texts, into the materiality and bodily nature of thinking. Thinking among such ruins, thinking in the wake of such destruction, implores an investigation into the structure of intellectual embodiment in the postwar era.

Once again, the metaphors through which this thinking was expressed are the key to our theoretical exploration. Throughout this dissertation, in both the texts under consideration and in my interpretations and narration, the conceptual shadow cast by terms such as crisis and catastrophe are quite long. As Anson Rabinbach's seminal work on German thought and apocalypse demonstrates, the experience of catastrophe was central to the intellectual history of Germany in the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Following my argument above regarding the importance of the image and metaphor of rubble for understanding postwar German work upon the past, it behooves us to undertake an examination of the conceptual architecture of such experiences and the theoretical terms they generated.

Most important among these terms is crisis, which encompasses both explicitly and implicitly the stakes of historical thinking after the Second World War. The work produced by Löwith, Voegelin, and Koselleck emanate and often directly address a crisis that, in their articulations, reaches to the deepest spiritual foundations of Western thought. Even further, as we see in our examination of Koselleck's dissertation in Chapter 3 below, crisis was a central focus

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<sup>1</sup> Anson Rabinbach, *In the Shadow of Catastrophe: German Intellectuals between Apocalypse and Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

of historical criticism. Recent theoretical work has revealed the expanse of crisis and its foundational status for historiography. In the words of Janet Roitman, "...crisis serves as the non-formation of contemporary historical narrative; it is a non-locus from which to claim access to both history and knowledge of history. In other words, crisis is mobilized in narrative constructions to mark out or to designate 'moments of truth'; it is taken to be a means to access historical truth, and even a means to think 'history' itself."<sup>2</sup> Crisis, then, is the moment in which a destabilized truth becomes vulnerable to reimagination. The atmosphere of physical, political, moral, and spiritual degradation in postwar Germany, when manifested in a discourse of philosophical-historical criticism, becomes an opportunity, a critically-inverted "zero hour" in which space was available for new historical orientations. In this sense, crisis was a crucial ground for the thought of these intellectuals. It structured the very possibility of historical criticism, bringing history itself—via the catastrophic eschatological heavings of political projects driven by a philosophy of history—into the domain of experience and rendering it malleable. Crisis thus is the fundamental ground of historiography.

However, the symbol of crisis becomes more interesting and more complicated if we reinterpret it through its latent significations. Not only does it stand as the condition of possible historical criticism, but it also reveals paths for thinking through the imbrication of ideas and bodies. Historically, crisis emerged as a medical term, denoting the moment during an illness that required decisive intervention and determined the fate of the patient.<sup>3</sup> Despite its universalization into a condition of modernity—or perhaps because of it—crisis remains metaphorically operative

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<sup>2</sup> Janet Roitman, *Anti-Crisis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 3.

<sup>3</sup> For a genealogy of crisis, see Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 103fn15. For an excursion into the significance of the medical connotations of crisis, see Jean-Luc Nancy, "Critique, Crisis, Cri," trans. Patrick J. Lyons, in *Qui parle* 26, no. 1 (June, 2017): 7-8. Koselleck and Nancy both, as the titles of their pieces betray, are concerned with the semantic entwinement of crisis with critique.



within a web of significations centered on the body. If crisis is the foundational framework for historiography and the condition of possibility for historical meaning, to follow Roitman, then the body is the metaphorical terrain—and limit—in which history has meaning.

Crisis, however, is not just the field which makes possible historical significance. It is also an object of experience. The suffering of millions in the Second World War and its attending atrocities stands, as I have argued, as an experience of history itself gone wrong. The crisis of history instantiated in the devastation effected by and to Germany was in part a physical experience, in which the materiality of the body collided with philosophical-historical projections. The transvaluation of history undertaken by these thinkers in the postwar era is a consequence of this. As a result of the catastrophes of the twentieth century, then, crisis was experientialized.

In this experientialization, trauma is the deciding factor. Like crisis, trauma—“wound”—is semantically linked to the body. It signifies a separation, the infliction of an absence or a partition within a body that was previously whole and intact. Here, we see basis of the persistence of the clinical paradigm of reintegration: to heal a wound is to bring together the flesh that has been rent. In its cultural ramifications, trauma effects the destruction of meaning, the interruption and destabilization of an identity or a worldview. Thus, trauma contains both bodily and ideational metaphoric possibilities.

On one level, the thinkers examined in this dissertation render philosophy of history as a traumatic discourse by highlighting its disruption: of physis (Löwith), of politics/temporality (Koselleck), and of order (Voegelin). On a deeper level, however, their work embodies—in the active, verbal sense—the philosophy of history by linking their own bodily displacement (exile, imprisonment) to the bodily fundament of philosophical-historical reasoning (crisis). Through their evocations of trauma, their texts establish a link between eschatology and experience,

between ideas and bodies. Trauma, therefore, is a medium for the experientialization of crisis: by establishing the philosophy of history—or more generally, historical eschatology—as the source of catastrophe and establishing its emergence in and perpetuation of crisis, and by carrying out this genealogy through historical metaphors that are indelibly traumatic, the thought of Löwith, Koselleck, and Voegelin recast the philosophy of history as both traumatic discourse and as a source of trauma and an object of experience. Their intellectual work on the philosophy of history was thus also bodily work.

What trauma as an interpretive apparatus provides is a hermeneutics that links histories of ideas and histories of the body. Even more, it makes possible a paradigm for the understanding of embodiment. Trauma serves as a pineal gland of sorts, a conduit in which historians can detect the mutual effectivity of the “intellectual”—ideas, concepts, orientations, interpretations—and the “bodily”—physicality, materiality, suffering, desire. The experience of crisis in the form of the catastrophes of the Second World War generated complicated theoretical and philosophical ideas. In their articulation, these ideas recast the philosophy of history as both a source of trauma and as a traumatic discourse itself. Trauma thus unites philosophical-historical criticism and bodily response: it is the transcoding of the body into intellectual discourse. It is through trauma—as both experience and discursively-ramified metaphor—that these thinkers embodied their ideas: Löwith’s cosmic view of history, Voegelin’s excavation of order, Koselleck’s affinity for plurality. In their delegitimization of trauma, these thinkers challenged the primacy of crisis without challenging crisis as such. In so doing, they also relativized the basic metaphoric concepts which underlie historical significance. For if crisis is the condition of possible historical meaning—the moment in which history, as the body, is amenable to intervention between death and salvation—these thinkers, by challenging the determinant potential of trauma, undermined crisis as

historiographical foundation. Their work weakened the link between crisis and meaning by articulating alternative historical orientations that pushed trauma and crisis to the margins, in order to bring to the fore of historical consciousness alternative poles around which to understand and endure history.

If this sketch of embodiment is viable as a theoretical filter, then what is further enabled is a view of the mutual imbrications of trauma and intellectual history. The schema of trauma as embodiment allows for the provisional charting of this underexplored territory. When trauma becomes an object or product of intellectual work—however implicitly in a text or discourse—then its effect is felt in intellectual history. An intellectual-historical methodology that reads for trauma is therefore able to interpret texts and bodies as co-constitutive. The inseparability of the body and the intellectual thus become open to investigation and makes possible intellectual-historical accounts of how ideas, concepts, and the like are embodied, are made effective in the very flesh of the humans who think them.

While the effects of trauma in narrative and discourse have been a massive site of scholarship in the humanities since the 1980s, the effects of trauma on ideas has been underexplored. Whatever we take as the currency of intellectual history—Lovejoy's unit ideas; Koselleck's concepts; Foucault's discourse; Pocock and Skinner's political language—the potential historical role of trauma in shaping, determining, and changing such units has not been a consideration for intellectual historians. What this dissertation seeks to ignite through a reconstruction of trauma's role in fundamental philosophical-historical discourses is a theoretical awareness of trauma as a field upon which ideas can be formulated, modified, and even created. That is, trauma not only as a force that alters an idea or concept *ex post facto*, but rather stands as a historical potency that can, in given situations, generate intellectual-historical units and

paradigms. I mean here to complicate the notion, embedded at the core of progressive historical visions and still operative in the structures of intellectual histories, that there is a pure form of an idea that is isolatable from its later motility. Following Peter Gordon and his emphasis on the ramification of concepts, I argue that, when trauma is examined in intellectual histories, it must not be conceptualized only as a force that modifies existing ideas and their paths of circulation.<sup>4</sup> Nor, even, should it be configured as an amorphous mass from which ideas are birthed. Rather, trauma must be theorized in intellectual history as potential, as a possible set of circumstances and relationalities that can generate particular ideas, concepts, and language for particular ends.

From this theorization of trauma follow some consequences for intellectual history in general. For if, in theoretical terms, trauma is not a unit of analysis but rather a constellation of intellectual, textual, and tropic trajectories, then the currency of intellectual history is moved to a deeper fundament of ideational formation. What a paradigm such as that of “postprogressive” employed in this dissertation enables is an understanding of parallel positionalities across sets of ideas that are non-identical. In specific terms, it allows for an understanding of the congruencies between thinkers and ideas that are otherwise at odds, such as Löwith’s reconstruction of cosmic history or Voegelin’s excavation of order. Thus, it examines not only ideas themselves in their explicit and implicit ramifications, but also their participation in and constitution of larger structures of intellectual being. Following from this, intellectual history becomes the study of orientations. Orientations I define here as the relationalities that organize sets of ideas into relationships of similitude or dissimilitude, antagonism or cooperation, recognition or mutual incomprehension. The geometric-trigonometric metaphors of congruency and parallelism employed throughout this dissertation were chosen for their incisiveness in representing these

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<sup>4</sup> For a deeper explanation of ramification as an intellectual-historical hermeneutic, see Peter E. Gordon, *Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

relationalities. Therefore, the history narrated here is, at the deepest level, not about the ideas produced by postprogressive thinkers, but is instead about how those ideas share congruent orientations toward the problem of meaning and catastrophe in history that the horrors of the Second World War made materially pertinent.

When taken as a hermeneutic lodestar, this theorization of orientations has further significance for the comprehension of the persistence of the problem of historical meaning in our contemporary moment. Political developments across the globe—from the United States, to Brazil, to France, to Hungary, to Russia, to India, and beyond—have seen ethnonationalist movements mobilize visions of historical meaning in order to fuel resentment. These movements have arisen often in backlash to the still-pertinent—and I would argue, still dominant—conception of history as a story of progress. In the consciousness of Western societies—films, magazines, social media, blogs, think tanks; in short, the cultural organs of power in popular, middlebrow, and highbrow modes—a devotion to history as progress is reiterated. The autobiography of the West, told in its generality or in its constituent parts, is one of improvement, of the ever-increasing rule of justice, equality, prosperity, and opportunity. Indeed, the significance of nativist reactionary political successes can in large part only be comprehended through the shock they have administered to the assumptive philosophy of history of Western politics. The incredulity of Western political commentators in the face of these developments—Trumpism, Brexit, Orbán, Bolsonaro, Modi—is inexplicable without reference to the edifice that animates the shock: a secular faith in progress, an orientation toward the past that definitionally precludes regression.

The erasure and violence undergirding this triumphal progressive history has long been stressed by historians of colonialism, slavery, and white supremacy. Yet it survives across popular and elite non-academic visions of history, embodied in every monument to western progress and

every insistence that some form of violence or prejudice is a relic of the past, transgressively raised into a present in which it does not belong. What persists in this incomprehension, I argue, is not a philosophy of history per se, but an orientation toward history that is structured by an enlightenment historical temporality that ever and anon reads suffering as an anachronism to be subsumed by progress. This temporality, itself self-aggrandizing and prejudicial, is rooted in the deepest fundament of modern historical consciousness.<sup>5</sup> It is a scheme, at once spatialized to the “West” and secularized to a scientific-technocratic future, that occludes and makes incomprehensible alternative, non-progressive historical orientations.<sup>6</sup> As such, it severely limits the ability of societies to address the frightening resurgence of racist and misogynist politics driven by right-wing historical visions. To be sure, the alternatives envisioned by postprogressive thinkers such as Löwith and Koselleck are an insuperable length from the hybrid orthodoxies of the New Right. But the study of their alternative orientations, and an understanding of their destabilization and delegitimization of progressive philosophies of history, can assist us to rethink the possibilities and boundaries of the historical, so as to imagine new futures.

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<sup>5</sup> The efforts of Kathleen Davis to show the constitutive nature of the medieval/modern divide to historiographical chronology are valuable here. See Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> For the classic study of this spatialization, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

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