

Alexandre Saintin, Le vertige nazi. Voyages des intellectuels français dans l'Allemagne nationale-socialiste, Paris (Passés composés/Humensis) 2022, 320 p., ISBN 978-2-3793-3206-7, EUR 23,00.

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The totalitarian regimes of 1930s Europe held their attractions for highly heterogeneous groups and individuals not just in those countries that had turned them into reality. Amidst crises that shook national economies as well as politics to the foundations, the Bolshevik regime in Russia, the fascist one in Italy and its national-socialist counterpart in Germany seemed to offer clear-cut answers to complex problems. They had not only replaced inertia and shock by action and dynamic movement, but also hopelessness by myths of a proletarian or a national revolution. To contemporaries, highly sensitive to political issues, who used to make themselves heard in the political arena – the meaning of »intellectuels français« as applied by the author –, the transformations initiated in Russia by Bolshevism, in Italy by Fascism and in Germany by National Socialism were fascinating cases to study in detail.

To intellectuals in France from right to left, Germany was a most interesting case in point for various reasons. For many decades, the neighbouring country on the other side of the Rhine had been a source of important philosophical, literary, artistic, and musical impulses for French intellectuals and, as such, had frequently been visited on a Grand Tour. The First World War, however, had left behind a completely different political and ideological landscape. Although the German governments before 1933 had initiated numerous socio-political experiments as answers to the pressing problems of the time, and although the avant-garde Berlin of the late 1920s had attracted French cultural workers, it was the National Socialist regime that broke with many conventions, took a path so different from the ones chosen in France, Britain or other democracies in response to the current crises and therefore provoked curiosity. This induced contemporaries to travel to Nazi Germany and see for themselves, amazed at or frightened about, the changes that National Socialism had imposed on an entire people. They wanted to talk to everyday people and experience an ideology in practice, they wanted to form a first-hand opinion about whether this could be a model for their own country.

In written reports they recorded what they had learned in Germany on one or more trips across the country, produced on the spot or shortly afterwards and generally published before 1945. They did so not for the sake of private memory or of creating literary works, but rather to inscribe themselves in the political debate in their own country about how to best lead the nation out of the interwar crisis. Travel reports of this kind by politically engaged intellectuals form the basis and core of this study. This is an important



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limitation, as it excludes from the study travellers, who had not explicitly political motives, for example those from the fields of science or technology, incidentally also the diplomatic corps or members of the administration. It also excludes artistic and literary reactions to the challenges of National Socialist ideology and politics. The disadvantage of this proceeding lies in passing over eyewitnesses who, just like the »political intellectuals«, may have arrived at remarkable assessments. The advantage is a greater focus on those eyewitnesses who went to Germany with a decided political agenda. As the eyewitnesses included by Saintin came from diverse political backgrounds, their assessments turned out diverse as well.

Nonetheless, as the author points out so eloquently, a remarkable number of them actually fell for the Nazi swindle of a national rejuvenation at one time or another, temporarily for some, as in confrontation with the spectacle of the Nuremberg party rallies, for a much longer period for others, as their admiration survived even into the war years. They may have been under the tutelage of Pierre Drieu la Rochelle, who dreamed of uniting opposites, nation and Europe, socialism and aristocracy, mysticism and anticlericalism among other oxymora. They may have been apart from the mainstream of reports on National Socialism. But all of them felt challenged by the transformations across the Rhine to formulate more sophisticated concepts of French nationalism or of a union of the peoples of Europe. Their self-image as important actors in the project to save the (French) nation and to overcome the present crisis, very often conceived as a crisis of civilisation, played an important role.

As one moves on from one chapter to the next, one cannot help wondering why they proved deaf to more fitting views or warnings, which were prevalent in public discussions just as well. A telling example is the comment by resistance fighter Jacques Decour. He, as so many others, was more clairvoyant and pointed to an important effect: » ... vous avez servi de masque«, a mask hiding the true barbarity at the bottom of Nazism as an ideology and a political system. It is the merit of this study to bring the assessments of individual observers of Hitlerite Germany to light, to show how these descriptions and interpretations emerged, were clarified or changed on the spot and after the journey and how they were related to a traveller's preconceived knowledge of the country.



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