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Glorious, Accursed Europe

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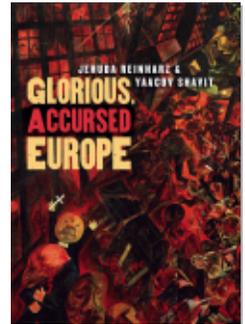
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OLD EUROPE OR NEW EUROPE?

*One of the spectacles which the next century
will invite us to witness is the decision regarding
the fate of the European Jews.*

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE,
*The Dawn of Day*¹

In his novel *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (The man without attributes),² the Austrian writer Robert Musil wrote that at the beginning of the twentieth century—that magical date—some Jews clung to the old, while others pinned their hopes on the new. The internal crises that rocked European nations after World War I prompted fears not only that Europe would remain unstable, but that forces of destruction continued to lurk beneath the surface, increasing in power and momentum, and apt to explode in violence. Apprehension and misgivings about the future once again gave rise to a torrent of apocalyptic prophecies regarding the inevitable decline and fall of European civilization.³ The most famous of these prophetic works was Oswald Spengler's monumental *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (The decline of the West), which was published in installments beginning in late 1917 and ending in 1922.⁴ It is important to note that in addition to the morphological, deterministic schema promoted by Spengler and others, a contrasting outlook developed that might be called relativistic. This outlook did not support the idea of redeeming the Occident through a return to the Orient, nor did it believe in European values such as Occidental rationalism—rather, it claimed the existence of multiple modernities. In other words, it was not a Eurocentric perception of universal history and did not observe the world outside of Europe as a projection of the European self-image.⁵

In any case, Spengler and his notion of decline created many responses and numerous imitators. One of the oddest, the bizarre Jewish American publisher and poet Samuel Roth, published a poem in 1919 titled "Europe: A Book for America," in which he attempted to bare Europe's "true face,"

hidden behind the facade of progress. Roth maintained that Europe was spiritual heir to the licentious and morally bankrupt classical world, and that there was no possibility that the 1919 Treaty of Versailles could establish stability on that quarrelsome continent. In his poem, an ailing Europe, having satisfied its brutish desires, calls for a doctor who might bring it relief:

Europe,
After you have made the rounds of your cruelest lusts,
 and spat out a million devils
You make a wry face
And clamor for a doctor.

Europe, let me be your doctor!
With hammer let me break open those iron jaws and pour
 a pail of your bitterest spleen down your throat.
O, I know a way to make eunuchs of the most terrible men;
For twelve months I would like to feed you on a diet of dung.

You are a sick, sick Europe.
You need medicine.
Let me be your doctor!⁶

BETWEEN THE WARS: THE PENDULUM OF EXPECTATIONS

In Europe itself, World War I was depicted as both a purifying and a refining experience—one of destruction and reconstruction—and as a testament to the irreversible decline of European culture.⁷ In his poem *Mefisto*,⁸ Uri Zvi Greenberg—influenced by Spengler or by *Upadek cywilizacji zachodniej* (The decline of the West, 1921), a book by the Polish sociologist Florian Znaniecki, and certainly by his own experiences in the Austro-Hungarian military as an army medic at the front—depicted Europe as a continent “given to evil.”⁹ A sick continent, it had sold its soul to the devil and unleashed all the forces of evil and destruction that had been buried within.

Still, this dismal picture did not dominate the mood of the day, just as images of destruction had not dominated the end of the previous century. At least during the 1920s, it was generally believed that the crises Europe endured after the war were simply the pangs of rebirth; Europe, still licking its wounds, had learned its lesson and would not permit a new

general war to break out. This optimism translated into plans to establish a new Europe and to implement the idea of a federative Europe—an idea whose seeds first appeared, as we have seen, in the fourteenth century, and whose embers again began to glow in the seventeenth century.

The general consensus was that Europe, now mature and experienced, would become a continent free of national borders, armies, and wars. Before World War I, Sir Norman Angell—an author and member of Parliament, and the winner of the 1933 Nobel Peace Prize—published a book titled *The Great Illusion: A Study of the Relation of Military Power in Nations to their Economic and Social Advantage*, to great acclaim. After the war, the book's title took on an additional and unintended meaning, immortalized by Jean Renoir's 1937 film, *The Grand Illusion*.¹⁰ Ivan Bloch's 1898 six-volume *The Future of War* was highly successful and was translated into twenty-five languages.¹¹ Bloch claimed that war was not an unavoidable phenomenon, and that economic and moral progress would bring about an end to war in Europe; because modern weapons were sufficiently powerful to turn wars into mass genocides, the nations of Europe would refrain from risking self-annihilation.

Optimistic—or perhaps naive—visionaries such as the Czech philosopher (and later politician) Tomáš Masaryk, the Austro-Hungarian count Richard Nikolaus von Coudenhove-Kalergi, and the French politicians Aristide Briand and Eduard Herriot called for the reorganization of East and Central European nations, and for the founding of a pan-European organization that might spare the continent from yet another vicious war. The Spanish thinker José Ortega y Gasset called for the establishment of a single great European nation that would inject new blood into the continent's veins; he believed this possible because nationalism was a relatively new historical movement without any deep roots.¹² He also rejected the assessment that Europe was increasingly in decline and losing its vitality, while the United States was poised to take its place—a prediction popularized in books such as Waldo Frank's 1929 *The Rediscovery of America*. Ortega y Gasset maintained that no other culture could inherit the culture of Europe (i.e., of France, England, and Germany). Nor was there the slightest indication of a civilization that might inherit it: America was incapable of ruling. Benedetto Croce rejected the “pessimism and voices of decadence, which were heard in pre-war literature” and “now heard once more.” He also predicted in 1932 that although Europe was hovering on the brink of war, and despite the rise of communism and fascism, a unified Europe could still coalesce, and prewar Europe—that “orderly,

rich Europe, overflowing with trade and movement, exuding comfort and convenience”—might be reborn. Europe, he wrote, was a vast world of common spirit, thought, art, and culture. Nationalism and communism had carved an immense chasm between liberal and fanatical Europe. Still, “the process of European unification stands in opposition to competition between the Nationalists; even now it is set for battle against them, and soon enough it will liberate Europe from them entirely.” Croce also maintained that nations were not “natural developments.” In the near future, according to him, the people of Europe’s various nations would rise to the rank of Europeans, with no artificial barriers separating them. To those who read his vision as nothing more than pure prophecy—“which is forbidden to us and to all men”—Croce replied that it was a call for action and an endeavor to prepare hearts and minds.¹³ These and similar voices created the impression that the idea of European unification was fast being realized—an impression that was especially strong during the first Congress of the Pan-European Union in 1926.¹⁴

During the interwar period, as in the period before 1914, opposing views abounded regarding the character of Europe. The Austrian Jewish writer Robert Musil found himself surrounded by uncertainty and despair and described Europe as “ein babylonisches Narrenhaus” (a Babylonian madhouse).¹⁵ Five years after the Nazis’ rise to power, Thomas Mann wrote that Europe’s condition was unfortunate, and that the cause was the newfound might of *Massenmensch* (mob mentality); having surfaced during the age of liberalism and socialism, it granted power to those who controlled it. According to Mann, this was a new kind of idealism, superficial and mystical, which would destroy the old humanist idealism. If that idealism were destroyed, he wrote, the word “Europe” would become nothing more than an idea from the past.¹⁶ The German sociologist Georg Simmel claimed that World War I was a madness that had destroyed Europe in the sense of a consistent spiritual creation. However, the danger he foresaw was that after the war, a new type of cosmopolitan internationalism would emerge—lacking nationalistic roots and a unified historical awareness. A new Europe, he declared, was impossible without regard to the deep roots of *Deutschtum*—the German spirit.¹⁷

How did Jews view Europe, and what did they see in the Europe that existed between the world wars? They had no doubt that, as Arthur Ruppin observed, the fate of European Jews was caught in every historical development, and that even seemingly stable states were threatened by economic and political upheavals. As a result, Hebrew and Yiddish literature

and journalism in Eastern Europe followed current events closely even before World War I, and with increased intensity after it. The mood of East European Jewish writers fluctuated between two extremes: a sense of impending catastrophe and hope for a better world.¹⁸ This fluctuation increased greatly after the war: there was no sense that peace in Europe was ensured. In 1919, Nachman Syrkin predicted “eternal war” between the various nations of Europe. According to him, “a terrible hatred” would reign, primarily between Germany and France, “which will exist—which will survive—as long as the society of materialism and competition prevails. This enmity bodes ill for peace between nations, and it is a deep enmity, unfortunately, and not without cause.” He added:

This is no peace, but the birth of a murderous hatred between the nations of central Europe and the Entente Powers . . . Now, the war concluded, this world is even more saturated with danger than before. The Great War merely gave a sharp jolt to the gears of history, helped grind up the remains of the Middle Ages, the empires, the anarchy. But it did not have the power to resolve the differences between nations. It did not have the power to divide the world and its resources fairly among the nations, and only after the Treaty of Versailles is signed, and after the League of Nations is established, will we be sensible of all the bitter desperation of the time.¹⁹

The pogroms and antisemitism in independent Poland—especially the riots against Jewish residents of Lvov on January 21–23, 1918, in which some seventy Jews were murdered and hundreds more injured²⁰—were described as “a single unending mess of riots, spreading from city to city, from station to station, from one train cart to another,”²¹ and reinforced fears that the new, nationalistic countries of Eastern Europe would adopt anti-Jewish policies. Some Jews even sounded the alarm and declared that “the threat of extermination” hovered over Poland’s Jews, and thus there was no need for Jews to pity the oppressed Polish people—and certainly no need to consider the Poles a nation of freedom fighters and justice seekers. Poland did not deserve to be an independent nation; not since the crusades had Jews faced “a threat like that which is expected from Poland . . . Autonomy for that nation means the destruction of two million of our brothers.”²² The nation of Poland, wrote the newspaper *Hatzfira* on December 5, 1918, “was born with a red stain of blood on its brow.”²³ In his 1923 poem, “In the Kingdom of the Cross,” Uri Zvi Greenberg described Slavic Europe as a “forest of afflictions” and wrote that a “poisonous gas”

would seep into its castles; Europe was a place whose inhabitants dreamed of the destruction of all Jews.²⁴ In 1925, he wrote: “And here I come to a crossroads. I do not believe in our continued existence in the land of the Slavs. I do not believe it is possible to preserve our uniqueness in Europe at all. History teaches this to me in full awareness, to say this day Europe has not accepted the Jews, and cannot bear Jews on her soil, living persons with their own character, who are not Christians.”²⁵

In contrast to this catastrophic and apocalyptic vision of Europe as a graveyard, Greenberg also presented a vision of redemption, in which the European Jew would abandon the opera, the museums, the dancing halls, and cafes; exchange his tuxedo, bow tie, and patent-leather shoes for “the flowing Arab *abaya*”; and proclaim that he was turning his back once and for all on Europe, that ailing land. It was admittedly difficult to leave even a land of troubles and a “homeland of grief,” but it was necessary to do so because ruin awaited the Jews in Europe. A full revival of the Jewish experience could be achieved only in Palestine. However, Greenberg believed that Zionism would turn the Jewish settlement in Palestine into “a European beacon shining on Damascus . . . [and become] an important political factor and *avant garde* for European Hebrew culture.”²⁶

AN EVIL WILL BREAK FORTH FROM GERMANY

Did the intellectual Jewish elite—writers, journalists, and public figures—include any astrologers able, in the mid-nineteenth century or even after World War I, to read the events that would unfold in Europe during the 1920s? And if such astrologers did exist, where did they believe calamity would break out: in the Slavic lands or in Germany?

It was Heinrich Heine, as we have seen, who was exalted as a seer; but in the field of apocalyptic prophecy on the subject of Germany, he was preceded by the writer and thinker Shaul Ascher, in his 1815 *Germanomania*. Ascher—who, until the end of the Napoleonic wars, had been an ardent believer in the universal nature of modern, Christian European culture—believed that reason would instill the spirit of *Weltbürgerlichkeit* and that the European idea of humanity would prevail over national or particularistic differences. He changed his mind after the rise of German *Volkism* and in the wake of the reaction to Napoleon’s fall. In his 1815 book, Ascher warned that Germanomania—that is, German nationalism representing the age-old uniqueness of the German race—was instilling a conservative, nationalistic Romanticism that would stand in the way of

rational and liberal universalism.²⁷ Ascher further predicted that in order to fan the flames of nationalism, the Germanomanes (or Teutons) would strike at the Jews as a first batch of kindling for the fire: “Fuel has to be gathered in order to maintain the fire of enthusiasm, and our Teutomaniacs wanted to see in the little heap of Jews, a first bundle of twigs to spread the flame of fanaticism.”²⁸

Heine’s prophecies, however, echoed more strongly; he was a central figure, writing in German—rather than in Hebrew or Yiddish. The nightmarish portrait that he painted in his 1844 poem “Deutschland, Ein Wintermärchen” (Germany, a winter’s tale) was treated as a prophecy of what might be expected from a unified Germany—a prophecy that eventually came true:

It’s the future you’ll be viewing—
The future of Germany before your eyes
Like a billowing fantasm;
But do not shudder if from the mass
Exhales a foul miasma! . . .

But the scent of the German futurity
Was ever so much stronger
Than anything I ever smelled,
I could bear it no longer.²⁹

Heine predicted that an independent and unified Germany would give rise to a xenophobic and fanatical nationalism,³⁰ and that if this fanaticism won the struggle for Europe’s soul, the Jews would face unprecedented persecution. After the war and the Holocaust, it was said of Heine that he “saw the truth in all its viciousness, heard the rustling of German mysticism, and understood the darkness in that nation’s psyche. He tried to warn other nations, and most of all our own—to communicate a true idea of the ‘mystical psyche of the Teutonic people.’” According to this description, Heine was “the first European Jew, and perhaps the only one, to grasp the true meaning of the theory of racial superiority . . . He had learned to understand the German nation and to hate it. And indeed he knew very well what Germany’s leaders in his time wrote and thought about Europe and the Jews.”³¹

Some twenty years after Heine’s dismal prophecy, in 1862, Hess asked: “Who can foresee the catastrophes that may befall us as a result of our arrested development?”³² He predicted a “final race war” between the

German race and the Roman Catholic nations.³³ In a pamphlet published in 1863—in which he replied to Abraham Geiger, who described him as a reactionary Romanticist—Hess wrote that Germanness and German culture would never allow Jews to assimilate into the German racial entity.³⁴ Graetz was of a similar mind. He wrote that the Germans were “a lowly, contemptible race” and “a narrow minded and arrogant nation”; it was they who had created the dark world of the Middle Ages and now represented modern barbarity. This opinion was shared by Aharon Aronson, who lived in Palestine. He saw German patriotism as zealotry without moral restraint. In 1910, nearly half a century after Hess and Graetz, he wrote “nothing . . . has weakened my cognizance of the threat to civilization posed by the realization of the all-Germanic dream . . . What Jew, whether German or Austrian, does not sense the danger that lies in Teutonism?”³⁵

During the run-up to World War II, it was easy to issue retrospective prophecies, as Thomas Mann did through his character Goethe in *Lotte in Weimar* (published in English as *The Beloved Returns*): The Germans’ sense of liberty and their love for their homeland could at any minute be transformed into a monster, their nationalism turned into something ominous and terrible. Sometimes, Mann’s Goethe said, he was attacked by a paralyzing fear, since sooner or later the Germans’ eternal hatred for the Jews was apt to erupt in an awful massacre. In *Doctor Faustus*, which Mann began writing at the height of World War II, the narrator predicts that Germany will once again be ruined because the attempts by Bismarck and other leaders of the Weimar Republic “to normalize Germany in the sense of Europeanizing or ‘democratizing’ it” had failed.³⁶

The conviction that Nazism was an unavoidable consequence of Germany’s *Sonderweg* (special way) in Europe³⁷—as well as a consequence of the age-old demonism inhabiting Germany’s soul, an idea that became widely accepted after the Holocaust—was a case of perfect vision in hindsight, or as Kurt Blumenfeld, the leader of the German Zionists, called it, “retrospective prophecy.”³⁸ However, these depictions of the nature of German nationalism and the threat it posed did not originate in a vacuum. Even in the 1830s, the historian Leopold von Ranke declared that any significant achievement in Germany after the French Revolution was a result not of imitation of, but of opposition to, French ideas.³⁹ Germany positioned itself against the West as though it rejected—or was pressed to reject—liberal and democratic ideas because they were not German. This outlook was disseminated in later years by spokesmen for the German

Volkist movement. At their head was Julius Langbehn who, in his 1890 bestseller *Rembrandt als Erzieher* (Rembrandt as educator), painted a chilling picture of a degenerate, declining German society that was losing its unique spiritual values; other leaders were Paul de Lagarde and Moller van den Bruck. They and others claimed that Germany did not belong to the West; they rejected the French Revolution's universalist legacy and demanded that Germany distance itself from the materialistic West. Only in this way could the unique collective genius of the German people be expressed.⁴⁰ France symbolized the West, its values, and its traits, which stood in contrast to Germany's uniqueness and authenticity.

The majority of German Jews did not reject the idea that German culture had a unique character within the European cultural framework. On the contrary, they adopted the idea enthusiastically, but they saw Germany's culture as one that embodied universal values. On September 16, 1898, Herzl wrote proudly in his diary: "Most Jews these days belong to the German culture."⁴¹ The Jewish elite in both West and East was drawn to the radiant aura of German culture; before and after World War I, that culture symbolized *Weltkultur* (world culture). For example, in his memoirs, the East European *maskil* Abraham Baer Gottlober described Germany, to which he was headed, as "the land of Ashkenaz where lies the treasure of knowledge, in my opinion . . . and the people of the land are all good and righteous."⁴² In September 1881, the writer A. S. Friedberg wrote Y. L. Levin that one could not be surprised by Russian antisemitism: Russia was "a country shrouded in fog-like lethargy." Nor was there hope for a Jewish revival in Germany, "the land of study and logic."⁴³ This positive image no doubt contributed to the acute disappointment that resulted from revelations of German antisemitism. In a series of articles titled "Examples from the World of Truth, or the Education of the Nineteenth Century and Israel's Hopes from Ashkenaz," published in *Hamelitz* in 1896, the author piercingly expressed the dejection of those who believed that "the light has gone from Germany":

At first we were as though drunk with happiness. In our eyes [Germany] was transformed into Paradise and its people into higher beings. The power of delusive imagination so overwhelmed us that we were misled into believing that an end to suffering was at hand, that soon hatred and jealousy would flee like shadows from the Enlightenment, which would cast its spirit over every living being and unite the people of the world as one . . . And now, this single hope too has

been disappointed . . . We stand today before our bitter enemies who never cease to degrade our honor and the honor of our faith, depress them to the lowest depths, and exhibit us in broad daylight in our eternal shame . . . This impetuous, bitter vision has now been shattered, at the end of the nineteenth century, in the land of wisdom and science, the forefront of enlightenment—in Germany.⁴⁴

A few years later, in October 1914, Chaim Weizmann wrote that he had fallen captive to Germany's charms and that his admiration was sparked by the German discipline and strength, which stood in stark contrast to lazy, talentless Russia, which was rotten to the core. Compared to Russian antisemitism, German antisemitism was mild and easily borne.⁴⁵ Only World War I dampened his enthusiasm for the Germany of "pagan Siegfried," if not for its virtues. In July 1915, he wrote:

I am not an admirer of the German cultural ideals, but I admire the organization and efficiency of Germany . . . It is deplorable that this wonderful motor is using itself up now for destructive purposes. I admit that the warlike tendencies have to be destroyed, but the virtues of Germany will remain, blossom out again and if the military cast is destroyed a new and great Germany will arise, which may conquer the world without firing a shot.⁴⁶

The majority of Germany's Jews shared this positive assessment of their country; they cultivated it and expressed steadfast confidence in German values and German justice. As we have seen, they pointed proudly to their integration into Germany's culture and society, cited their contributions to these in almost every field, and believed that the plague of antisemitism would fade away over time, though it might never be cured entirely. Shulamit Volkov sees German Jews' sense of confidence in the success of their integration into German society as hubris on their part.⁴⁷ Hubris can certainly be detected in the following speech delivered on January 22, 1919, by Ismar Freund, one of the most respected members of the Berlin community and a director of the Central Association of German Citizens of Jewish Faith. His speech was titled—what else?—"Die Zukunft des Judentums" (The future of the Jews):

Deuschtum [Germanness] as we understand it, Deuschtum as it has developed, the Deuschtum we love with all our hearts is something holy to us, something of an historic importance, is something which represents an intellectual milieu, a cultural element . . . We

hereby declare publicly and with the greatest emphasis . . . we German Jews are conscious of the fact, that we have greatly contributed to what we regard as Deutschtum . . . Ladies and Gentlemen, it is because we know that we have done our share with our life's-blood to build this German essence, because it is part of our innate being, that . . . we are Jewish Germans and therefore German Jews, not only German in the legal sense, or from a political point of view, but because of deep conviction, because we love our German Fatherland . . . out of an inner necessity and because our soul forces and commands us to do so.

A transcript notes that the speech was received with "lively shouts of bravo!"⁴⁸

It was also difficult for German Zionists to conclude that the Jews' hard-won emancipation and integration were in danger, and that the dream of full Jewish integration into the German nation had been shattered. In their agenda of 1932, they declared that Germany's Jews enjoyed excellent social conditions and possessed full civil rights; they were thus entitled and permitted to remain in the country as loyal citizens and good neighbors, and to fight for cultural advancement. At the same time, they had an obligation to help their oppressed coreligionists in Eastern Europe who were in search of a new homeland.⁴⁹ On September 16, 1932, Dr. Nahum Goldmann, then a German Zionist leader, declared: "I do not believe we need fear pogroms or a rescission of rights . . . in Czarist Russia the situation was worse . . . While Russian antisemitism endangered the physical existence of the Jews, the greatest danger of German antisemitism is the moral effect of the antisemitic climate."⁵⁰ However, Goldmann wrote in his memoirs that "from the first I was one of those—unfortunately a minority—who took the phenomenon of Hitler very seriously." Most German Jews, he wrote, "mindful of their economic and cultural standing in the Weimar Republic, refused to recognize the danger [Hitler] represented"; they saw those who warned about him as "panicky, hysterical alarmists."⁵¹ One person who did issue a warning was the German Jewish writer Jakob Wassermann, who prophesied that a time of darkness unrivalled in a thousand years was at hand.⁵² In contrast, on September 20, 1935, the writer Leon Feuchtwanger promised the writer Arnold Zweig that Germany's madness would not last long:

I do not like to make political prophecies, but through the intensive study of history I have reached the, if I may say so, scientific

conviction that, in the end, reason must triumph over madness and that we cannot consider an eruption of madness such as the one in Germany as something that can last more than a generation. Superstitious as I am, I hope in silence that this time too the German madness won't last longer than the [1914–18] war madness did. And we are already at the end of the third year.⁵³

A year later, in 1936, the historian Marvin Lowenthal wrote that within the next few years, Germany must choose between liberty or, “in battlefields too horrible to contemplate,” death. However, he added, the fact “that the world, including Jewry, will permit the slow starvation of a million Europeans seems barely credible until we recall how little the world has concerned itself with a million no less starving Polish Jews.” German Jews, he continued, “are disappearing from the stage of history.” He saw Hitler and Nazism as temporary phenomena—a warp in German history from which they would be expelled in short time.⁵⁴ The idea that political nationalism and racial antisemitism were phenomena deeply rooted in German culture, rather than errant outgrowths, was perceived as deriving from Zionist concerns. However, there were also those within the Zionist camp who believed these phenomena would soon die out. Chaim Arlosoroff, for example, who was chairman of the Jewish Agency's political department, believed that the Nazi regime would become reasonable and rational once it was stabilized. In June 1932, Arlosoroff wrote that antisemitism carried at most marginal weight in the Nazi ideology, and that Jews were in far greater danger of assimilation under the Soviet regime and from the collapse of the middle class in the United States, following the financial crisis of 1929. If a new world war broke out within five or ten years, it would be because of Germany's desire to rein in Soviet Russia.⁵⁵

That this was not simply a matter of tragic error or self-delusion on the Jews' part is attested by Thomas Mann's article “The Fall of European Jews,” which was published in 1945 in a collection of articles called *The Future of the Jews*—neither the first nor the last book to bear that title. Mann wrote: “Never could a spiritual and philo-European man in Germany be an antisemite.” Mann believed that it was a mistake to attribute antisemitism to all Germans, or even to most of them.⁵⁶

Questions such as whether Nazism was a wild, temporary deviation, or whether it was a manifestation of something inherent in German culture—and consequently a threat to Jewish existence in Germany and

in Europe as a whole—were frequently raised by Jews only after 1930, particularly after 1933. We will cite here only a few examples of responses written during the 1930s. It is not our intention to judge the authors for their failures as prophets, but rather to examine how they understood the events that took place in the second half of the 1930s against the background of their understanding of the essence of Europe in general, and of Germany in particular. In other words, did they believe that Nazi Germany posed a threat to peace and stability in Europe?

The answer is that most of them feared for the fate of the Jews, but few assumed that Germany would instigate a global war—a war that would determine the fate of Europe and its Jews.

In 1935 some believed that Hitler would soon fall: “The Jews [would] have the last laugh” and would soon witness Germany’s financial destruction.⁵⁷ In a November 23, 1935, meeting between the Association of German Immigrants in Palestine and the Jewish Agency’s directors, Menachem Mendel Ussishkin declared that “there is something positive” in the Nuremberg Laws—namely, that they determined one’s eligibility for discrimination on the basis of race rather than religion. Had they discriminated on a religious basis, the result would be the “annihilation of half the Jews in Europe.” Ussishkin saw German Jews as a negative model of integration into the surrounding society, one that transformed Germany’s Jews into “real Germans in feeling, thought, and disposition.”⁵⁸ In early 1933, Jabotinsky posed a rhetorical question: “Where is the blind man who believes that Hitler’s regime will ‘triumph,’ that is, that he will turn at least a portion of his promises into reality—except for his decision to destroy the Jews?” Against the Jews, Jabotinsky declared, “there stands an enemy doomed from birth to the shame of failure.”⁵⁹ (Note that by destruction, Jabotinsky did not mean physical destruction.) About three years later, in January 1936, Jabotinsky expressed his opinion that the Third Reich was just a “banal episode” in the history of Jewish misfortune.⁶⁰ Yitzhak Greenbaum—the leader of Poland’s Jews, who believed that it was possible to wage an active Jewish war against Germany—declared in the beginning of 1936 that it was Poland’s Jews who were headed “toward a new catastrophe in the story of our people, the catastrophe more severe than that of Jews in Germany.”⁶¹ However, the agent for this catastrophe, according to Greenbaum, would not be global war or Nazi control of Germany, but conditions in Poland.

The biblical scholar and thinker Yehezkel Kaufmann maintained that the antisemitic revolution in Germany was not due to the theory of racial

superiority; instead, antisemitism begat racism and was rooted “in the eternal hatred of the Jews of the Diaspora.” He explained:

Hitler’s race theory is certainly not popular belief. A day before the Nationalist Revolution, the people as a whole knew nothing of “Aryans” and “non-Aryans,” and probably even today they do not know how these are defined or what these entail. Race theory is the domain of a small number of zealots, who are imposing it on the people . . . Hitler’s theory has no popular basis, but with respect to antisemitism specifically, German fascism has served to express genuine popular sentiment.

According to Kaufmann, the danger posed by German fascism, which utilized antisemitism for its own means, was “the economic depletion of the Jews.” This would be “a racial lesson of terrifying clarity,” with the result that Jews would always be considered aliens in Europe. The popular war against Jews in Germany was in essence a nationalist, economic war, and as a result, the Germans would not allow Jews to live among them as a separate cultural entity. In any case, Kaufmann believed that Hitlerism, “despite its savage tyranny, is not a return to the Middle Ages” and would not revive the ghetto to isolate the Jews. Thus, Kaufmann predicted, the Nazi leadership would enact policies with the purpose of denying Jews their civil rights, pass legislation specifically applicable to them, and turn them into a “national minority.”⁶² Weizmann also issued words of calm, saying in December 1937 that “the German tragedy is far smaller in scope than the Polish tragedy; it is small enough to overcome, and, moreover, Germany’s Jews have greater financial security; they are better able to withstand an attack than the Jews in Poland.” He further declared that if several tens of thousands of German Jews immigrated to Palestine, “we shall be able to answer to history that we did as much as could be done.”⁶³ The fate of Poland’s Jews was a greater cause for concern. In 1934, Nahum Sokolow, then president of the Zionist Organization, wrote: “Not too long ago, my heart already prophesied the coming of this tragedy. However, we never really felt it as if it were truly palpable.”⁶⁴

Other opinions were also heard. In 1924, Chaim Nachman Bialik claimed that there was no more antisemitism in Germany.⁶⁵ However, he changed his mind and in May 1933—some five months after Hitler rose to power—wrote to a Viennese friend, the industrialist Max Delfiner, that he had warned many of his friends in Germany about the developing climate, because “who knows what the future holds for our other brethren

abroad.” In another letter, Bialik wrote: “Now the signs and omens are here. The evil has come even before I thought it would. Would that our brothers had understood what was to come.”⁶⁶ In January 1934, he wrote to the editorial board of the *Judisk Tidskirt*, the Jewish newspaper in Stockholm, that while he could not predict the future, as far as he could see “the Jews of the Diaspora—the entire Diaspora, and not just in Germany—are on the verge of annihilation.” A healthy people should never guess what the future would bring; there was “no divination in Jacob” (Numbers 23:23). What a healthy nation did need, Bialik asserted, was not prophets and seers but open eyes to see and acknowledge the reality of the present.⁶⁷ The writer Yehoshua Heschel Yeivin, who belonged to the radical wing of the Revisionist movement, wrote in March 1933 that the Nazi movement had not emerged overnight but had developed over the course of a decade; there was still enough time to study its roots and understand its essence, and to prepare for “the day of destruction and escape it in time.” What was taking place in the cultured part of Europe was not “psychosis” or “momentary madness,” but a full-scale attack on the Jewish people, “aimed at its destruction and eradication. I mean complete, criminal, material eradication that is taking place and will take place, if not through official pogroms then by devastating any means of economic survival. That is: bringing millions of Jews to a state of chronic hunger and degeneration.”⁶⁸

There were, of course, those who interpreted the appearance of anti-semitism in Germany differently. In 1934, for example, Professor A. Kolisher, one of the leaders of the Revisionist movement in Europe, published a series of articles entitled “Our Enemy,” in which he asserted that the Jews’ admiration of German culture blinded them to the barbaric nature of German nationalism and antisemitism. The truth of the matter, he opined, was that Germany was a barbaric country, and it was for this reason that antisemitism could take roots among the masses there, as well as become official policy with the aim of exterminating the Jews (by “extermination,” Kolisher meant expulsion of the Jews from German society). The special feature of German antisemitism, Kolisher stated, was the lack of distinction between how the government and the people approached it; he maintained that antisemitism expressed the “soul of Germany at this time.”⁶⁹ As an anti-Marxist and an avowed anti-Communist, he explained the phenomenon of Nazism as being due to, among other reasons, the triumph of Marxist ideology over liberal values. Nothing could be expected from Germany except horror and terror. In the news-

paper *Hazit Haam*, A. Ginsburg wrote that it was impossible to describe Nazism's rise to power as "simple antisemitism. This is not simply a wave of persecution, but a movement to exterminate the Jews. [Hitler] does not want to diminish Jews' rights, but to eliminate them. He does not want to diminish the Jews' power, but to erase them from the face of the earth."⁷⁰ In October, 1935, Moshe Shertok (later Sharett), who had succeeded Arlosoroff as head of the Jewish Agency's political department, wrote to David Ben Gurion: "we are clearly facing a new and catastrophic phase of developments there [in Germany]."⁷¹ By "catastrophic," he meant—like many others—an acute crisis, but not a threat to the physical existence of Jews in Germany. Ben Gurion, for example, declared that one of the wealthiest Jewish communities in the world was in danger of witnessing the destruction of all its property, but also that the situation in which German Jews found themselves was likely to place new wind in Zionism's sails.⁷²

The Jewish press in Poland was exceptional in its unsparing expressions of apprehension and its depictions of Polish antisemitism as the chief enemy. In a 1935 poem "The Blind Generation," for example, Roman Brandstaetter urged his complacent brothers in Poland to open their eyes and see the disaster that approached.⁷³ At the same time, the Polish press predicted that Nazi Germany was about to draw Europe into a threatening future. After Kristallnacht, the German threat became tangible; the Germans were described as born murderers,⁷⁴ and Germany as a savage beast hiding behind the facade of culture and progress and attempting to return all of Europe to the Middle Ages.⁷⁵ Nazism was perceived as a radical expression of German Romanticism, which rejected liberalism, humanism, and democracy.⁷⁶

Only over the course of 1939 did the prediction that a full-scale war was at hand become prevalent, but soothing articles still continued to be published. Thus, for example, after Hitler's speech of January 30, 1939, in which he promised to destroy the Jewish people if war broke out, Y. Gurion, the editor of the Revisionist newspaper *Hamashkif*, wrote that darker threats than this had been made over the past two thousand years of exile. If war broke out, he predicted, it would clear away Hitler's medieval regime.⁷⁷ The radical Revisionists' hatred of Britain outweighed their fear of Nazi Germany; one of them wrote at the start of March 1939 that the Nazis were "relative enemies," while the Jews' mortal enemy was Britain.⁷⁸ Only in April 1939 did Berl Katznelson dare to announce: "We are on the eve of world war—a world war based on race."⁷⁹ From 1933 onward, Katznelson

maintained that Germany's Jewish population had been devastated, but to describe this devastation, he used words that in a few years would have a different meaning: one day German Jews woke up and found that they had been "eliminated" from their jobs in the civil service, banks, universities, and the like. When, in 1939, Katznelson warned that Hitler intended to destroy the Jews, what he meant by the word is not at all clear.⁸⁰ In contrast, Moshe Beilinson had no trouble declaring—on September 25, 1939, two days before the invasion of Poland—that "German Jews have still not reached the [terrible] condition of Russia's Jews."⁸¹

Thus pessimists expected that, at worst, Jewish ghettos would return to the heart of an enlightened culture, and Germany's Jews would suffer economic and cultural devastation. There was much talk of dispossession, religious persecution, expulsion, and the destruction the war would bring, but the possibility of organized mass murder was not considered. Even when people wrote about decimation, annihilation, destruction, or eradication, they referred not to physical destruction but to financial and other losses that European Jews could expect from the war. Zionist circles discussed the possibility that the Jews' situation in Europe after the war would not be what it had been before. Even the bleakest prophecies failed to see what was underway in Germany.

Among their followers, there are those who believe the seer's mantle belongs to Zeev Jabotinsky and David Ben Gurion. The claim is that they sounded the alarm in time and were almost alone among their generation in seeing the future: this should establish them as extraordinary individuals who were able to read the signs around them. The poet Uri Zvi Greenberg has also been granted that mantle and has been described as the sole member of his generation to predict the awful fate of Europe's Jews as early as the 1920s. Again, it is not our intention here to judge the prophetic ability demonstrated by these three; it is simply to examine how—if at all—they understood the nature of Nazi Germany within Europe's historical framework.

WHO CRIED WOLF?

In the summer of 1939, after listening to a radio speech by Hitler, Uri Zvi Greenberg warned against the threat of the "brown lava." Hitler, he wrote, would implement his threat to expel Germany's Jews, but after he was finished, the Jews of the world would take little notice of him.⁸² In previous years, Greenberg had minimized the importance that should

be accorded to Hitler's belligerent policy. "Even the irascible Hitler reins in his German war-lust," he wrote in November 1933; Hitler did not in fact desire war, and there was no reason to frighten Jews with the unlikely prospect of approaching war.⁸³ In reality, Greenberg continued, Europe did not want to involve itself again in the "atmosphere of gas and blood."⁸⁴ In 1939, he repeated this view when he declared that this was no more than a tempest in a teapot: Europe did not want war.⁸⁵ Despite this, in a poem published in 1938 that described a vision of a declining British Empire, he wrote "I see the eagles of Amalek from the Rhine / swooping over the spires of Westminster."⁸⁶ But this vision, similar to one put forth by Yeats in the same year, stemmed from Greenberg's profound loathing of Britain, and not necessarily from an ability to see the future relating to Nazi Germany's hawkish intentions or military power.⁸⁷ The Slavs' "eternal hatred" of the Jews took center stage in Greenberg's apocalyptic and catastrophic worldview. At the same time, his great confidence in Poland's strength and his belief that the interests of Poland and the Zionist movement coincided—with a deep affinity between the two—never waned. Greenberg did not foresee Nazi Germany's rapid conquest of Poland, and in any case, he could not have foreseen the destruction of East European Jewry as a result of Germany's occupation of Poland. As late as May 1939, he wrote that the talk of an "approaching world war" was merely a "paper war" spread by a handful of Jews. Although communism would welcome a world war because it would destroy the old order and hasten a global revolution, European capitalism and governments would not. Only in September 1939 did Greenberg recognize that Hitler is "our common foe," meaning an enemy of the Jews as well as of all Europeans—a "universal Amalek." Ignoring what he had written just a short while before, he claimed that the Jews, and he himself in particular, had demonstrated their spirit of "prophetic power" by being the first to warn the entire world against the Nazi threat:⁸⁸ "Alas! I prophesied the truth, and I curse my truth / That in the eyes of my people I appeared as a seer at the wrong time."⁸⁹ As an apocalyptic prophet, Greenberg successfully read the signs of the time; but as a political seer, he misread the main historical events. In the late 1930s, it was the preconceived apocalyptic outlook of the future that proved to be far more accurate than any rational predictions.

It is important to note that the Jewish ultra-Orthodox in Eastern Europe fared no better. They viewed modern antisemitism as an inevitable part of Jewish life in the Diaspora, and Nazism as merely another

manifestation of that age-old phenomenon. The ultra-Orthodox believed that the Jews would once again be able to ride out the storm. This passive, traditionalist approach, sometimes supported by theodicean arguments, persisted even during the Holocaust. The Zionist movement's catastrophic prophecies concerning the future of European Jewry were perceived by the ultra-Orthodox as no more than propaganda and heretical ideology.

The failure to foresee coming events was also the fate of the Bund, which was the main political and social Jewish force in the interwar period in Poland. Its leaders expressed deep concern about Nazi Germany but interpreted its nature from a Marxist perspective, as a product of capitalism and nationalism. Not one of the leaders foresaw Germany's rapid occupation of Poland. They continued to believe, until the end, that combining Jewish and non-Jewish democratic forces in Poland was the best way to ensure Jewish rights in the Polish homeland. Moreover, the *Bund* was convinced that Zionist pro-emigration propaganda was encouraging Polish antisemitism and thus endangering the Jews of Poland.

Germany held a marginal standing in Jabotinsky's worldview. Although he was a man of culture and had a clear European orientation, he was not particularly enamored of Germany or its culture, and he certainly did not consider German culture as representative of European culture. At times, he acknowledged that "like all of my generation . . . [I am] an admirer and to a certain extent a student of German culture," and that "Germany is a nation with one of the grandest cultures in the world, with a long tradition of order, equal rights, and rule of law";⁹⁰ he also appreciated Germany's clean, beautiful cities. Despite that, Germany's culture, literature, and thought appeared only rarely in his writings.⁹¹ In fact, he seldom wrote about Germany until 1933, and he reacted infrequently to the developments that took place in the Weimar Republic. The rise of Hitler and the Nazi party took him entirely by surprise. After reading Hitler's *Mein Kampf*—in which he claimed to find "chapters, or pages, that are quite intelligent"—Jabotinsky concluded that its racist and antisemitic ideology was the sole facet of Nazism that should be taken "seriously." From this appraisal, he inferred that "the German anti-Jewish crusade is the most important and gravest event in the history of recent generations," and he foresaw destruction for Jews around the world if Hitler's regime remained in power.⁹² In a similar spirit, the newspaper *Hazit Haam* published an article titled "The Swastika Crusade" on March 10, 1933, which argued that although the Jewish press tended to treat Hitler's words with derision, his threats were real.

At the same time, Jabotinsky ridiculed Nazi Germany's hawkish propaganda and did not believe that it was backed by any substantial power. In June 1933, he even compared the Nazi movement to the Ku Klux Klan and maintained it was a case of "inebriation" that had transformed Germany into a "drunken nation," but the storm would pass; Nazi Germany was not an "iron giant," but an internally weak and unstable state. This seemed to be a perilous time for Jews, since the Nazi example had found favor in the world—"But wait, my friends; sanity will prevail." Most of all, Jabotinsky was convinced that a full-scale European war would not break out again: "Prophecy is a terrible thing . . . If you prophesy you risk being mistaken, but . . . despite the dangers of prophecy I am willing to take the risk: There will not be a war in Europe. Not half a war nor a fourth of one; not between England and Italy nor between any other powers." On April 4, 1939, he still firmly insisted that there was no need to be a prophet in order to understand that a European war was impossible, because the nations of Europe would not be dragged into a massive war in which their civilian populations would also be harmed.⁹³

Nor did Jabotinsky see the Nazi party's rise to power as a necessary outcome of the German spirit or of Germany's singular history. In fact, he did not have a conclusive opinion about whether Nazi antisemitism was a pathological outburst uncharacteristic of the German people, or whether it was "a natural phenomenon, a drug buried deep in this nation's blood, whose effects emerge at an appropriate moment."⁹⁴ Only at the start of 1940 did he arrive at the conclusion that German antisemitism was "folk antisemitism"—that is, antisemitism nourished by ancient ideas passed from generation to generation and imprinted on the national culture, and which the Nazis transformed into a political instrument. Jabotinsky thus perceived Nazism as an antisemitic movement and was entirely convinced that European civilization had reached such heights of progress that a full-blown European war was impossible. His catastrophic image of a "volcano that will shortly commence to spew its flames of destruction" described the situation of Poland's Jews; it was they, in his opinion, who stood "at the edge of the abyss."⁹⁵

Germany also initially held a marginal place in Ben Gurion's worldview. Nothing in what he said or wrote ever addressed German history or culture, and there is no evidence that he paid close attention to the crises that jarred the foundations of the Weimar Republic, or attempted to predict their outcomes. The Nazis' rise to power changed this situation. In January 1934, after reading *Mein Kampf*, Ben Gurion wrote:

Hitler's rule places the entire Jewish people in danger; Hitlerism is fighting not only the Jews of Germany but the Jews of all the world. Hitler's regime cannot exist for long without war, without a war of vengeance against France, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the rest of its neighbors . . . or against Soviet Russia, that expansive state . . . Who knows—perhaps only four or five years (if not less) separate us from that awful day.⁹⁶

Thus, in contrast to Jabotinsky, Ben Gurion predicted that the world was in grave danger of a full-blown European war, because Germany intended to go to war against the entire continent: "The war that will break out this time will surpass the previous world war in devastation and horrors."⁹⁷ Ben Gurion was also alert to the peril in which such a war would place Europe's Jews, and in June 1939 he declared: "A war might break out that will rain calamity upon us . . . If a world war breaks out . . . it will be Hitler's doing, and first of all he will destroy the Jewish people of Europe."⁹⁸

Ben Gurion was one of the few who predicted the war that was gathering as a result of Nazi Germany's character and purpose.⁹⁹ But even if a small number did succeed in predicting the future, the Jews' attempt to decipher Europe's enigmatic soul, their criticism of European civilization, and their distrust and suspicion of Europe all failed to equip them to foresee the emergence of Nazism in the very heart of cultured Europe, or to read Germany's history as "an open book that speaks for itself."¹⁰⁰ This fact would cast a heavy shadow over the attempts to understand Europe and to predict its future in the half-century after World War II.