

THE CORPORATE STATE AND
THE CONSERVATIVE REVOLUTION
IN WEIMAR GERMANY

I

DURING THE nineteenth century the history of representative institutions was viewed in terms of the development of parliaments. It seemed as if this form of popular representation was triumphing everywhere. German and French scholars joined their English colleagues in tracing the rise of parliamentary government as tantamount to the development of democracy. The twentieth century, on the other hand, may well go down in history as the century which decisively challenged this connection between democracy and parliamentary representation. When the German constitutional theorist and lawyer Carl Schmitt wrote that parliament as a bourgeois institution of the nineteenth century lacked a basis in the age of mass industrial democracy (1926), he was summing up a widely held point of view.¹ There was a turning away from what the previous generation had regarded as the bulwark of democratic progress. Was this simply a flight into Caesarism? Can we say that if the nineteenth century saw a trend toward parliamentary democracy, our own century has seen an equally strong trend toward government by dictatorship?

The Corporate State and the Conservative Revolution

It would be misreading the history of anti-parliamentarianism to regard this trend merely as a heightening of the anti-democratic forces which have always played an important role in Western history. Rather, this was essentially a search for the new forms that popular representation might take, a quest for a different kind of democratic expression. Few wanted to do away with popular participation in government: the majority believed that parliamentary institutions were, in fact, inhibiting such participation. Schmitt gave the principal reason for this: parliament had become a class institution, a weapon in the hands of the bourgeoisie. Spengler had called such government the continuation of private business by other means.² The parliamentary institution was no longer representative of the whole nation; instead, the true nation should be an expression of the Volk—a mystical entity above, apart from, and outside social class or political party. The Volk constituted an organic whole which could not possibly be represented through a system based, as it seemed, on the selfishness of private interests.

While this rejection of parliamentary government could be analyzed for the whole of Europe, Germany provides a particularly significant example. In the political and economic chaos of the 1920's, the search for alternate forms of democracy had room to grow. More important and symptomatic, this search came to presuppose a general effort to do away with the bourgeois age. This was so for those who took their inspiration from the Bolshevik revolution, but it was also the aim of those who wanted no part of bolshevism. This search for new democratic forms could take place within a socialist framework that rejected both communism and the bourgeois society. We shall analyze this search for a different kind of socialist democracy when

dealing with the German left-wing intellectuals in the last chapter of this book. However, for the most part those who desired such a "third force" came from the right, rejecting all forms of Marxist socialism as well as bourgeois forms of political representation. Their attempt has special significance in modern history: it raised the question whether a rejection of parliamentary government in anti-bourgeois terms could find a firm basis that would lead neither to communism nor to some form of dictatorship. We must not see this quest simply in terms of the National Socialist triumph or of its eventual failure. Both these factors served to narrow the possibilities, until parliamentary government seemed once more the only means of true political participation, and dictatorship or communism the sole alternatives.

The term "conservative revolution" has been applied to this attempted "third force":³ conservative because it based itself on the organic unity of the Volk, founded on history and tradition; revolutionary because it opposed bourgeois society and, for the most part, the capitalist system as well. This revolutionary conservatism, through its concern with the Volk, was a part of the Volkish movement in Germany. To be sure, it placed a greater emphasis on the necessity for revolutionary action and the importance of the corporate state than the rest of the movement, but this should not obscure its essential orientation. Revolutionary conservatism can be described as the left wing of the Volkish movement. In this discussion, however, we shall use the term "conservatives," which is what these men called themselves.

Among the advocates of the "conservative revolution" there was much talk of a "socialist state"—by which many of these conservatives meant something akin to National

Socialism. But this must not be confused with either Hitlerian policies or Oswald Spengler's "Prussianism and Socialism," both of which were rejected: Hitlerian ideas because they seemed a thinly disguised acceptance of bourgeois society, playing the parliament game; Spengler's because in his praise for the Prussian aristocracy he seemed to deny that every member of the Volk should participate in the nation's destiny.⁴ Möller van den Bruck (1876-1925), the most influential conservative theorist, made the point about Spengler. For Möller, socialism meant the ideological unity of the Volk as opposed to the divisiveness of parliaments and political parties.⁵ He wanted the nationalization of production as part of this organic unity—the common *Mythos* which had once held the people together.⁶ Möller looked back at this past unity and fused its aim with a desire for strong corporate organization.⁷ Corporate ideas were an essential part of a state "beyond Marxism and Capitalism." *The Third Reich*, to use the title of Möller's most famous work (1923), symbolized this attitude for many revolutionary conservatives, though not for Adolf Hitler. It is significant that Möller at first titled his famous book *The Third Force (Die Dritte Kraft)*.

One historian has called this conservatism a flight into the past, and the corporative ideas a part of this flight.⁸ Certainly, the corporatism which provided the structure for the corporate state was understood by many conservatives to be a return to the medieval guilds. Groupings by occupation were considered the essence of a structured society, for here the worker would get his "rights" side by side with his employers. Such corporatism, however, must be superimposed on a true community, which constituted the basis of the state. Indeed, for most revolutionary conservatives the "true community" became the true corporate unit,

displacing the occupational chambers. We shall therefore have to consider the ideal of the group, or *Bund*, which is essential to this concept at some length later. Some of the men involved, however, did not go back to past examples but saw this corporatism embodied in the soldiers' and workers' councils (*Räte*) which had come into being at the beginning of the 1918 revolution. Unlike the left, however, they saw these councils not as an instrument of the workers to obtain sole control over the state but as an example of self-government by special-interest groups, an element which has always been considered of prime importance in conservative ideology.⁹ But men who thought along these lines were the exception rather than the rule.

Did the emphasis on a true community reflect the vague romantic unity of the Volk rather than a well-worked-out economic theory? The Volkish thought of these conservatives, the mystical basis of their view of the Volk, is clear in Möller van den Bruck's description of how the new order was to come about: "The state must be renewed through a world view [*Weltanschauung*]."¹⁰ Their thought tended always to stress the ideological rather than concrete and pragmatic solutions to the problems confronting Germany. These men and groups maintained their conservatism in this manner, combining it with a backward look at history.

Yet the past was more of an inspiration than an example to be imitated by the present. Revolutionary conservatives wanted to go forward "into history." The symbiosis between conservatism and revolution was in their terms to be more revolutionary than conservative, directed to the fundamental change and even overthrow of existing society. That is why they stand at the left wing of the Volkish movement. The past was a weapon against bourgeois society and through a corporate structuring of society provided the

memory of a congenial political and economic form. Men taken with this thought talked constantly of the "new Germany."

It was the ideological weight that was to drag the movement down, the precedence given to the fact—as Möller put it—that Germany was now without an "idea" and that it had better get one. Möller's emphasis on the importance of a world view was meant to lead toward anti-rational conclusions, for such a view must be rooted within the mystical entity of the Volk. Typically enough, he praises *Mythos* rather than history, for *Mythos* expresses the drive of the Volk soul. Möller's use of *Mythos* matches that of Martin Buber discussed in the last chapter. For both these men this concept expressed the organic unity between the individual and the Volk, as well as the nature of the Volk as a living organism. The *Mythos* of a people, their legends and superstitions, are closer to the realities of life than any product of historical scholarship.¹¹ The organic unity of the Volk must be restored. "The nature of democracy consists in this: that the Volk must emerge as a political (organic) whole."¹² The Volk was viewed in typical Volkish fashion in terms of a common *Weltanschauung* and the solid Marxist fusion of ideology and economic theory condemned as "superficial." As a result, revolutionary conservatism became bogged down in a search for the "genuine," for "roots," and for a social harmony achieved through racial rather than economic theory. The revolutionary conservatives had few ideas about economics, as we shall see, but ideological considerations were always uppermost in their minds. The roots of failure must be sought here, but that does not lessen the importance of the effort.

Möller van den Bruck wrote that liberalism, with its parliamentary form of representation, was the expression of a

society, not of a community.¹³ It was artificial inasmuch as the government was divorced from the community as a whole and had lost contact with the real longings of the people. Previously, men of all political persuasions who criticized Wilhelminian Germany had made this very point, and this gave further impetus to the revolutionary conservatives' theories. Writers of lasting influence such as Paul de Lagarde and Julius Langbehn had sought to unify the people and their government through a mystical idea of the Volk. Such ideological unity would lead both to greater individual fulfillment and to genuine representative government. Langbehn had already advocated the form of the corporate state as best suited to those aims,¹⁴ but neither of these men thought in terms of revolution against bourgeois society. It was the Youth Movement, arising in the new century, that gave these ideas a sharper edge against the existing order. Revolutionary conservatism was a conscious rebellion against its environment, though it did not always find a coherent expression of its aims. Where it did so, both Marxism and parliamentary government were rejected in favor of a more genuine unity of the Volk. By the 1920's the largest group in that movement, the Bündische Jugend, provided some of the most important theoretical expressions of the "third force."

A concern for *Individualität* (individualism) stood in the forefront of the Youth Movement and this was true also of revolutionary conservatives in general. Marxism, a youth leader wrote, ". . . is nothing more than the acceptance of mechanization [of life]. From this, no salvation can come for the individuality of each person."¹⁵ Parliamentary government, with its political parties, atomized the individual, divided him from his rulers, and produced a ceaseless conflict between the individual and the masses.¹⁶ The leader of

the important Freischaar demanded that state and people be reunited once more. The state must be an expression of the community, the Volk. He went on to suggest a corporately structured Volk as the antithesis to the present "anonymous" state.¹⁷

This was a quest for a new kind of democracy. What seemed to be needed was a "new concept of the community,"¹⁸ and for this the Youth Movement before and after the war could draw on its own experiences. The movement consisted of several well-defined groups, each with a conscious spirit of its own. Through common activities, such as hiking through the countryside, these groups acquired common experiences which rendered them cohesive units. Unity of body, soul, and spirit was the primary law of their community.¹⁹ Such empathy provided genuine unity within the group and, through the group, with the Volk.²⁰ This was the true *Bund*, and it was opposed to bourgeois artificiality; that is, to the society they found dominant. A certain activism was part of their make-up: "living the common experience" took precedence over thinking about it.²¹ The war experience and a glorification of life lived dangerously heightened this drive for action on the part of the Bündische Jugend. Even after the war, in the face of the problems of the German Republic, some of the groups never formulated a coherent ideology. Yet all of them thought of themselves as cells for the renewal of the nation, and the poet Stefan George's ideas of a "secret Germany" that would redeem the nation played some part in their literature.

Many of these groups never progressed beyond a kind of Volk mysticism based on the "taking in" of nature, but some were more specific about how a group should be structured, how it could become a true *Bund*. The automatic equality of all members was rejected as a mechanical, abstract idea

and therefore not "genuine." The existing unity of the group implied a structured, hierarchical society, in which every individual had his place according to his individual merits. This hierarchy was built on both the corporative and the leadership principles. The leader of the Freischaar envisaged a society in which the leader confronted the diverse special interests organized corporatively.²² Within the *Bund* itself the leadership principle was the important one. The leader of the New Scouts (Bund Deutscher Neupfadfinder) held that the foundations for the life of the individual were provided by the community and the leadership.²³

Important from our point of view is the fact that these groups thought of themselves as independent units dedicated to a specific way of life. This was the cell from which "all states had their origin."²⁴ What was more logical than that they should envisage the ideal nation as consisting of such self-contained groups? In this manner the existing schism between the people and their government would be organically bridged. For example, the political manifesto of the Jungdeutsche Orden, a political movement which was sparked by war veterans independently of the Youth Movement (1929), advocated a constitution in which the state was to be made up of groups, not individuals. These ideas also took hold in all the Bündische Jugend.²⁵ They were in the very air and were, moreover, projected outside the nation itself. Their emphasis on the Volk was neither exclusive nor aggressive, for they held that the individual Volk was a self-contained group within an international community composed of many different groups of peoples.²⁶ One youth leader summed up the general feeling among the *Bünde*: the nineteenth-century state was in the process of transformation. The new basis for the state was to be the rediscovery of the group—the community to which the

individual had a direct relationship and in which he belonged. "Where the *Bund* exists, a new Germany starts." Martin Völkel, the leader of the New Scouts, added that although capitalism devoured its own children, the idea of the proletariat was equally unconvincing; it had betrayed German socialism to the enemies of the nation. The *Bund* of men was the only true reality.²⁷ Similarly, the Jungdeutsche Orden called for a true community (*Sozialen Volksstaat*) cemented by the ideological ties of the *Bund* as opposed to a parliamentary state that equated the bourgeois and the nation.²⁸

These ideas were basic to the concept of the corporate state which we find in the 1920's among the conservative revolutionaries. The new Germany was to be based on individual groupings, called *Bünde*, and these various units would constitute the nation. Corporate structure was envisaged in these terms; after all, the medieval guilds also had been bound by shared experience (the worship of a particular saint, etc.) which differentiated them from groups based only on special economic interests. Indeed, corporatism would prevent the institutionalization of special interests, as the Jungdeutsche Orden put it, and substitute the "ideological ties" of the *Bund* as the source of true association among men. In the Jungdeutsche Orden occupational corporate chambers would have a separate existence confined to economic life but not representing the nation as a whole.²⁹ This then was the political thought that for these conservatives typified the real negation of the parliamentary bourgeois state.

These ideas influenced important Volkish organizations such as the north German wing of the National Socialist Party. Alfred Krebs—closely associated with Gregor Strasser, who until 1929 was second only to Hitler within the

party organization—wrote in 1928: "What is the state? Its germinal cell is the *Bund* of men which gathers around a leader."³⁰ Friedrich Hielscher, a leading conservative revolutionary, defended the student corps on the grounds that the law of the *Bund* was more important to them than the law of the state itself. The spirit of the *Bund* was weightier than the profit motive of the bourgeoisie.³¹ It was widely held that a state based on such groups would restore the organic unity of the nation and at the same time free the state from involvement with capitalist private interests.³²

This was an important point for those who believed that parliamentary government meant merely carrying on private business by other means. A state made up of self-governing organic units would change all that. Krebs, active in a white-collar labor organization, believed that the social struggle would then be fought out within the corporate units and thus the state would be freed from the pull of divisive forces.³³ He himself fused the *Bünde* and the occupational groups into one corporate structure. For Krebs too it was the ideological cement of a true *Bund* which held such units together and this was where they found their origin. Such an organization of the state would deprive political parties of their power. A grouping of corporations was envisaged by some as a "first chamber," and did not exclude an elected parliament. Somewhat confusedly, however, this set-up was supposed to eliminate the political party system.³⁴

The *Bund*, then, was to be the corporate cell out of which the national structure would grow. Essentially this was an aristocratic concept: the *Bünde* of the Youth Movement considered themselves an elite "order." The transformation of this idea of association into a general principle at the basis of all political life seemed to modify in an im-

portant respect the idea of the elite. Yet the concept of the *Bund* could also be applied to the leadership group within the corporate state. This was done, for example, by Hans Zehrer, the moving spirit of the influential *Tat* Kreis (a group of intellectuals gathered around *Die Tat*, a journal originally founded by Diederichs). The leaders, a minority group, must form a *Bund* among themselves in the spirit of the Youth Movement. Through this *Bund* they would lead a corporately structured state—for Zehrer, the only way to bring discipline to Germany. The entire nation would then be held together by an ideology that for him was derived from a Lutheran and Protestant inspiration.³⁵ Once again the ideological factor asserted itself as basic to the *bündisch* and corporate state. The concept of a binding ideology was so important to the cohesiveness of the *Bund* and therefore of the state that economic theory was submerged beneath it. A state based on such groups would automatically solve all problems, and so the literature on economic theory often does not go beyond a condemnation of the international capitalist conspiracy. Here we have in a heightened form the dilemma that plagued the whole movement. The formula "Neither capitalism nor Marxism" sought implementation through a corporate structuring of society and economics, but in the last resort it was bolstered by a romantic notion of the historic unity of the Volk. Historians have stressed the "political aestheticism" of the Youth Movement in particular, by which they mean that concrete political programs became lost in the almost ecstatic worship of the new Reich as the true democracy of the Volk.

Moreover, the concepts, on the one hand, of strong leadership within the group and, on the other, of corporate representation were bound to conflict and to introduce a

dichotomy into this political thought. Within most of the groups, the leader was thought to be representative of the whole, but if this system were to be applied to the national scene, the corporative structure would lose its meaning. This dilemma was solved for a great many people outside the Youth Movement through the Italian example. Carl Schmitt attempted to resolve the conflict between leadership and democracy by saying that society should be divided into corporate bodies economically as well as politically, by treating the local governments as corporate entities. But—and here he parallels ideas already discussed in the Youth Movement—this must all be rooted in the Volk, which shares the same ideology and longings. And here the Volk is based on a common Aryan race. The leader, the corporations, indeed the whole Volk share this mystical tie; their attitudes toward life are therefore identical. It follows that no real differences between the leader and the corporations can arise. The *Führer-prinzip* (leadership principle) is able to permeate the Volk as a whole, dominating the diverse corporations.³⁶ A similar relationship developed in Italy between *Il Duce* and the Chamber of Corporations. There is a significant point of contact here between the ideas of the conservative revolutionaries in Germany and the fascists, which calls for further study.

Although the group of conservative revolutionaries as a whole never emphasized economic problems, the men who stood squarely in the middle of the political struggles of the 1920's did attempt to put a greater emphasis on reality. The conservative revolution (like the Volkish movement in general), through its attempted closeness to nature, tended toward the ideal of a society of peasants and craftsmen. However, the industrial worker could not be ignored. August Winnig made a major contribution toward

facing this problem. He had been a Social Democrat and subsequently moved closer to the kind of conservatism we have been discussing. As chief administrative officer of East Prussia he became involved in the Kapp putsch directed against the Weimar Republic, lost his position, and thereafter devoted himself to theoretical questions, chiefly that of the relationship of the worker to the state. As part of the confusion that accompanied the growth of big cities, the worker had lost all his rights. He was no longer a true citizen but had been depressed into proletarian status. The once free German worker had now lost his freedom and it was the prime duty of the state to restore it to him.³⁷ It seems clear that, like all those associated with this movement, Winnig thought of the workers in terms of craftsmen, without himself denying the necessity of an industrial society.

What, then, was to be done? Once again the concept of a hierarchically structured society came to the fore. The proclamation that all men are equal would not better the lot of the workers, August Winnig said, for such equality was in direct opposition to nature itself: "Nature has many aspects, except one: equality." Doctrines of equality were, therefore, artificial—as artificial and divorced from the "genuine" in man as was all parliamentary representative government. Only man estranged from nature could believe in such a fraud.³⁸ Rather, there must be a revival of the organic state, which meant that everyone must be coordinated in the service of the Volk. At the same time the overweening financial advantage of the employers must be curbed: because of their unrestrained capitalism, the wages of the workers were constantly shrinking.³⁹ A corporative organization of occupational chambers must be set up. Laborers and employers working together would have specific rights and

duties toward one another. Once again, a strong concept of leadership would give direction to economic endeavor and the ideology of the Volk; the organic, natural principle would cement the whole organization.

Winnig was a moderate; his economic policy took scant advantage of what Gregor Strasser called the "anti-capitalist longings" of the people. It is typical that his ideas were shared to a large extent by a man such as Dr. Paul Bang, who was also involved in the Kapp putsch and subsequently became principal economic advisor to Hugenberg, the head of the German National Party (*Deutschnationale Volkspartei*). He too sought to lead the economic system back to what he called the "principle of personality," as opposed to the goals of capitalism. Even more moderate than Winnig, he proposed to make every worker a small proprietor and he saw the road to this goal in much the same kind of worker-employer collaboration that Winnig had advocated.⁴⁰ Bang cannot be called a conservative revolutionary, and Winnig can claim such a designation only in a very limited way. Their corporative ideas sought social justice without advocating the abolition of the present capitalist system, however much its excesses were deplored. Here the organic principle was made a substitute for economic change. The capitalist system was to remain intact, integrated with the ideology of the Volk and expressed through corporate organization.

"True socialism is the community of the Volk."⁴¹ This phrase sums up the basic attitude of the revolutionary conservatives. For most of them—the author of this phrase, for instance—this socialism was combined with opposition to existing capitalist society. Paul Krannhals, a writer of some influence, believed that the principal task of any economic system was to allow the free development of indi-

vidual personality. Against this stood the enslavement of man through money and credit. Just as the state had been separated from the Volk by parliamentary government, so the economic system had been detached too, because money had become a value in itself and for itself alone. "Money and blood [the Volk] are contrasting elements which could not be in greater opposition."⁴² Capitalist finance must be abolished and money again made a reward for real work. Credit was the essence of unproductive capital—so thought the conservative revolutionaries. They were attracted by the clause in the first program of the National Socialist Party which called for emancipation from the "slavery of interest charges." Once this had been accomplished, Krannhals believed, trust between workers and employers could be restored as they collaborated in the interests of the Volk through corporate chambers.⁴³

In essence, these ideas were not new. The early English socialists, for example, had put forward a similar opposition to the workings of capitalist finance. In Germany, however, the ideological basis of the Volk was always in the foreground and now was increasingly coupled with racial ideas. The true community on which the state must be built was said to be Aryan in nature, and because this was essential for the proper working of politics and economics, it had to be defended against all enemies. Traditionally the Jew had been cast in the role of enemy. Thus the action necessary to implement true socialism was not a revolution as such but, rather, the elimination of the Jews, who came to represent the slavery of interest and the domination of unearned capital. Not merely the ideological predilections of the Volk, but also the "respectable" economic theories of Werner Sombart, distracted these revolutionaries from attacking bourgeois society as a whole directly and effec-

tively. For Sombart, the Jews, through their "rationalism" and their "impersonal commercialism," played the principal role in building modern capitalist society. Conservative revolutionaries were increasingly driven to racial thought as a substitute for the "overthrow of society" which many of them sincerely desired. Krannhals summed up the general position: "With Jewry stands or falls the mechanistic and materialistic concept of the economic system."⁴⁴ These men increasingly envisaged their revolution as directed against the Jews and not against the employer class; with the overthrow of the Jews, they believed, the fetters of capitalist finance would fall to the ground. However, this anti-Semitic, racial focus must not be allowed to obscure the urge toward change and toward a "new Germany" which inspired the movement.

At its extreme, this urge called for decisive action against existing society. This was best illustrated by the brothers Otto and Gregor Strasser. They worked in the industrial north of Germany and first attempted to turn the National Socialist Party in the direction of such action. When this attempt failed, Otto Strasser tried to carry on with a movement of his own. "Movement" in this case is too limiting a word, however, for the Strasser program managed to capture the hopes and imaginations of a wide variety of people who flowed in and out of all sorts of radical groupings without allowing firm organizational forms to take root. It was a constant coming and going that may well have been due to the nihilistic components which, as Schüddekopf has pointed out, existed in all the social revolutionary groups. For Strasser was not alone. Many National Bolsheviks as well as some youth groups shared his ideas.⁴⁵ They all wanted to abolish the existing system, and despite their frantic opposition to the communists there was an ele-

ment among them not averse to collaboration with this enemy: "every opposition to the system must be furthered."⁴⁶ A very different, radical attitude predominated here to that found in the other men and groupings discussed: it was the revolutionary overthrow of society as a whole that was desired; the capitalist system had to undergo a fundamental change.

For all this, once the ideas and plans of the Strassers are analyzed, we are back to the main theme of this chapter. The *Fourteen Theses of the German Revolution* put forward by Otto Strasser when he left the National Socialist Party (1929) advocated the overthrow of capitalism. This was the *sine qua non* of the revolution's success. Yet the specific economic reforms proposed were scarcely geared to the kind of overthrow of which the program spoke so enthusiastically. According to one of Otto Strasser's formulations, German socialism entailed the sharing by the workers of 49 percent of all industry. This would have left working control in the hands of the managers.⁴⁷ Land was to be nationalized and those who "held" it were to be responsible to the state. Yet they would still be regarded as "proprietors." Each individual's share of property and profit in the economic system was to be directly related to his work or responsibilities to the state. That state was once more defined as an organic community based on a common race. In turn, this meant a "living" (i.e., genuine) structuring of society formalized in occupational and corporate, as opposed to parliamentary, groupings.⁴⁸ Here the emphasis is again on the Volk and on a corporate system that will cater to the needs of the nation rather than to the profit motive. Later, Otto Strasser added that the corporate state with its occupational groupings was the true "Germanic democracy," because it was in tune with the aristo-

cratic principle of government. His corporate state would be built by national representation from occupational groups in the localities. Strasser contrasted this with the Italian model, in which the official party was predominant over the self-government of the working population.⁴⁹ His racism, however, gave his structure the ideological and dictatorial unity which, as we have seen, was explicit in all this thought. Here too the Jews represented the evils of capitalism, while the Aryan ideal provided the basis for a cohesive society.

Corporatism would allow for unity of planning and of personal development, as well as for initiative on the part of the leaders of the economy. Equality as such was not advocated. Society would be structured through a leadership hierarchy within each corporate unit. Alfred Krebs who, like Otto Strasser, eventually left the National Socialist Party, made a familiar point when he discussed the kind of corporate society that this socialism would bring about. Through it, he maintained, the state would be removed from the play of private interests, whose battles would be fought within the corporate groupings themselves, supervised, however, by the state. In view of this last idea, it is difficult to understand Alfred Krebs's opposition to Italian fascism. To be sure, as Krebs wrote, *Il Duce* and his followers had no real appreciation of the racial ideas that were necessary to give ideological unity to the structure as a whole.⁵⁰ Krebs accused some of his fellow revolutionaries of a vital mistake in downgrading Volk and race.⁵¹ Despite the emphasis on the overthrow of the capitalist system, such ideological considerations were of great importance. Even in the case of avowed revolutionaries, opposition to materialism led in a neo-romantic direction, and in turn this caught up the revolutionary impetus.

It is difficult to assess the true political potential of such revolutionary conservatism and with it the chance of transforming Germany in a corporative direction. National Socialism may have offered such an opportunity, and if Gregor Strasser had been a man of greater personal decisiveness, he might well have won his battle against Adolf Hitler and the "Munich clique." As it was, he fell into obscurity and was assassinated in July 1934. His brother Otto's Black Front suffered from organizational instability, a common failing of all these small social revolutionary groups. Indeed, with the rapid radicalization of the German masses to the left and right, many a Strasser follower wandered off into the communist camp.⁵² The failure of the radicals did not benefit the more moderate advocates of corporatism. The Youth Movement never pushed through to really effective political action, and men like August Winnig were, for all their influence, isolated figures. Hope might have lain in another direction, that of the white-collar unions, the largest of which was the *Deutschnationale Handlungsgelhilfen Verband* (Nationalist Union of Commercial Apprentices). Krebs was an important official in that organization and Max Habermann, one of its most important leaders, also believed that the corporate structuring of the nation provided the most "natural" political and economic organization.⁵³ However, the union shared only anti-Semitism and a belief in the Volk as general principles and its members never formed a coherent political force. Yet at one point this large union (some 450,000 strong) could have been politically effective. In 1928, one of its leaders made contact with the Catholic Christian trade-union movement. The idea behind this was for some sort of concerted action to eliminate political parties and replace them with "organic democracy." A corporate state might well have been

the eventual outcome.⁵⁴ But this attempt at change from below never gained ground and led, instead, to the founding of another political splinter party.

The only real political chance to create the "new Germany" seemed to present itself with the short-lived government of General Schleicher (1932). Gregor Strasser at this point called Schleicher's proposed government (in which he was to be a member) the "cabinet of anti-capitalist longing."⁵⁵ It is more probable that Schleicher was merely using Strasser's differences with Hitler in an attempt to split the National Socialist Party and that he never really sympathized with Gregor Strasser's kind of National Socialism. At any rate, Schleicher soon fell from power and Hitler, who was anti-Strasser, became the next Chancellor. The final collapse of revolutionary conservatism was not brought about solely by the triumph of Hitler; it was foreshadowed by the basic weakness we have discussed. The society "beyond capitalism and Marxism" was basically a society held together not by an explicit social or economic aim, but by a romantic ideology. It was in those terms that von Papen, having failed in his attempt to govern Germany, tried to revive the corporate ideal once more at the time that the National Socialists were forming a coalition government with conservative forces. The group to which von Papen belonged was close to high finance and scarcely sympathetic to revolutionary conservatism. Von Papen, therefore, tempered the idea of the corporate state with the statement that "all true revolutions are revolutions of the spirit against the mechanization [of man]."⁵⁶

Von Papen said nothing about economic change, though he referred to the medieval concept of the guilds and to Catholic corporate thought. There was no mention of a society, capitalist or Marxist; nor of a "new Germany" going

forward "into history." Von Papen's theorist, Edgar Jung, held that the "new Reich" was indeed the "new Middle Ages"—a model of the organic Volk of the future.⁵⁷ The emphasis on the "spirit" so prominent here was also that part of the revolutionaries' philosophy that most endangered their avowed objective of overthrowing the present system. National Socialism retained this emphasis, but it rejected ideas of corporate society as out of place in a Führerstaat. The party program envisaged the creation of occupational chambers, but these were to be economic units only, without wider significance. An official party commentary on corporatism rejected this type of organization as fostering a spiritual attitude that favored an aristocratic way of life rather than a mechanism for the better representation of the Volk. Thus Nazism, which called itself democratic, rejected the political concept that Mussolini wanted to put into effect in his fascist state.⁵⁸

National Socialism cut through the problem of the relationship between the group and the leader by stressing personal relationships through the leadership principle. National Socialism seemed to revive the past in forging pseudofeudal ties between the individuals in the leadership hierarchy. The loyalties that cemented the structure of the group, however, consisted of a web of reciprocal duties among the leadership itself. The only parallel with a corporate society was in the personal groupings which these feudal leaders built up around their persons and which constituted the leader's *Hausmacht* (personal following).⁵⁹ In effect, the National Socialist state was a network of such groupings, but there was no concept of a corporate organization of the community as a whole.

Von Papen's reference to Catholic corporate thought leads to the possible connection of the ideas we have been

analyzing and the Catholic corporate ideology which influenced all Europe. At certain points the influence of Catholic corporatism led to ideas vaguely similar to those held by the conservative revolutionaries. Othmar Spann, an influential professor at the University of Vienna, provides a good example of this trend.⁶⁰ Spann, resorting to the conservative and Catholic theorists of the nineteenth century, believed that a return to a feudal order would restore the personal relationship between ruler and ruled which had been lost in the impersonal modern state. The medieval estates should be revived, each having a say in its own sphere of influence. Thus, the cobblers would direct shoemaking; the teachers, education; the generals, the army—but the king or the nobility would control national politics, which was their province. These estates ran counter to the unity of the *Bund* in which so many conservative revolutionaries believed and which did not permit a sharp division between politics and professional life: the *Bund* and its spirit included all facets of human existence.

Moreover, the corporate ideas with which we have been concerned in fact developed from different sources. The emphasis on the group, the *Bund*, cannot really be linked to Catholic thought, and it was not from this source that these corporate ideas derived. To be sure, the medieval example cannot be discounted. However, guilds provided an inspiration to the revolutionary conservatives, not in a purely restorative sense, but as a reminder of a type of organization that could be adapted to the new Germany. The link with Catholicism faces a further difficulty. The revolutionary conservatives were not only anti-Semitic but also anti-Catholic, equating Catholicism with anti-national ultramontanism. Thus they overtly rejected any Catholic

influence. This animosity also played a part in their hostile attitude toward Italian fascism. The Italian experiment with corporate forms was never seriously discussed. But fascism was analyzed in terms of its link with the Papacy: to these men it was another "Roman" thing. Hitler was constantly accused of imitating Italian fascism, and the link with the Papacy in that movement seemed to be paralleled by the Führer's brief flirtation with the Catholic Center Party. Neither Italian nor Catholic ideas seemed to have any measurable influence on the revolutionary conservatives.

The long-range preparation for revolutionary-conservative thought lay rather in the *Genossenschaftslehre* (Theory of Associations) of the nineteenth century, the idea that the state must be constituted through associations: whether guilds, estates, classes, or local communities. The people, considered as individuals, were merely an amorphous mass. For Hegel, a corporate structure had been the intermediary between the state and society.⁶¹ This concept was very similar to the attempt to free the state from involvement with special interests. Instead, special interests should be reconciled within the corporate group. Otto von Gierke's concept of the corporation as a "morally free being" growing up organically out of and through free individuals has many points of contact with the ideas we have been discussing. Moreover, Gierke—one of the most influential German political thinkers of the nineteenth century—in contradistinction to Roman Law allowed a corporation to have greater independence from the state: it could speak directly through its own organs and did not have to be represented by others.⁶² This is reminiscent of the ideal of the group or the *Bund*, the cell through which the corporate state was to grow. Such ideas, rather than Catholic or Ital-

ian corporatism, were apparently the historical background for the political and economic form which revolutionary conservatism was to take.

The immediate roots of this "German Revolution," as Strasser called it, must be sought in the revolt against Wilhelminian Germany. The "Revolution" was directed against the kind of bourgeois and capitalist society which Germany seemed to represent. For it a true democracy of the Volk must be substituted. Hermann Burte, in one of the most popular novels of the age, *Wiltfeber, the Eternal German* (*Wiltfeber, der Ewige Deutsche*, 1912), says of his Germanic hero that he sought and found the Volk, not the bourgeoisie.⁶³ A contrast between Volk and bourgeoisie has been implicit in all that we have discussed. The concept of the "masses," the "proletariat," was also rejected. Burte's hero seeks typically to "destroy the masses for the sake of the Volk."⁶⁴ The emphasis on the Volk in antithesis to the bourgeois and the masses—to parliamentary capitalist government and Marxist theory—was bound to lead to a romanticizing of the nation. This overwhelmed and frustrated the revolutionary impetus implicit in such Volkish thought. Strasser's *Fourteen Theses of the German Revolution*, for all its emphasis on the overthrow of the existing order, goes on to discuss the German "soul."⁶⁵ The purity of the German soul and its genuineness became the base on which the revolutionary-conservative concept of society rested.

Small wonder that this political thought led to an overemphasis on racial theory. We have seen how left-wing Volkish thought could slide over into racism; the examples we gave earlier do not stand in isolation. The predominance of the irrational and the absence of specific economic and social programs inevitably led many advocates of this conservatism to adopt racial theories: racism not only would

provide coherence for the *Bund* but also would automatically solve the complex problems of the times in opposition to the existing order. In the opinion of the official journal of the German fraternities, the corporate organization of national life would free the state from involvement with special interests, leaving it to devote itself solely to its own true task. This was to further the race, through racial hygiene and foreign as well as domestic policies. The journal concludes its discussion with the statement: "Not economics but race determines the fate of a people."⁶⁶ At its extreme this led to the coining of the phrase "biological socialism" to replace the term "German socialism." E. G. Kolbenheyer defined this in contrast to "demagogic socialism," by which he meant the concept of the equality of individuals. Biological socialism rested rather on a hierarchy of merit determined by the biological make-up of the individual. Not collectivism but corporate groups based on this principle must constitute the state, for it determined the kind of work and position to which individuals could attain. Biological structures were inherited, and thus Kolbenheyer's socialism became an extreme conservatism based on a biological group system which he saw in racial terms.⁶⁷

The "spirit" came to dominate the conservative revolution, and social change degenerated into a changing of the people's soul. The enemy became not the employer, not even the bourgeois, but anyone who opposed the racial policy necessary for the new Germany. The anti-Semitism always latent in the conservative revolution was the crux of the matter. The Jew was the enemy; a conspiracy kept the revolution from succeeding. This theory, the panacea of second-rate intellectuals, was substituted for an analysis based on the realities of the situation in which Germany found herself. As Strasser's program put it: together with the

Freemasons and the ultramontanes, the Jews destroy the soul of the people.⁶⁸ For Otto Strasser this may have been secondary to his other theories of change, but in the economic hypotheses of the movement such delusions played a leading part. Anti-Semitism fused with the racial approach to identify the enemy who stood in the way of the new Germany.

There is an interesting parallel here with the Christian Social Party (Christlich-Soziale Partei) founded by Adolf Stöcker in the 1870's. He also started out as a social reformer interested in bettering the lot of the working man within the framework of a national socialism. In his case too, the substitution of a corporate state for a parliamentary system became a political goal.⁶⁹ Soon, however, anti-Semitism predominated and his call for reform (including the abolition of the Stock Exchange) made its appeal to the lower bourgeois and the displaced intellectual. Similarly, the revolutionary conservatives came to attract these classes of the population, for their theories envisaged a structured society based on a hierarchy which did not allow for economic success in the granting of status.

The Youth Movement had not managed to transcend the bourgeois origins against which it was in revolt; neither were revolutionary conservatives able to find a theory that would effectively eliminate bourgeois capitalism. Instead, their ideas became a panacea for uprooted intellectuals and displaced bourgeois, of whom there was no lack in the Weimar Republic. The "anti-capitalist longings" reflected the desires of these people rather than of the workers, and the corporate state as we have defined it became their ideal. The dream of a nation "beyond capitalism and Marxism" collapsed in January 1933. Its advocates soon found themselves not only excluded from participation in power

but imprisoned or exiled. Adolf Hitler did not want their kind of German revolution.

Yet the attempt at a "third force" had been made, and this very fact lends the movement an interest beyond any political relevance it might have attained in the Weimar Republic. Conservatism, it has been said, is anything from "high-minded inspiration to frustrated revolution, from religious revivalism to Babbitry and inertia."⁷⁰ In this case it was an attempt at revolutionizing the existing order. Much has been written about left-wing revolutions; little about right-wing revolutions, for conservatism is usually associated with a quest for stability and the status quo. Nevertheless, there were in this German movement very real revolutionary forces which wanted to overthrow both bourgeois society and capitalism as they defined it. Hitler availed himself of this impetus, only to betray it in the end. The quest for a democracy that was neither parliamentary nor communist was over by 1933, betrayed and bogged down in its own ideological weakness. It seems doubtful whether this ideal of a corporate state will ever again be associated with the desire for a fundamental change in society. The future of such a system of government may lie with those Catholic corporatist ideas that preceded and paralleled the conservative revolution, although in Germany, at least, going forward "into history" has often meant returning to the romanticized traditions of the past.