EUROPEAN ARISTOCRACIES AND THE RADICAL RIGHT
1918–1939

Edited by
Karina Urbach

THE GERMAN HISTORICAL INSTITUTE LONDON
European Aristocracies and the Radical Right
1918–1939

EDITED BY
KARINA URBAČH

GERMAN HISTORICAL INSTITUTE LONDON
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
1

Introduction

KARINA URBACH

What do the post-war experiences of an impoverished Prussian Junker have in common with those of a Florentine countess or a politically influential British peer? How can one dare to compare them and come to any useful conclusion about the nobility as such in interwar Europe?

A noted philosopher has suggested one solution. In *Philosophical Investigations* Ludwig Wittgenstein explained common features of social groups in terms of "family resemblances": "We see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail. I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than "family resemblances"; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way."¹ Such an explanation would have appealed to nobles with their own, very special concept of the family.²

The essays in this volume follow Wittgenstein by looking at the "build and temperament" of the nobility of eleven different countries during a particularly testing time. A great help in filling this so far almost virgin soil are the works of early modernists.³ Their

² For aristocratic family concepts see e.g. Andreas Geistrich, Jens-Uwe Krause, and Michael Mitterauer (eds.), *Geschichte der Familie* (Stuttgart, 2003), 632 ff.
comparative studies on the aristocracy are encouraging as well as an example in terms of method. For them the noble houses of Europe are comparable: "united by ideals of conduct and values which, in their different regional and national variations, still bear a certain resemblance to each other".4 This was also a result of the fact that contacts between nobles were much more frequent in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Aristocratic mental maps and connections were truly international. Karl Heinrich Nikolaus Otto Prinz von Nassau-Siegen, for example, son of a German-Dutch family, was born in 1745 in France, became a grandee of Spain, married a Polish countess, and worked as a Russian admiral until 1794.5

The process of incorporation of nations into states made such cosmopolitan biographies less common by the twentieth century, apart from the higher echelons of the aristocracy. Yet this does not mean that nobles did not still recognize each other as kindred spirits in many cases as equals.

Historical research on aristocracies in the twentieth century, let alone a comparative approach on a European level, is, however, still in its early stages. In many countries, the fight against and cooperation with modernization since the nineteenth century, including the political alliances aristocrats formed in the twentieth century, are still neglected. Among modernists Dominic Lieven alone led the field,6 followed by Hans-Ulrich Wehler, who more than fifteen years ago as an editor encouraged historians to turn from the history of the working classes and the bourgeoisie to the nobility. In his comparative study Europäischer Adel 1751-1930 Wehler pointed out that research on the French, Italian, Russian, and Austrian nobility was all but non-existent.

7 In Great Britain different historical schools opposed each other, seeing the nobility either as adaptable, politically strong, or, in Cassandine’s sense, as an example of decline.

century. In Eastern Europe studies—for example, on the Polish aristocracy—are only just emerging and could not be included in this volume. Some of the archival material has still not been catalogued because of a lack of funds; yet Constantin Iordachi overcomes such obstacles when he presents his research on the Romanian case. At least some south-eastern European archives are now technically accessible; something that cannot be said of the family archives of the Spanish nobility. In his chapter on Franco and the Spanish nobility Carlos Collado therefore had to piece together information from disparate aristocratic biographies and genealogical handbooks.

II

Apart from such very different starting positions, all the authors represented in this volume at first had to battle with the basic problem of defining their group. Lieven’s verdict that ‘everyone knows what aristocracy means until they have to write a book on the subject’ remains valid to this day. First of all the difference between ‘aristocracy’ and ‘nobility’ has never been properly analysed. British historians have used both terms interchangeably, though strictly speaking the term ‘aristocracy’ in Great Britain includes only the peerage and inner family. Lieven’s own monograph is, however, entitled The Aristocracy in Europe and covers peerage and gentry in Germany, Russia, and England: ‘To write a history purely of the peerage would ... omit a key element in the story of how England’s upper class confronted their rapidly changing society’, he emphasizes. David Cannadine followed a similar line of argument. During the conference on which this volume is based, T. C. W. Blanning opposed this and suggested that since ‘aristocracy’

could be seen as a political term and did not cover the whole group, ‘nobility’ should be used as a more neutral word. This argument is also supported by the sources. When one types ‘aristocracy’ into the word search of the catalogue of the National Archives, London, the results are minimal. The word ‘nobility’ or ‘nobles’, however, results in an overwhelming array. In the following essays authors have tried to find their own adequate translations for their often very heterogeneous group. This was not just a problem of getting the terminology right. David Bell recently claimed that the French nobility, for example, was ‘never a caste. It was a porous and untidy social category that incorporated hundreds of thousands of individuals, ranging from the grand aristocrats of Versailles to retired provincial aldermen.113

As with studies of the bourgeoisie, the closer you look at a group the more blurred the picture becomes. In the case of the nobility, matters are complicated by the fact that in each country the distinctions that identify a noble as of the higher or lower nobility are very different. In Germany the age of the pedigree determines the social status of an aristocratic family (not necessarily the title), while in Great Britain hereditary peers are ‘young’, that is, they often have relatively short pedigrees but their status (and titles) rose by the accumulation of money and land. As the Duchess of Westminster so succinctly put it: ‘English people are accustomed to be snobbish over money and titles but not to care a damn about pedigree.’ Her husband’s family owned land in Mayfair, Kensington, and Chelsea—areas that became increasingly important. As a result, they received a baronetcy in 1761, which was elevated to an earldom twenty years later, and a marquessate in 1831, finally culminating in a dukedom in 1874.114

Yet in other European countries, noble families often have nothing left but the name. You find nobles everywhere in Italy,

bemoaned Luigi Barzini in 1956, in palaces, and even among the indigent on the street. Were these families who had lost all noble insignia still noble, or had they become simply an 'imagined community'? The latter would prove Heinrich Heine's verdict that the aristocracy, like the devil, exists only because people believe in it. Marcel Proust, however, would not have agreed: 'the power of such people is seen to reside not so much in their wealth or inherited position, much less in their talent or personality. Rather it lies in the power of names themselves, the imaginative recognition ascribed to them by others and the authority that the name appears to inscribe in them as people.'

Apart from writers, sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu have tried to explain the longevity of elite power by highlighting their symbolic capital (titles), their cultural capital (knowledge, taste), and their social capital (networks). Whereas some historians resent the influx of such theories ('Parlez-vous Bordieu?') as a typical joke among historians of aristocracy others have adopted them and find useful the work of Max Weber and Niklas Luhmann on the concept of 'habitus'—a distinctive definition of aristocratic behaviour. In Germany Heinz Reif developed the concept of 'Adeligkeit' to explain aristocratic identity (including déclassé nobles), based upon, among various other criteria, importance of blood, family, honour, and the ability to rule. In

---

17 Oscar Wilde was of a similar opinion: 'You should study the peerage . . . It is the best thing in fiction the English have ever done.' Oscar Wilde, A Woman of No Importance (London, 1893).
18 For this see Simon Gunn, 'Aversion as Inscription: Occupations and the Transformative Powers of Names', paper given at the University of Greenwich, 2 Nov. 2002.
20 Heinz Reif, 'Adeligkeit'—historische und ethnographische Überlegungen zum Adelshabitus in Deutschland um 1800', speech delivered at the Institute for European History in Mainz, 18 June 1997. This concept is questioned by Silke Marburg and Joseph Matzerath who describe the nobility as an 'Erinnerungsgruppe', an elite of memory. Silke Marburg and Josef Matzerath (eds.), Der Schritt in die Moderne: Sächsischer Adel zwischen 1763 und 1918 (Cologne, 2001).

---

22 Connadine's Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy therefore stands in a long historical tradition. His theories were questioned by Peter Mandler's work. Peter Mandler, The Fall and Rise of the Stately House (New Haven, 1997).
the losers. However, nobles were suddenly confronted with republics, revolutions, and an influx of ‘Bolshevist’ ideas. The Red threat varied from country to country, of course; but the international network of the European aristocracy tried to turn it into a common experience—a class war seemed to be imminent. How, if at all, did they as a result become a focus for anti-democratic tendencies? Or, to quote Dominic Lieven’s last sentences in *The Aristocracy in Europe 1815–1914*: “In extremis, would aristocrats be sufficiently reactionary or civilised to remain constrained by traditional conceptions of religion and honour, or would insecurity, resentment of lost status and agnosticism lead them down the path towards totalitarian nationalism and its inevitable companion, barbaric anti-Semitism?” Debates about a new order (preferably based on the old one) in which aristocrats would play a leading role took place in all countries after 1918.

The interwar years seem to have given some nobles brief political opportunities—in Germany for those surrounding Hindenburg, in Hungary those following Horthy, in Spain those collaborating with Franco. This would indicate that in countries in which fascist or authoritarian regimes were successful the aristocracy experienced a last hurrah. Yet what part did they really play in such movements? Are we perhaps falling for a left-wing conspiracy theory by overestimating the nobility’s political prowess and underestimating the degree to which they often stood as a conservative bulwark against the radical right?

What, though, is meant by the ‘radical right’? As with fascism, agreement on a common definition is difficult to find and this book will not claim any false precision. What is *not* meant is the concept of a ‘conservative revolution’, a phrase particularly popular in the German historiography. Generally speaking, the radical right was composed of groups that existed in small numbers on the political margins of Europe before the First World War, but became increasingly powerful in the interwar years. There were affinities and coalitions between conservatives and the radical right. Discontented former Tories in Britain, for example, were as much fascinated by authoritarian and later fascist regimes as Prussian conservatives who eventually turned to Hitler. Yet there were also conservatives in the old sense, who found the ‘modernistic’ and anti-religious side of these new movements alienating. Usually the ‘classic’ countries of research on fascist and radical right-wing regimes are Germany, Italy, Spain, Romania, Hungary, and Austria. These countries are to be found in this volume, but other case studies, of so-called ‘stable democracies’ such as Great Britain, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands, have to be analysed as well to understand whether and why aristocrats reacted differently here. In the essays that follow, authors include under the term ‘radical right’ fascist, National Socialist, and authoritarian regimes, though Ignác Romics does not see the Horthy government in this context.

Generally speaking, the social profiles of members of radical right-wing movements have in the past shown a high proportion from the lower middle classes. Yet the higher echelons of society were by no means absent, as the following essays show. In this, the generational issue seems to have played a part. For Germany it has been shown that it was often younger aristocrats who persuaded their parents to join. Whether this was also the case in other countries is still unknown. Yet nobles who joined had a great impact, especially in the early stages of these movements. Aristocratic members, or ‘Drawing Room Nazis’ as Diana Mitford called them, were not only a great public relations catch, they were also door-openers to other important circles. Because of their illustrious names, they were particularly ‘visible’ and gave the radical right a new social respectability.

What was it that attracted the nobility to these movements? Anti-parliamentarism? The mixture of modern and traditional elements? Anti-Semitism and racist concepts? The pomp, the symbols, the militarism, the ‘masculinity’ of the movement? Or was it the charisma of leaders that attracted them as in the case of Romania, where a fusion between the old Romanian aristocracy and the new ‘charismatic aristocracy’ of the Iron Guards was forged? (Constantin Iordachi shows in his essay that this led to them advocating ‘cultural purification’ and ‘national regeneration’ coupled with a virulent anti-Semitism.)

Each essay will give its own particular combination of answers to these questions. The authors also try to show what kept
Introduction

Ideological cross-currents flowing between European nobles are an important and so far neglected reason why many fell for the radical right. This brings us back to Wittgenstein’s idea about criss-crossing. Noble families, particularly on the Continent, were interrelated or had befriend each other. That these links had an effect on their geographical as well as ‘mental’ map is obvious. Nobles still emulated and stimulated each other and supranational ideological transfers were therefore not uncommon in a group which had such cosmopolitan roots. The higher aristocracy, in particular, did not exist in a national vacuum. Despite the First World War, which tore international families apart, contacts were re-established very quickly. It is, however, particularly difficult to untangle this complex international network.

How can one imagine such an abstract concept of networks? A good way of visualizing it is to look at the network paintings of the New York artist Mark Lombardi. His pictures are narrative structures, unveiling the secret entanglements of a small elite of politicians with multinational companies. Lombardi is obsessed with conspiracy theories, but if one wants to understand the links that European aristocracies tried to sustain amongst each other and with various power centres over a long period of time, one could draw a similar picture: in the early nineteenth century still with strong brush strokes, later on with increasingly shaky ones. Yet despite growing shakiness, these contacts also made them ideal ‘transmitters’ or intermediaries for the radical right. Prince Max Hohenlohe, who is mentioned in Urbach’s essay, was such a transmitter who, for a while, regained some political influence. He lived in Czechoslovakia and Spain (where he had married into an influential family) and worked for Hitler, Franco, and the British Foreign Office, spreading the gospel of National Socialism. The common link was the fear of Bolshevism. The influence the Russian nobility had on their scared European cousins has so far been neglected. It was not possible to find a Russian contributor for this book.30

However, in his recent monograph on white émigrés after 1917, Michael Kellogg mentions aristocrats and their political dealings with fascist regimes. He comes to the conclusion that they

30 Julia Hilde has just started a dissertation at the University of Bonn on autobiographies of the exiled Russian aristocracy after 1917.
contributed extensively to the making of German National Socialism'.

To understand the aristocracy in the twentieth century one has to use political, economic, and social history in combination. However, in this volume economic aspects play only a secondary part. This is because of the lack of research by economic historians on noble families and the problem of getting exact figures from the archives (in Germany, for example, wills are to this day not available).

Of course, cultural approaches are important too. The enormous power of country houses, for example, has been proved by Peter Mandler's study and in Germany historians have tried to explain the aristocratic mindset, for example, by studying their hunting patterns. This is a very specialized angle, though, and for countries such as Spain or Hungary, where the study of aristocracy is in its early stages, it seems more important to write a political and economic history of the aristocracy. When this base is achieved, a story of aristocratic Spanish hunting patterns would not seem frivolous anymore.

Furthermore, cultural interpretations can be deceiving in pressing the sources too far. Cannadine, for example, interprets John Sargent's famous 1905 painting of the Marlborough family as an example of the new dominance of an American heiress. Indeed, like so many of his compatriots, the 9th Duke of Marlborough married a rich American to save his estates. In Sargent's painting Consuelo Vanderbilt stands two steps above her husband, towering over her children. Cannadine sees this as a sign of her power, but if one reads Vanderbilt's memoirs, the reason for this arrangement was quite banal: 'I was placed on a step higher than Marlborough [her husband] so that the difference in our height—for I was taller than he—should be accounted for.' The 9th Duke of Marlborough, who commissioned the portrait, was, like many aristocrats, too much of an expert in careful stage setting to have given away any possible inequalities within the family.

32 David Cannadine, Preface to Decline and Fall, p. xiii.
the 1950s in the movements for Christian Democracy and European integration.

III Conclusion

The story of the relationship between the Belgian aristocracy and the radical right might sound like a love story, a tale of attraction and rejection. However, this aspect of the plot, moving from sympathy to actual involvement, from sceptical distance to open antagonism, is not the essence of the Belgian story. More important, it seems, is the psychological aspect: out of frustration, misdirected self-interest, and the feeling of being unappreciated, a social elite for a time deliberately devoted itself to the legitimation of the radical right and the New Order—which cleverly took advantage of this, it must also be said. Whether intentionally or not, the frustrated aristocrats achieved the desired model. Is this a dramatic love story with a moving and happy ending relating the aristocracy’s great contributions during the resistance in the Second World War? Or did the relationship end in bitterness?

sanitized. Descendants have understandably developed a selective memory—connections with authoritarian regimes or radical right-wing groups were not seen as laudable after 1945 and were thereafter erased from the family archives. Even in cases of well-known British Nazi supporters such as Viscount Lymington (later 9th Earl of Portsmouth), whose papers are deposited in a public archive, letters from his German, Austrian, and Italian friends are missing. Nor are works of reference illuminating. Burke's Peerage, which lists affiliations, does not mention, under the entry for the Marquis of Graham (later 7th Duke of Montrose) and his brother Lord Ronald, the affiliation: 'member of the Right Club'. However, they had been ardent supporters of various fascist groups and eagerly contacted the German embassy to arrange an 'educational' trip to Berlin: 'We would also like to see if possible a Labour Service Camp and a Concentration Camp—in fact anything which might help to throw a true light on the situation as opposed to what we read in the Press. This bizarre enquiry was not unusual. Files of the German foreign ministry are full of applications from members of the British upper class to meet Hitler. The infamous 'Gestapo Muller' was busy checking their pedigrees to make sure that the Führer would not be embarrassed—after all, some members of the British nobility seemed to have Jewish blood.

In general, British aristocrats have been perceived as setting an example for their European cousins, who were not as charismatic, urban, wealthy, or adaptable to the modern world. This image extended to the twentieth century, when the British aristocracy was considered to have been politically reliable—a Horthy regime or Prussian camarilla would never have been possible in England. Aristocrats who are known to have supported radical right-wing groups have often been portrayed as eccentric figures, or marginalized as disgruntled, 'declining landowners'. A recent panegyric for the aristocracy came to the conclusion that 'Class war, socialism, fascism were un-English ideas, only suitable, if suitable at all, for foreign countries.' This was because of the British aristocracy, which 'for three centuries guaranteed the rights and liberties of all the British people so effectively as to make a written constitution unnecessary'.

So, all is well on the Western Front of the European aristocracies? In Kazuo Ishiguro's Remains of the Day, fictional Nazi sympathizer Lord Darlington is in close contact with Oswald Mosley and dabbles in appeasement. He is suspicious of democracy: 'The world's far too complicated a place now for endless members of parliament debating things to a standstill... Germany and Italy have set their houses in order by acting.'

The character of Darlington could have been based on various contemporary aristocrats who were disillusioned with democracy: the Marquis of Tavistock, a Nazi sympathizer who wanted to strike a peace deal with Hitler, or Lord Londonderry, former secretary of state for air, who defended Nazi Germany and not just for political purposes. But, to put it in literary terms, is Ishiguro's Lord Darlington as representative of the twentieth century as Anthony Trollope's Duke of Omnium was for the nineteenth?

The contemporary left would have answered in the affirmative. They suspected an aristocratic conspiracy: Mosley has 'wealthy, aristocratic, influential friends; men who have powerful controlling influence in industry; in parliament, and in particular the

---

4 Lymington himself gave a bowdlerized version of his activities in the 1930s and 1940s; Lord of Portsmouth, A Knot of Roots (London, 1955). However, the German foreign ministry has kept his enthusiastic letters which started in 1933. Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts, Berlin. Nachlass Dr Leopold von Hoesch, 1881-1936, no. 14 Privatdienststellen Auswärtiges Amt 1932-4.

5 Their 'impeccable' credentials included a letter of introduction from Hitler's court jester, Putzi Hanfstaengl. Lord Ronald Graham to Attaché H. Fritz Radvohol, 2 Nov. 1934, Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts Berlin, Politische und kulturelle Propaganda in England Pol. 26, R 7171. The address of Graham's letter, 28 Summer Place, Onslow Square, SW7, is interesting. Onslow Square is only a few hundred yards from 83 Onslow Gardens, which is where William Joyce lived by 1937. At the time South Kensington was a semi-run-down area and Onslow Square seemed to attract budding fascists.

Tory party machine. Mosley is a millionaire and has wide family ties with sections of the ruling circles... The fact that these families were personally friendly with Hitler arose from their common bond of hatred of the working class. The Earl of Kinnoull supported this line of argument when in 1934, during a House of Lords debate on the British Union of Fascists, he accused fellow peers of supporting and financing fascist movements in Britain. Today we know that upper-class support for Mosley was short-lived. We are also aware of the political, economic, and military reasons for appeasing Hitler; and this essay will not repeat the extensive research that has been done on the subject. Yet 'there was a body of conservative opinion which took a serious interest in Fascism, both for its qualities of leadership and for its corporatist theories'. In the 1920s and 1930s this body was in constant flux, its make-up and doctrines changed quickly, and one has to distinguish between many shades of grey. The question therefore is: who thought what, when, and why? This essay will concentrate on only one group and ask how representative radical right-wing ideas were of the aristocracy. Why were British aristocrats attracted to such ideas? And were only declining landowners and eccentrics affected by them, as Cannadine argues? If so, why are the richest and most illustrious aristocratic names to be found among supporters of the radical right?

The aristocrats under scrutiny in this essay mainly belonged to the peregrine. Compared with the long pedigrees of German aristocrats, theirs were relatively 'young', yet they were much richer than their Continental counterparts. Still, since the 1880s the British aristocracy had increasingly suffered from economic problems and a growing fear of social upheaval. In this respect the Parliament Act of 1911 marked a turning point. In 1999 the Earl of Romney was still bemoaning this loss of leadership and favoured a benevolent dictatorship of the well informed. Born in 1910, Romney was the last link in a chain of reactionary British aristocrats, the 'diehards'. Before the First World War this group had advocated a national and military awakening, criticized the decadent and plutocratic influences at Edward VII's court (there are parallels here with the German nobility's criticism of William II), favoured the programmes of eugenics, opposed reform of the House of Lords, and tried to prevent the introduction of Home Rule for Ireland.

The diehards remained a minority that symbolized the strongly nationalist aspect of the higher-ranking nobility. What they feared most was the rising power of socialism; 'a poisonous weed of huge proportions, destroying our national defences and warping the strength of the nation... Socialism narcotic-like has drugged the spirits of patriotism into a forced slumber.' After the war surviving diehards continued to sympathize with radical right-wing organizations, and the sons of diehards would, for cultural and political reasons, be more receptive to fascist ideas in the 1920s and 1930s.

The enormous loss of aristocratic officers during the First World War has often been seen as one reason for the subsequent

13 Fascist Organisation in this country', in Parliamentary Debates, Fifth Ser. xc, House of Lords, Session 1933-4, pp. 1002 ff. The BUF had been founded in Oct. 1932. Before that there were minor parties such as the British Fascists, the Imperial Fascist League, and the British People's Party, a creation of the Marquis of Tavistock. See T. Landman, British Fascism 1918-39: Parties, Ideology and Culture (Manchester, 2000).
14 To feel affinity for authoritarian regimes, Nazi Germany, or British fascist groups did not necessarily mean that one had to become a Mosley supporter. See for this Arnd Bauerkämper, Die 'ostrale Rechte' in Großdeutschland (Göttingen, 1991), 160 ff.; Martin Pugh, 'Hymn for the Blackshirts? Fascists and Fascism in Britain Between the Wars' (London, 2003); Richard Thurlow, Fascism in Britain: A History 1918-1983 (London, 1987); and Kenneth Lunn, British Fascism (London, 1980).
16 See n. 7 above.
erratic behaviour of the aristocracy. In many families the sense of personal identity with country properties seemed to decrease with the death of the direct heir. Furthermore ‘le grand moan’—complaints about economic downfall, resonated across the land and the ‘suffering’ of British aristocrats impressed even a German visitor. Indeed, the Bavarian Crown Prince Rupprecht, who visited London in 1932, noted in his diary: ‘a butler seems to have become a mythical person’.22

It has consequently been argued that aristocrats became more disgruntled as commodity prices fell sharply and rents dwindled after 1918. The Estate Gazette reported in 1921 that one-quarter of England had changed hands, which led F. M. L. Thompson to conclude that a social revolution in landownership had taken place, the greatest transfer of land since the sixteenth century (although later he himself described this claim as an over-dramatization). This theory has recently been challenged by John Beckett and Michael Turner.23 Beckett argues that to this day the figures are difficult to verify and articles such as those in the Estate Gazette or The Times must be seen in the political context of the time. Headlines such as ‘Duke of Portland is selling his estates’ were misleading because only small portions of such estates were sold off and not, as the newspapers assumed, to war profiteers, but to tenant farmers who had worked on them for generations.

Reports about ‘aristocratic estates dying’ had surfaced as early as 1912. After the war the fear that land might be nationalized played a part in creating further hysteria. In fact, by 1921 the land market had settled back to normal. Sales, in terms of acreage sold and prices achieved, peaked in 1919; by 1921 they had sunk back by one-third.24 Beckett argues that for a short period many aristocratic families solved economic problems accumulated in the nineteenth century by selling land, and that this should not be seen as a sign of their imminent bankruptcy. It was not the catastrophe for the aristocracy that they themselves and the press claimed.

This essay will therefore argue that economic fears were not as great as political ones—otherwise rich aristocrats would not have been as infected by the radical right as their poor counterparts. Instead, three points of political fear will be identified: Ireland, the Empire as a whole, and repercussions on the homeland. All three were linked with the biggest of all fears: that of Communism. As a result of the Russian revolution of 1917, ‘if there had not been such a wholesale threat to the integrity and customs of the European states system—commonly proclaimed as Western civilization—since the revolution in France of 1789,25

The problems of the aristocracy had started in Ireland. The Troubles had a psychological impact even on English aristocrats who only followed the reports from a distance in the Morning Post. In 1919 the same sort of stories of resistance by brave noblemen emerged from Ulster as had come from Pomerania or Mecklenburg in 1918.26 There German landowners had fought off unruly peasants; in Ireland country houses were raided for arms by the IRA: ‘masked men marched in on the undefended house of Lady Una Ross [dragged her into the garden and made her watch as her house was] burnt to the ground’.27 Lady Londonderry reported that someone of her class reacted to such stories with aristocratic fighting spirit. She took pleasure in a certain cult of violence, and always carried a loaded pistol. (She actually fired it when her house was attacked—an action that frightened her own security staff more than any threat from Sinn Fein.) Less influential names were not spared either: ‘Coolmore was raided by twelve masked men one night. One of the intruders held a pistol at the stomach of the old butler and ordered him to agreed that it was difficult to get exact numbers for them because most were done via solicitors and not made public.

22 I would like to thank Dieter J. Weiβ for his generous help in providing me access to Crown Prince Rupprecht’s comments on Great Britain. Dieter J. Weiβ, König Rupprecht von Bayern (Leipzig 1955): Eine politische Biographie (Regensburg, 2007).


25 In the discussion that followed this paper F. M. L Thompson and other speakers pointed out that sales of gentry land were not included in Beckett’s research. It was
hand over his master's service revolver. "I would sooner be shot than let one of you touch my Captain's things". Not all staff remained so deferential; strikes (including a chauffeurs' strike) seemed to be a foreboding of a socialist future. Altogether 200 country houses were burnt down between 1920 and 1923, which led people like Lady Londonderry to conclude that Ireland was not yet ready for 'democracy as the British know it... It is not for southern Ireland. They are of a different race. They want firm, wise but powerful control, to prevent them from trying to eat each other up.

But even in England things seemed to get out of hand. In September 1918 Lord Cecil wrote: 'It looks as if we shall be precious near a Revolution before long.' The end of the war prevented this, but for many aristocrats the 1920s were dominated by fear of Bolshevism. There were two catalysts that had an impact on aristocratic thinking: first, the fears transmitted via the communication channels of international aristocratic networks; and, second, the national fears created by indigenous scaremongers. The fear of the new evil, Communism, began on the Continent, where aristocratic Baltic and Russian refugees brought tales of persecution to their countries of refuge: 'Some surviving Romanovs did feel that they possessed a certain expertise on revolutions, an expertise that they were all too ready to share... Romanov exiles took a wry pleasure in nodding knowingly at the sight of a strike or procession of unemployed workers, as if to say: "Ah yes, I've seen this before. Your turn, affectionate cousins, is only a matter of time.'

Even amongst the British aristocracy, which had not been directly affected by revolutionary movements, horror stories circulated via networks of old friends. The Earl of Portsmouth, who had no relations on the Continent, still empathized deeply with the plight of his friends in the Austro-Hungarian aristocracy. In Hungary he stayed at a 'semi-ruined castle. The gutting of the castle was Béla Kun's work... Béla Kun had been worse than the war in many ways, and ranked with the peace treaties in the Hungarian Soul.'

Marriage networks had an even stronger impact. The letters of Maria Alexandrovna exemplify this. Daughter of Tsar Alexander II, and a member of the English royal family by marriage, she had been a German duchess since the 1890s. She had spent the war in Germany and in 1919 warned her English nephew, King George V, most urgently of the dangers of Bolshevism: 'What pursues me like a nightmare is the probability that the great mass of the [German] population, losing all hope for their future existence, might be driven by despair into extreme bolshevism... I warn you of what might become a danger to the rest of Europe. You may be sure that I am not promped by any anti-English or pro-German feeling, but by the intense pain I have suffered through the horrible fate of my own family.'

Apart from warning of imminent danger, Maria Alexandrovna was also appealing indirectly in her letter to the aristocracy's long memory, their common European roots—the 'international chain of the aristocracy'. Prince Rohan, later a National Socialist, even believed that the aristocracy 'beyond all national passion [was united by] a common heritage, blood that has often

---

29 Ibid. 190.
30 Before the Troubles started there were about 2,000 country houses in Ireland. Ibid. 195.
32 Lord Cecil to his wife, 4 Sept. 1918, Lord Cecil of Clevedon Papers CHE 6/1–164. Hasfield House Archives. See also his papers in the British Library: 'It may well be that when the war is over, we shall only be at the beginning of our troubles.' Memo by Lord Robert Cecil, confidential, Oct. 1916. British Library (henceforth BL), Add. 51102. Also Kenneth Rose, *The Later Celics* (London, 1973), 127 ff. According to the Duchess of Westminster the aristocracy led rather a schizophrenic life: 'The dark shadows were caused by labour problems, strikes and unemployment. From time to time I wrote cheerfully in my diary that we seemed to be on the brink of a bloody revolution, but it was a possibility which had been at the back of the minds of the upper classes since the days of Marie Antoinette and which they had got quite used to, so in the next sentence I went on to describe how I was trimming a hat or arranging a dinner party.' Luella, Duchess of Westminster, *Grace and Favour: The Memoirs of Luella, Duchess of Westminster* (London, 1964), 123.
34 Carl of Portsmouth, *A Man of Hue* (London, 1919). In Mar. 1919 Béla Kun (1886–1939) formed a Hungarian government dominated by the Communists and ruled by force. Admiral Horthy overthrew this regime in August 1919 and Kun had to flee to Austria. In 1939 he was murdered during the Stalinit purge.
35 Cz. of this letter was her son-in-law, Priaré Ernst II Höhenlohe-Langenburg. See Nachlaes Fürst Ernst II Höhenlohe-Langenburg (uncatalogued), Zentralarchiv Neuenstein, Neuenstein.
been mixed, a common social niveau and attitude to life’s problems’. Consequently they had to stand together now against the wave of Communism, Lord Cecil tried to turn this into policy when he wrote in early August 1919 to Balfour: ‘It is the interest of the associated governments to stop the westward advance of Bolshevism before it has penetrated Germany and Austria.’

Nonetheless, appeals to the aristocracy as a whole at times of need created secondary fears that would not have been so effective if they had not been mixed with specifically national problems. For the British aristocracy two perceived threats played a role, to varying degrees: a pan-European one and, more importantly, a national one. The Soviet Union threatened the Empire. Its first target had been China, though officially not part of the Empire, still Britain’s second biggest trading partner. The 8th Duke of Northumberland was obviously not alone in waging war against Communism. The Duke represents a link between the pre-war diehards and post-war fascism. In the 1920s he used the House of Lords for his anti-Bolshevist speeches and acquired ownership of the Morning Post, which was widely read in aristocratic circles. The Morning Post reported Bolshevist attacks on the Empire and came to the conclusion that ‘Moscow... is making war on England.’

Serious aristocratic politicians agreed. When in 1920, for instance, the Lloyd George coalition negotiated the first trade agreement with the Soviet Union, the foreign secretary, Lord Curzon, did not want to communicate with the Russian emissary: ‘As things are at present, [the Foreign Office] sees itself

36 The Earl of Portsmouth saw it similarly in the 1920s: ‘What was, and still is, interesting is that there is a sort of international aristocratic family freemasonry which permeates Europe even now in a one-adult, one vote world.’ Earl of Portsmouth, kind of Roots, 146.
37 8 Jan. 1919, Robert Cecil to Arthur Balfour, BL Add. 4144.
38 Ruthella Marks is currently preparing a political and religious biography of the Duke.
40 Morning Post, 13 Jan. 1927.

The British Aristocracy expected to enter relations with a State which makes no secret of its intention to overthrow our institutions everywhere and to destroy our prestige and authority particularly in Asia.’ Here Curzon was defending his nation’s interests as much as his class interests, as he was unable to distinguish between the two.

It was, therefore, no surprise that many aristocrats looked for alternatives. Italian fascism was the first form of fascism the British encountered. To be attracted to Italy was a British tradition, yet this admiration now went beyond adoring paintings and the countryside. In the 1920s the right wing of the Tory party was very much pro-Mussolini, who had suppressed the Communists after his March on Rome, and it supported the Anglo-Italian Axis politically. Though fascism was not an ‘organic’ English idea, it seemed expedient to support it as a bulwark against Communism on the Continent. Churchill’s famous Rome speech of January 1927 was typical of his class and his times: ‘I will... say a word on an international aspect of Fascism. Externally your [Mussolini’s] movement has rendered service to the whole world. The great fear which has always beset every democratic leader or a working class leader has been that of being undermined or overbid by someone more extreme than he. Italy has shown that there is a way of fighting the subversive forces... She has provided the necessary antidote to the Russian poison. Hereafter no great nation will be unprovided with an ultimate means against the cancerous growth of Bolshevism.’

Churchill was restrained from speaking for Franco during the Spanish Civil War, yet he stayed in contact with a relative, the Duke of Alba, a supporter of Franco, Jacob Stuart Fiz-James y Falco, Duke of Berwick and Duke of Alba was a descendant of Arabella Churchill, who had produced an illegitimate son with James II. Although this connection may seem remote, for the
The British Aristocracy

ample time to entertain British visitors. Goebbels was not completely averse either. Apart from his friendship with Diana Mosley, he carefully monitored House of Lords debates. Heber Albrecht Haushofer therefore claimed that the Nazi regime was looking for a settlement with the British upper classes. If one considers how successfully the Nazis had targeted the German nobility, this was not such a far-fetched plan.

One concept of British society outlined in a paper by the German foreign ministry was that of a pyramid in which the upper class played a vital political role and consequently seemed to be a much more important player than its dethroned German counterpart. These German aristocrats were, however, useful in doing the proselytizing. Aristocrats preferred talking to aristocrats, and access to each other was easily gained, even if there was no family connection. The aforementioned international communication within the aristocracy worked again: German aristocrats passed on their positive experiences with the new regime to their English cousins in order to give Hitler more credibility abroad. British aristocrats and the royal family were bombarded with glowing reports about the Third Reich.

Some of the delivery boys were well chosen. By recruiting the Duke of Coburg, for example, the Nazis gained a direct channel to the British peerage and monarchy. For Coburg, the Nazis offered the chance to play a political role once again: but what pleases me most is that they still need our help. In spite of their saying nowadays that the young must rule, Coburg had strong personal reasons to hate the Communists. His sister-in-law Victoria was married to Grand Duke Cyril and used Coburg as a base to further his husband’s candidacy as the only legitimate

42 For this see Kim Philby, quoted in Denis Smyth, Diplomacy and Strategy of Survival (Cambridge, 1986), 265.
43 Personal and Secret from Prime Minister: We must not put any slight upon the Duke of Alba, who is a good friend to this country,” 96 Apr, 1913, CHAR 20/131 B 217, Churchills Archives, Churchills College, Cambridge.
44 Duke of Coburg, 2 Mar, 1899, to his sister, the Countess of Athlone, AV/FF/AGA/10, Royal Archives, Windsor.
45 Lady Eleanor Cecil could not bear such talk when she stayed at the country houses of her aristocratic friends: ‘Nearly all my relatives are diehards and tender to Mussolini (not so much lately) and to the Nazis, and idiotic about “Communism.”’ Quoted in Camadine, Decline and Fall, 530.
46 The Germans were, of course, Anglophiles even before Hitler came to power and their picture of Britain was as outdated as his. For this see e.g., Gerwin Strohl, The German Image: Nazi Perceptions of Britain (Cambridge, 2000).

51 How carefully the Nazis monitored the upper classes is shown by Goebbels’ diaries. See Erich Friedlind (ed.), Goebbels Tagebücher, pt. 1: Aufzeichnungen, iii. 1 Apr, 1934 to Feb, 1936, 101, 241, 376, 415, 417 ff.
52 Albrecht Haushofer was a professor of political geography at the University of Berlin and an adviser to Rudolph Hess. Quoted in Lynn Picknett, Glice Prince, and Stephen Prior, Double Standards: The Rudolf Hess Cover Up (London, 2001), 152–3.
55 Duke of Coburg to his sister, Alice, Countess of Athlone, 2 Mar, 1939, AV/FF/AGA/10, Royal Archives, Windsor.
tsar in exile. This brought her into contact with the German extreme right, first Ludendorff, then Hitler, who in 1922 celebrated the infamous German Day in Coburg.56 ‘Charlie’ Coburg wholeheartedly supported his Russian relatives and their new German friends, and tried to export this crusade to England. His correspondence with his sister, the Countess of Athlone, extracts of which have been made available by the Royal Archives in Windsor, indicates that in the 1990s he used her house as a base for propaganda talks, and later reported to Berlin on their outcome.57

British country houses must have been busy places in the 1990s, the last heyday of country house politics. Coburg was only one of many go-betweens. Jonathan Petropolous has recently shown how useful the Hesse family was to the Nazis in forging ties with the Italian and the British elite.58 Göring even cultivated a menage of aristocrats with international contacts, including Max Hohenlohe and the Wieds, for similar purposes.59 The aristocratic grandeur of Göring, a self-styled renaissance man, who invited his British guests to hunting parties and entertained like Louis XIV, as Chips Channon noted, seemed familiar and appealing to international members of the aristocracy.60 British aristocrats, true ‘choreographers’ themselves, were full of admiration for the pomp of fascist movements. Nor was the idea of

56. For this Russian connection see Stephan, The Russian Fascists, 13. Stalin was paranoid about the emigres. The Cheka even invented a front group, the Trust, which foiled monarchists. It became a source of misinformation for monarchists about events in Russia and aristocrats also invested in it financially. See Andrew Marr, ‘A Window on the “Trust”: The Case of Ato Birk’, Intelligence and National Security, 11(2) (April 1991), 275.
59. MGs papers released by the National Archives, Kew in 2005 show what an interesting propaganda crusade was pursued by two members of the Hohenlohe family, Stephanie Hohenlohe, who had married into the aristocracy, cultivated influential circles in Austria, then in the case of Hungary (a revision of the Treaty of Trianon), later in the service of Hitler. Max Hohenlohe had excellent contacts in the FO and worked for Göring in Czechoslovakia, Spain, and Switzerland. By 1944 he had changed sides and offered his services to Allen Dulles. For this, see Karina Urbach, ‘Nobilitiiten und Neuenkerche’ (Habilitationschrift in progress, 2008–9).
60. Lymington was attracted to Göring’s military side: ‘I was introduced to Göring whom I say unashamedly I liked and got on with ... He was jolly and full of fun, and had that sort of ace ex-airman’s attitude to life which I so often found endearing among his British and American counterparts.’ Earl of Portsmouth, Knot of Roots, 19.

The British Aristocracy

charismatic leadership remotely alien to the British aristocracy—they regarded themselves as the bearers of ‘inherited glory’. ‘The cinema star had not yet eclipsed the duchess’, as the Duchess of Westminster put it.61 To the British aristocracy, such people as Horthly,62 Mussolini, and Hitler seemed to be charismatic types one could relate to—after all, were they not just observing a benevolent paternalism?

Furthermore the Nazi policy of anti-Semitism did not prove to be an obstacle to liking the regime. In England there had always been a discourse about race. Lord Redesdale and Churchill had admired Houston Stewart Chamberlain’s Foundations of the Nineteenth Century,63 and the aristocratic discourse about racially pure elites was as strong in Britain as in Germany (although in Britain this was mainly connected with the Empire). After the First World War anti-Semitic conspiracy theories thrived among all classes and aristocrats were in the lead. Their anti-Semitism ranged from the ‘mild’ forms used within the Cecil family to obsessive outbursts such as those of the Duke of Northumberland at the far end of the spectrum, who believed in a Jewish–Bolshevik conspiracy. Richard A. Grosvenor, 2nd Duke of Westminster, even consulted a book entitled Jews Who’s Who, which gave an exact breakdown of how much Jewish blood was flowing in English aristocratic veins.64 Such issues also worried the organo-fascists who have recently been analysed by Dan Stone. This group, in some ways similar to the German Blut und Boden ideologues, were known as the English Mistery, and

61. Loelia, Duchess of Westminster, Grace and Favours. This might refer to the Duchess of Malò ‘I am the Duchess of Malò still.’
62. As a dictator he was the nearest thing in my recollection to a larger English landlord ... ‘One felt instantly at home with a type of man one had always known.’ To Lymington, Horthly was a man of the gentry: ‘Horthly was the country squire, fundamentally filling in the old regime for a king who never returned.’ Earl of Portsmouth, Knot of Roots, 106.
64. Benny (the Duke of Westminster) was usually excessively careless about his belongings and left his valises lying about anywhere, but he used to lock up one book with elaborate secrecy. This was called the Jews Who’s Who, and it purported to tell the exact quantity of Jews blood coursing through the veins of the aristocratic families of England. According to Benny, the Jews themselves, not liking to be revealed in their true colours, had tried to suppress this interesting publication and his copy was the only one that had escaped some great Holocaust.” Loelia, Duchess of Westminster, Grace and Favours, 189.
believed in an 'organic society, . . . a holistic, unitary, racially pure body . . . in the sense of being rooted in the soil, and led by a hereditary landed aristocracy that instinctively performed its leadership role.' Its members included anti-Semites as well as reactionary conservatives such as Anthony Ludovici and Viscount Lymington. The latter eventually left the Mysteria and founded the English Array, which was pro-German.

The papers of the German foreign ministry show that the Nazi regime placed great hopes in this movement. One reason was that lesser British royals had connections with the Mysteria; another was that it held out the promise of becoming an opposition movement: 'this group is extremely anti-parliamentarian. It includes people from the politically interested upper classes, among them numerous members of the House of Lords.'

The above points show that during the interwar period aristocrats were for a number of reasons attracted to fascist ideas. But ultimately the British aristocracy had more to gain by conformity. In the House of Lords debate of 1934 on the British Union of Fascists, the higher ranks of the nobility fought amongst themselves as to which interpretation was correct. After the aforementioned Earl of Kinnoull had accused his fellow peers of helping to finance fascist movements in Britain, Viscount Esher responded that if the choice had to be made between Stafford Cripps and Oswald Mosley, it would have to be Mosley: 'There are innumerable quiet people in this country, who hating both those gentlemen, will, if they are forced to choose between them, I am glad to say, choose Sir Oswald Mosley.'

Viscount Cecil of Chelwood, who was later to become Londonderry's formidable opponent, considered this response

65 Dan Stone, Responses to Nazism in Britain, 1933-1939: Before War and Holocaust (London, 2003), 164.

66 See for this Richard Moore-Golby, 'Towards “Mother Earth”: Jordan Jenkins, Organicism, the Right and the British Union of Fascists', Journal of Contemporary History, 39/3 (July 2004), 354-356; Jordan E. F. Jenkins was the agricultural expert for the radical right. He fought for the impoverished landed aristocracy that had been ousted by an 'alien plutocracy.' According to Jenkins the aristocracy should stay in charge: 'the aristocratic principle of respect for the past, careful husbandry of the present and stewardship for the future was pivotal to the organisat credits and by implication demanded a stable society susceptible to sympathetic, yet firm, authority.' Ibid. 366.


68 'Fascist Organisation in this country', Parliamentary Debates, Fifth Ser. xc, House of Lords, Session 1933-4, p. 1113.

dangerously nonchalant. He reminded the House that radical parties which believed they could come to power by force were a danger to the constitution. This House of Lords debate, with its three aristocratic archetypes ranging from the far left to the far right, shows how important this institution, written off by many as irrelevant, was for upholding aristocratic decorum. It played a crucial role in enabling fellow peers to exert social control over radical aristocrats. Its traditional political language and social code did not allow aggressive confrontations.

In Germany after long overdue reform debates, the first chambers and the Prussian Upper House disappeared in 1918, and soon afterwards the radical Deutsche Adelsgenossenschaft (DAG) usurped their position, forcing conformity on the German aristocracy. Britain had more political pluralism within the aristocracy than did Germany. 'Red' aristocrats, the Duchess of Atholl being the most prominent example, had always caught the limelight. Others were fairly apolitical, such as Nancy Mitford, Mosley's sister-in-law, who enjoyed making fun of him and her Hitler-obsessed sister Unity in Wigs on the Green. The Mitfords were the most famous, but not the only, aristocratic family divided by politics.

Institutional ties with the government are, ultimately, what prevented the British aristocracy from following the same path as their German cousins. Aristocrats often had younger sons or sons-in-law in the 'House of Pretence' (that is, the House of Commons), unpopular though it might be, and this meant that for the sake of their careers they had to give due consideration to political and social issues. Furthermore, solidarity with the losers, for example, the impoverished Anglo-Irish aristocracy, was over by the 1930s. They were eventually written off, many ending their lives in genteel Irish poverty or in lodging houses on the south coast.

Another reason why radical ideas were held in check amongst the English aristocracy was that this group, unlike their German

69 Nancy Mitford had a rather complex relationship with her complex family. To Unity, who had sent her a newspaper clipping from Germany she wrote in 1936: 'Darling Stonyheart, We were all very interested to see that you were the Queen of the May this year at Hesselschlag. Call me early, Guerre dear, for I'm to be Queen of the May! Good gracious, that interview you sent us, fantasy, fantasy.' Quoted in Harold Acton, Nancy Mitford London, 1975; new edn. 2001, 81.

70 Cannadine, Decline and Fall (1999).
counterparts, had various lines of retreat. After losing formal and institutional status in 1918 the German aristocracy continued to focus on the land, and did not try to find new career opportunities. The English aristocracy, on the other hand, had more than one iron in the fire. They had never been totally dependent on life in the country—indeed, it was precisely their investment in urban centres, industry, and the Empire that had made them strong. Their relationship with country life was characterized by a mixture of pragmatism and mysticism. But despite any sentimental attachments, they took less and less responsibility for countryside affairs, for instance, in church matters.71

Because the British aristocracy had always worked at many levels as a local, national, and imperial elite, the Empire was an ideal safe haven in a crisis. It enabled the English aristocracy to create a flourishing parallel universe, an aristocratic Disneyland full of replica country houses and urban palaces. Many aristocrats, such as the Marquis of Graham (later 7th Duke of Montrose) or Lord William Scott (son of the Duke of Buccleuch), moved to the White Highlands of Kenya and Rhodesia, and created a feudal lifestyle. Viscount Lymington was to join them in 1947, deeply disappointed by post-war England.72

He should have counted himself lucky not to have been interned under Regulation 18B. In this respect the left was correct in suspecting an upper-class cover-up. A recently published MI5 file shows that another ardent fascist, Viscountess Downe, was not interned because ‘[i]f too many titled people are arrested the public might get the wrong idea as to the importance of the Fifth Column in this country.’73 Many illustrious Hitler admirers—among them Tavistock, Buccleuch, Westminster, Brocket, Mar, and Queenborough—escaped prison. It could hardly be seen as surprising that the establishment was covering up for its own people. Halifax, for example, forwarded pro-Nazi correspondence he received from the public to Special Branch,

but held back letters from members of his own class, such as Tavistock’s correspondence.74

On the outbreak of war every aristocrat did his duty. For some this meant a schizophrenic lifestyle. The Marquis of Graham served on destroyers in the Mediterranean, but whenever he and his brother had time they were involved in pro-peace activities and secret meetings with the Duke of Westminster.75 This group did not give up its ideologies overnight. Goering’s feared invitation to Nuremberg in 1945 therefore should not have surprised peers. For once, a German seemed to show an ironical sense of humour.

71 For this see Pugh, ‘Hurrah for the Blackshirts’, 307.
72 Ibid. 389.
73 Ibid. 392.
75 Ibid. 212.