

**„Deutscher Geist in Gefahr“. Dichter, Philosophen, Verleger und der NS-Staat**

**Veranstalter:** Ulrich Raulff, Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach; Per Leo, Berlin

**Datum, Ort:** 15.03.2018–16.03.2018, Marbach am Neckar

**Bericht von:** Steven Schouten, University of Amsterdam

On 15 and 16 March 2018, a conference entitled „Endangered German Spirit: Poets, Philosophers, Publishers, and the Nazi-State“ took place at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv (German Literature Archive - DLA) in Marbach. As ULRICH RAULFF (Marbach) explained in the introduction, the title of this conference was taken from the well-known book by the German literary scholar and philologist Ernst Robert Curtius (1886-1956), *Deutscher Geist in Gefahr* (Endangered German Spirit, 1932), which warned against the politicization of the German *Geist* (Spirit) at the beginning of the 1930s. Relying on archival material that predominantly came from the DLA, eight scholars from Germany, Switzerland and the United States presented papers on well-known controversial intellectual figures of the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich, such as the existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), the neo-conservative writer Ernst Jünger (1895-1998), and the life philosopher Ludwig Klages (1872-1956), as well as lesser-known individuals such as the student Rudolf Briske (b. 1915) and the writer Wolfgang Olshausen (1911-1969), and their relationship to the National Socialist regime and its ideology. How did these men (all of the intellectuals discussed at the conference were men) position themselves towards the Nazi regime, its ideology, and the atrocities committed in its name, before and after 1945? Recalling that National Socialism was not a unified movement, a coherent political system or a closed set of ideas, PER LEO (Berlin) emphasized that, above all, the Marbach conference aimed to highlight the variety and complexity of positions taken by these intellectuals during and after the Nazi era.

The conference began with a presentation by LUTZ RAPHAEL (Trier) on the – somewhat paradoxical – synthesis of imperialist

claims and exclusionary nationalism in the ideas of German right-wing intellectuals between 1914 and circa 1960. He argued that the politicisation of the *Geist* in the 1930s was essentially a ‘crisis-phenomenon’ that manifested itself during and after the First World War, when the literary and philosophical avant-garde increasingly levelled a nationalist critique against liberal notions of *Kultur* (Culture) in science, literature, and philosophy on the one hand, and an imperialist, cultural-political ‘*Weltgeltungsanspruch*’ (i. e. claim to a place in the world) directed against the ‘imperial claims’ of a ‘western’ liberal internationalism on the other. Raphael showed how this crisis-phenomenon was instrumentalized by the Nazi state, especially during the Second World War, when this state also manifested itself as the leading force of this imperialistic, anti-western counter-reaction. JANOSCH STEUWER’s (Zurich) presentation drew attention to attempts by individuals from various social classes who documented in their diaries their construals of the German political situation after 1933. Some of these individuals, such as the aforementioned Briske and the student Karl Möring (b. 1905), identified as Nazis. However, far from considering themselves as blindly following the regime’s orders and world view, they claimed that their identification with Nazism was subjective and individual. Briske, the son of a Jewish father who had converted to Christianity, identified with National Socialism, well aware that the racial policies of the NS state excluded him from the *Volksgemeinschaft* (People’s Community). Möring, who rejected National Socialism in the 1920s yet freely embraced it after 1933, regarded himself a „National Socialist, as I understand it“ (*Nazionalsozialist, wie ich es auffasse*). Central to such a stance, Steuwer argued, was the quest for a subjective essence of the Nazi-*Weltanschauung* (world view). Briske’s and Möring’s examples highlighted how support for the National Socialist state and ideology was often not a one-directional top-down process, but rather one in which the subjective views of the population interacted with those of the Nazi regime.

MICHAEL WILDT (Berlin) described „the semantic field and practice of the concept

*Arbeit*“ (labour) in National Socialism. He pointed to the central position this concept had in Hitler’s ideas and to the way in which Hitler succeeded in transforming *Arbeit* into an honour-filled duty at the service of the *Volksgemeinschaft*. As his views on labour could count on the support of various social and political groups, Hitler was able to transform labour into a key to national belonging and inclusion. However, as *Arbeit* and *Arbeitsfähigkeit* (working ability) became criteria for admission into the *Volksgemeinschaft*, those unable to work were excluded. Racial theory strengthened ideas of national exclusion. At the same time National Socialism also enforced labour to discipline and punish those who were unable or considered being opposed to work. While the idea of labour as a disciplining and punishing force was not invented by the Nazis, *Arbeit*, Wildt argued, obtained an extremely destructive dimension in the Nazi state. ULRICH HERBERT (Freiburg) highlighted the positions of three German professors: the conservative historian Gerhard Ritter (1888-1967), the racial theorist Wilhelm Mühlmann (1904-1988), and the physicist Walter Gerlach (1889-1979). Ritter opposed the NSDAP, but his attitude towards National Socialism as an ideology and regime, Herbert showed, was characterized by contradictions. For example, while he was imprisoned for his opposition to the legal and Church policies of the Nazi state, he did not oppose the elimination of large (i.e. Jewish and left-wing) sections of the academic elite from their university positions in the 1930s. Unlike Ritter, Mühlmann unconditionally accepted and welcomed Hitler’s rise to power in 1933. In the Nazi state he could freely develop his racial theories, yet he also criticized the ‘plebeian’ character of the NSDAP. Gerlach, by contrast, criticized National Socialism before 1933, but did not do so after 1933. He continued his career in the Nazi era undisturbed. He held high-ranking and influential offices in the Third Reich at the beginning of the war, when he became the most senior physicist of the country and worked on the German uranium project. Herbert summarized that while Ritter, Mühlmann and Gerlach were all in the service of the Nazi state, they all held different views on National Socialist ideology and

the Nazi state.

The evening program consisted of a discussion between the historian Wildt, the historian and writer Per Leo, and the writer MARCEL BEYER (Dresden). They discussed how, through integrating archival material in fictional accounts, one can talk about the National Socialist era. While Beyer read from his book *Das Blindgeweinete Jahrhundert* (The Century that Cried itself Blind, 2017), Leo read from his *Flut und Boden* (Flood and Soil, 2014).

On the second day of the conference JULIA IRELAND (Walla Walla) gave a paper on Martin Heidegger. A member of the NSDAP since 1933, Heidegger shared the Nazi rejection of a liberal perspective on science, but criticized, as Ireland showed, its idea of a *Neue Wissenschaft* (New Science), which aimed at the politicization of science by taking a racial perspective. Basing her analysis on a handwritten manuscript of Heidegger’s 1933 inaugural address as a rector of Freiburg University, a document that is held at the DLA, Ireland showed how Heidegger spoke about the New Science as „this purportedly new science“. She also pointed out his 1931 stance in a text from his *Schwarze Hefte* (Black Books) in which he calls the New Science ‘*schwatzen*’ (prattle). Heidegger searched for a new essence of science, Ireland concluded, but distanced himself from the New Science. Per Leo, basing his paper on letter collections held at the DLA, presented on Ludwig Klages, the author of *Der Geist als Widersacher der Seele* (The Spirit as Rival of the Soul, 1929-32). Leo distinguished between Klages’ ‘readings’ of National Socialism on the one hand, and his position in Nazi society on the other. With regard to the former, Leo showed that, following a phase of ‘ambivalence’ around 1930 due to the ‘plebeian’ and ‘vulgar’ character of the political rhetoric and style of Hitler and his entourage, Klages, attracted by the metaphysical claim of the Nazi state, ‘projected’ and, by 1934, ‘adapted’ his *Weltanschauung* to National Socialism. With the outbreak of the war in 1939 Klages’ work gained „apocalyptic tendencies“, Leo said, and an increasingly antisemitic character. After 1945, when Klages was forced to justify his intellectual stance

during the Nazi era, he tried to redefine those views he had propagated before that were now compromising. With regard to his stance in Nazi-society, Leo pointed to Klages' networks of acquaintances and admirers among the Nazi censors and, in doing so, to the 'poly-cratic' character of the Nazi state, in which power, as in this case of Klages himself, was not seldom obtained through a practice that Leo termed 'self-empowerment'.

GUNILLA ESCHENBACH (Marbach) presented on Wolfgang Olshausen who, after having interrupted his university studies in 1934, made career in the army and became a member of the German general staff in 1944. Although he was a self-proclaimed Nazi, Olshausen criticized the Nazi bureaucracy and its 'mechanical' character. After a short imprisonment in 1945, he settled in the small-town of Saig in the Black Forrest in South-West Germany. Olshausen unsuccessfully tried to establish himself as an art dealer and a writer in the post-war era. To compensate for the end of National Socialism, he clung to the historical pessimism of Klages. Eschenbach showed that Olshausen's philosophical essays and fictional texts, for example his novel *Ich komme wieder* (I will return, 1958), were greatly influenced by Klages' *Weltanschauung*. In the final paper of this conference DETLEV SCHÖTTKER (Berlin) focused on the (private) writing of Ernst Jünger. There are about 130,000 letters (!) in Jünger's estate held at the DLA. Jünger's relationship with Nazism has been the subject of numerous studies. Schöttker hypothesised that the many letters held at the DLA can still yield further results that allow a more detailed analysis of Jünger's conflicted relationship with Nazism. Schöttker stressed that Jünger never officially joined the NSDAP or the *Deutsche Akademie der Dichtung*. Moreover, in a letter from June 1934 he explicitly distanced himself from the party's organ *Völkischer Beobachter* (People's Observer), after the newspaper had falsely insinuated that he was part of its writing staff. In Nazi-occupied Paris, Jünger served as a soldier of the Nazi state, yet he privately criticized the deportations of French Jews and, based on a selection of the vast correspondence with his wife Gretha (1906-1960) during those years,

Schöttker added that Jünger recorded these deportations with „great emotionality“. As a writer, Jünger often breached political topics, but it is difficult, Schöttker argued, to locate his exact political stance; the 'language' of his books, such as *Auf den Marmorklippen* (On the Marble Cliffs, 1939), he claimed, leaves that stance ultimately ambiguous.

Overall, the conference once again highlighted the ambivalences towards Nazism that existed within Germany at the time and the varied ways in which academics, intellectuals and writers – even those who officially supported the Nazi party – responded to and identified with the regime and its racist ideology. Those who embraced National Socialism as a *Weltanschauung*, such as Klages, Mühlmann, Briske, Mörich, and Olshausen, or those who accepted parts of Nazi policies, such as Ritter, not seldom challenged its official readings or its bureaucratic and plebeian character. The conference also highlighted that engagement with intellectuals and their relationship with the Nazi state and its ideology still sparks intense debates. Differences of opinion among the participants surfaced, for example in the debate of Heidegger's critical stance towards the New Science and whether this should be interpreted as exceptional or rather as representative of larger sections of the German literary and philosophical establishment at the time. Schöttker's relativisation of Jünger's stance towards National Socialism was also contested.

### Conference Overview:

Ulrich Raulff (Marbach) / Per Leo (Berlin):  
Begrüßung

#### Sektion 1

Moderation: Per Leo (Berlin)

Lutz Raphael (Trier): Zwischen Ausgrenzung und Öffnung. Nationalsozialistische Positionen im imperialen Ideenwettbewerb

Janosch Steuwer (Zürich): Der subjektive Sinn der NS-Weltanschauung. Privates Leben und nationalsozialistische Ideologie 1933 bis 1939

#### Sektion 2

Moderation: Isabell Trommer (Berlin)

Michael Wildt (Berlin): Arbeit als Leitidee des

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## Nationalsozialismus

Ulrich Herbert (Freiburg): Zugänge deutsche Intellektuellen zum Reich

### *Öffentliche Abendveranstaltung*

Moderation: Michael Wildt (Berlin)

»Sound der Gespenster«? Wie kann man über die Rollen von Philosophen und Dichtern im Nationalsozialismus schreiben? Marcel Beyer im Gespräch mit Per Leo

### *Sektion 3*

Moderation: Clemens Albrecht (Bonn)

Julia Ireland (Walla Walla): The Misplaced Revolution in Heidegger's Rektoratsrede

Per Leo (Berlin): Mythologische Geschmeidigkeit. Ludwig Klages' Nationalsozialismen

### *Sektion 4*

Moderation: Maik Tändler (Jena)

Gunilla Eschenbach (Marbach): Widerlegung der Deutschen. Wie der Klages-Schüler Wolfgang Olshausen nach 1945 über vor 1945 schrieb

Detlev Schöttker (Berlin): Ernst Jünger und der Nationalsozialismus im Spiegel seines Archivs

### *Abschließende Bemerkungen*

Tagungsbericht „*Deutscher Geist in Gefahr*“. *Dichter, Philosophen, Verleger und der NS-Staat*. 15.03.2018–16.03.2018, Marbach am Neckar, in: H-Soz-Kult 10.07.2018.