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The Significance of Dehumanization: Nazi Ideology and Its Psychological Consequences

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ABSTRACT

Several authors have recently questioned whether dehumanization is a psychological prerequisite of mass violence. This paper argues that the significance of dehumanization in the context of National Socialism can be understood only if its ideological dimension is taken into account. The author concentrates on Alfred Rosenberg's racist doctrine and shows that Nazi ideology can be read as a political anthropology that grounds both the belief in the German privilege and the dehumanization of the Jews. This anthropological framework combines biological, cultural and metaphysical aspects. Therefore, it cannot be reduced to biologism. This new reading of Nazi ideology supports three general conclusions: First, the author reveals a complex strategy of dehumanization which is not considered in the current psychological debate. Second, the analysis of the ideological mechanism suggests a model of dehumanization that is more plausible than other psychological models. Third, the author provides evidence that this kind of dehumanization had psychological consequences and hence was an important feature of Nazi reality.

Introduction

Processes of dehumanization are an important and controversial issue in the current debate about the psychological prerequisites of mass violence. On the one hand, several authors claim that the dehumanization of victims is an essential feature of the psychology of perpetrators who participate in atrocities like the Shoah.¹ The Nazi concentration camps are often used as an example of such a perfidious strategy. On the other hand, there are authors who question whether psychological dehumanization is a necessary

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¹See, e.g. Herbert C. Kelman, 'Violence Without Moral Restraint: Reflections on the Dehumanization of Victims and Victimized', *Journal of Social Issues*, 29:4 (1973), pp. 25–61; John Sabini and Maury Silver, 'On Destroying the Innocent with a Clear Conscience: A Sociopsychology of the Holocaust' in *Moralities of Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 55–87; Chiara Volpato and Alberta Contarello, 'Towards a Social Psychology of Extreme Situations: Primo Levi's *If This is a Man* and Social Identity Theory', *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 29 (1999), pp. 239–258; David L. Smith, *Less Than Human: Why We Demean Enslave, and Exterminate Others* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2011).

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condition for mass violence.² The social psychologist Johannes Lang has recently argued that the emphasis on dehumanization obscures the true horror of these atrocities.³ Lang's provocative critique, which I will discuss in more detail later (see section 'Conclusion: the psychological consequences of ideological dehumanization'), has reignited the debate about the significance of dehumanization for campaigns of mass murder.⁴

This debate has long suffered from the one-sided emphasis on psychological accounts of dehumanization. Although many authors mention the political and ideological embeddedness of social situations which involve psychological dehumanization, this broader context has not been considered sufficiently.⁵ Only some social-psychological studies on mass violence have recently followed the (re-)turn to ideology in the historical research on National Socialism.⁶ I embrace the rediscovery of the role of ideology in the context of National Socialism and argue that the significance of dehumanization can be understood only if its ideological dimension is taken into account.⁷ I will develop a complex picture of the racist core of Nazi ideology and derive a new understanding of the involved strategy of dehumanization.

Note that a racist anthropology was at the core of Nazi ideology. National Socialism regarded itself as a political revolution which realized a new image of the human. This claim was accompanied by a massive ideological dehumanization of other groups of people. The devaluation of these groups often was expressed by identifying them with animal life forms. Images like the 'Jewish parasite' and the murderous policy that this 'enemy' of the German people demands were an essential part of the perpetual flow of propaganda in daily life.⁸ However, political propaganda was only one way in which the racist

²See, e.g. Leo Kuper, *Genocide: Its Political Use in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), pp. 86, 92; Kwame A. Appiah, *Experiments in Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 44; Johannes Lang, 'Questioning Dehumanization: Intersubjective Dimensions of Violence in the Nazi Concentration and Death Camps', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 24:2 (2010), pp. 225–246; 'Explaining Genocide: Hannah Arendt and the Social-Scientific Concept of Dehumanization' in Peter Baehr and Philip Walsh (eds) *The Anthem Companion to Hannah Arendt* (London: Anthem Press, 2017), pp. 175–195.

³Lang, 'Questioning Dehumanization', op. cit., pp. 225, 235.

⁴See, e.g. Thomas Brudholm, 'Hatred as an Attitude', *Philosophical Papers*, 39:3 (2010), pp. 289–313; Martin Weißmann, 'Organisierte Entmenschlichung. Zur Produktion, Funktion und Ersetzbarkeit sozialer und psychischer Dehumanisierung in Genoziden' in Alexander Gruber and Stefan Kühl (eds) *Soziologische Analysen des Holocaust. Jenseits der Debatte über „ganz normale Männer“ und „ganz normale Deutsche“* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2015), pp. 79–128; Smith, 'Paradoxes of Dehumanization', *Social Theory and Practice*, 42:2 (2016), pp. 416–443.

⁵See, e.g. Lang, 'Questioning Dehumanization', op. cit.; Weißmann, op. cit.; Smith, 'Paradoxes of Dehumanization', op. cit. For the earlier debate see, e.g. Kelman, op. cit., pp. 37–38, 50; Sabini and Silver, op. cit., 67, 74.

⁶See, e.g. Harald Welzer, *Täter. Wie aus ganz normalen Menschen Massenmörder werden* (Frankfurt a.M.: S. Fischer, 2005); Alan P. Fiske and Tage S. Rai, *Virtuous Violence: Hurting and Killing to Create, Sustain, End, and Honor Social Relationships* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Lang, 'Explaining Genocide', op. cit. For the (re-)turn of ideology in the historical research on National Socialism see, e.g. Frank-Lothar Kroll, *Utopie als Ideologie. Geschichtsdanken und politisches Handeln im Dritten Reich* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1998); Michael Mann, 'Were the Perpetrators of Genocide "Ordinary Men" or "Real Nazis"? Results from Fifteen Hundred Biographies', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 14:3 (2000), pp. 331–366; George C. Browder, 'Perpetrator Character and Motivation: An Emerging Consensus?', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 17:3 (2003), pp. 480–497; Claus-Christian W. Szejnmann, 'Perpetrators of the Holocaust: A Historiography' in Olaf Jensen and Szejnmann (eds) *Ordinary People as Mass Murderers: Perpetrators in Comparative Perspective* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan 2008), pp. 25–44; Szejnmann, 'Nazi Economic Thought and Rhetoric During the Weimar Republic: Capitalism and Its Discontents', *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 14:3 (2013), pp. 355–376; Lutz Raphael, 'Pluralities of National Socialist Ideology: New Perspectives on the Production and Diffusion of National Socialist *Weltanschauung*' in Martina Steber and Bernhard Gotto (eds) *Visions of Community in Nazi Germany: Social Engineering and Private Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 73–86. Alon Confino, *A World Without Jews: The Nazi Imagination from Persecution to Genocide* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014).

⁷Already early interpretations of National Socialism have emphasized the role of the racist ideology for the understanding of its dehumanizing mechanisms. See, e.g. Aurel Kolnai, *The War Against the West* (London: Victor Gollancz LTD, 1938); Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co, 1951).

⁸See, e.g. Jeffrey Herf, *The Jewish Enemy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Raphael, op. cit., pp. 81–86.

anthropology of National Socialism was systematically disseminated. It is striking as well that a number of philosophers welcomed National Socialism because of its political break with the humanist tradition. Philosophers including Alfred Baeumler, Ernst Krieck, Erich Rothacker and Arnold Gehlen defined their own task as establishing a new conception of humanity in the realm of theory.⁹ Thus, anthropology became a paradigmatic way to understand National Socialism philosophically.

This strand of Nazi ideology had an important representative in the inner circle of Nazi leadership: Alfred Rosenberg and his main work *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts* (*The Myth of the 20th Century*), which will be the main subject of my critical analysis. The examination of Rosenberg's doctrine will show a complex strategy of dehumanization that rests on a separation within humanity itself. Rosenberg develops a dualistic anthropology that combines metaphysical and naturalistic aspects. He regards a spiritual disposition as the metaphysical essence of humanity. This 'race-soul' (*Rassenseele*) is specified as the capacity to develop a collective identity, which is expressed in the distinctive culture of a community. However, Rosenberg thinks that not all humans possess a 'race-soul'. Especially the Jews are portrayed as mere human animals whose life lacks any metaphysical and cultural dimension. The image of the 'Jewish parasite' is the ultimate expression of this dehumanizing naturalization of the Jews. Note that this kind of dehumanization is not considered in the current debate about the psychological prerequisites of the Nazi mass murder.

I examine a version of Nazi ideology that combines motifs of different strands of modern anthropological thinking and hence cannot be reduced to biologism.¹⁰ Rather, the critical analysis of this Nazi concept of humanity and the respective forms of ideological dehumanization has to consider the complex connection between biological, cultural and metaphysical motifs in a primarily political doctrine. This complexity makes it sensible to start with a general characterization of Nazi ideology (section 'The significance and character of Nazi ideology'). Then, I will turn to the political anthropology of National Socialism and examine the basic features of its concept of race (section 'The Nazi concept of race: between biology and metaphysics'). The detailed analysis of Rosenberg's doctrine will show that his racist anthropology grounds both the belief in the German privilege (section 'Nordic humanity: identity and culture') and the dehumanization of the Jews (section 'Ideological dehumanization: the "Jewish parasite"'). Finally, I will show how the results of my examination of Nazi ideology bear on the current debate about the significance of dehumanization: First, I will summarize the ideological mechanism of Nazi dehumanization and argue that the resulting model is more plausible than other psychological models (section 'Summary: the Nazi model of dehumanization'). Then, I will provide some evidence

⁹See, e.g. Alfred Baeumler, 'Das akademische Männerhaus' in *Männerbund und Wissenschaft* (Berlin: Juncker und Dünhaupt, 1934), p. 42; Erich Rothacker, *Geschichtsphilosophie* (München: R. Oldenbourg, 1934), p. 145; Arnold Gehlen, 'Der Staat und die Philosophie (1935)' in Lothar Samson (ed) *Gesamtausgabe. Philosophische Schriften II* (Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 1980), p. 305; Ernst Krieck, *Völkisch-politische Anthropologie*, vol. 1 (Leipzig: Armanen-Verlag, 1936), p. VI.

¹⁰Nazi racism is still often identified with biologism and hence regarded as a descendant of biological anthropology. See, e.g. Volker Böhnigk, *Kulturanthropologie als Rassenlehre. Nationalsozialistische Kulturphilosophie aus der Sicht des Philosophen Erich Rothacker* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2002); Marc Rölli, *Kritik der anthropologischen Vernunft* (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2011), pp. 39–41, 527; 'Das anthropologische Erbe. Die Verstrickung der Philosophie in die Vorgeschichte des Nationalsozialismus', *Merkur* 66:762 (2012), pp. 1067–1075. I do not deny that there is a biologicistic strand in Nazi ideology. However, I examine a political strand that presupposes both the naturalization of humanity and the philosophical critique of biological anthropology. The examination of the historical context of this strand of Nazi ideology is beyond the scope of this paper.

that this kind of dehumanization had, contrary to Lang's claim, psychological consequences and hence was an important feature of Nazi reality (section 'Conclusion: the psychological consequences of ideological dehumanization').

The significance and character of Nazi ideology

Recent historical research shows the significance of ideology for the broad success of the Nazi movement, including the establishment of its political power and the continuing execution of its policies. New approaches to the history of Nazi ideas confirm the self-understanding and contemporary perception of National Socialism as an ideological movement on different levels: Detailed accounts of the basic convictions of party leaders like Hitler, Himmler, Goebbels or Rosenberg reveal rather comprehensive, more or less consistent and divergent doctrines which guided the political decision-making and were part of the well-known power struggles within the inner circle of the NSDAP.¹¹ New studies on the young leadership of the SS show the significance of ideological commitment to the core group of Nazi perpetrators who organized mass murder.¹² The ideological indoctrination of mid- and low-level participants such as T-4 killers, camp guards or so-called 'shooters' has also come under examination. Although few were willing and committed ideologues from the beginning, their radicalization in the course of events included an increasing adoption of ideological convictions.¹³ Broader orientated studies analyse the intellectual, cultural and scientific context in which Nazi ideology could spread and, moreover, was affirmed as a sensible response to actual societal, economic and political problems.¹⁴ Such nuanced examinations of the ideological dimension of National Socialism are not only important to explain long ignored phenomena like the 'high degree of self-mobilization' of German academia.¹⁵ These insights into the political, psychological and historical significance of Nazi ideology also suggest a new understanding of its structure.

Nazi ideology has to be seen as set of basic beliefs and convictions which offered much scope for interpretation.¹⁶ Although key concepts like race had to be accepted as guidelines of thinking and acting, different interpretations of such ideological core elements coexisted and competed even in the inner circle of Nazi leadership. Briefly speaking, since there was no unified and mandatory ideological system, the well-known policracy of Nazi government was accompanied by the polycentrism of Nazi ideology. Nevertheless, it does not follow from this lack of a dogmatic version that Nazi ideology was nothing but a

¹¹See, e.g. Kroll, op. cit.; Claus-Ekkehard Bärsch, *Die politische Religion des Nationalsozialismus. Die religiöse Dimension der NS-Ideologie in den Schriften von Dietrich Eckart, Joseph Goebbels, Alfred Rosenberg und Adolf Hitler*, 2nd ed. (München: Wilhelm Fink 2002).

¹²See, e.g. Ulrich Herbert, *Best. Biographische Studien über Radikalismus, Weltanschauung und Vernunft 1903–1989* (Bonn: J. H. W. Dietz); Martin Cüppers, *Wegbereiter der Shoah. Die Waffen-SS, der Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS und die Judenvernichtung 1939–1945* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2005); Michael Wildt, *Generation des Unbedingten. Das Führungskorps des Reichssicherheitshauptamtes* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2002).

¹³See, e.g. Szejnmann 'Perpetrators of the Holocaust', op. cit., pp. 39–41; Mann, op. cit.

¹⁴See, e.g. Hans Sluga, *Heidegger's Crisis: Philosophy and Politics in Nazi Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Anne Harrington, *Reenchanted Science. Holism in German Culture from Wilhelm II to Hitler* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1996); Szejnmann, 'Nazi Economic Thought', op. cit.; Per Leo, *Der Wille zum Wesen. Weltanschauungskultur, charakterologisches Denken und Judenfeindschaft in Deutschland 1890–1940* (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2013).

¹⁵Raphael, op. cit., p. 74.

¹⁶See Sluga, op. cit.; Kroll, op. cit.; Gereon Wolters, 'Der "Führer" und seine Denker. Zur Philosophie des "Dritten Reichs"', *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, 47:2 (1999), pp. 223–251; Raphael, op. cit.

chimera.¹⁷ The ‘combination of fluidity and flexibility with a set of convictions and core arguments’ shows, instead, that a political ideology works best as controlled plurality.¹⁸ While demanding a general appeal and specific direction, the Nazi worldview remained open to individual and contextualized interpretations. Take the example of the concept of race: once you had accepted its key role for understanding whatever phenomenon interests you, you could engage in the heated debate on its meaning and significance.¹⁹ The range which was developed in the ideological writings of political leaders reached from bluntly biological conceptions (e.g. Darré) to metaphysical interpretations of race (e.g. Rosenberg). Such obvious tensions were never removed and created the impression that National Socialism was always in need for further explication. This crudity of Nazi ideology was a key reason for the intensive collaborations of scholars. Philosophers, e.g. thought to be invited to take up the task to elaborate, justify and ground what National Socialism truly is.

In the following, I shall examine a specific interpretation of National Socialism and its claim to realize a new concept of humanity. I concentrate on this political anthropology because, in contrast to bluntly biological conceptions, it can explain the dehumanization of others groups of people, especially Jews. This strand of Nazi ideology was in particular developed by the ideologue and politician Alfred Rosenberg. My reading of his doctrine differs from other interpretations: I argue that Rosenberg develops a political anthropology that connects metaphysical and naturalistic aspects.²⁰ There were also influential Nazi philosophers like, e.g. Baeumler or his rival Krieck who held similar views regarding the significance and meaning of National Socialism. I shall give a detailed account of this kind of Nazi worldview in the next sections.²¹

Rosenberg’s case is exemplary for a number of reasons. He developed a comprehensive interpretation of the world from a Nazi perspective, and published an encompassing version of his worldview in the monograph *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts*.²² This

¹⁷As e.g. Per Leo claims. See Leo, op. cit., pp. 16 f., 573.

¹⁸Raphael, op. cit., p. 76.

¹⁹For the intellectual debate on the concept of race in National Socialism see, Claudia Koonz, *The Nazi Conscience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 190–220; Smith, *Less Than Human*, op. cit., pp. 159–162.

²⁰Kroll’s detailed study concentrates on Rosenberg’s racist concept of history. He does not consider his political anthropology and the respective dehumanization of Jews. Kroll mentions the different dimensions of Rosenberg’s doctrine, but regards the combination of metaphysical and biological arguments as an immanent tension. See Kroll, op. cit., pp. 109 f. Bärsch uses Rosenberg as an example of his general thesis that National Socialism is, first and foremost, a political religion. From this perspective, he examines the metaphysical dimension of Rosenberg’s racism, but does not consider its naturalistic aspect. See Bärsch, op. cit., pp. 226–269. Piper’s encompassing biography traces Rosenberg’s career as ideologue and politician, but does not present new insights about his worldview. See Ernst Piper, *Alfred Rosenberg: Hitlers Chefideologie* (München: Karl Blessing Verlag 2005). Christian Strub examines important features of Rosenberg’s racism, but his analysis concentrates on his ethical claims and does not consider the connection of anthropology and dehumanization. See Christian Strub, ‘Gesinnungsrassismus. Zur NS->Ethik< der Absonderung am Beispiel von Rosenbergs *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts*’ in Werner Konitzer and Raphael Gross (eds) *Moralität des Bösen. Ethik und nationalsozialistische Verbrechen* (Frankfurt a. Main and New York: Campus, 2009), pp. 171–196.

²¹Alon Confino has recently presented an innovative cultural-historical reading of National Socialism (see Confino, *A World Without Jews*, op. cit.). He argues that the murderous policies against the Jews were motivated by the vision of a German renewal of Christianity. Rosenberg’s racist anthropology is clearly anti-Christian and offers thus an imaginative horizon that is different from Confino’s depiction. Confino’s study develops one narrative within the ideological framework of National Socialism, but overstates its significance and scope. The examination of the religious aspect of Nazi ideology and its complex relation to Christianity is beyond the scope of this article.

²²Rosenberg’s *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts. Eine Wertung der seelisch-geistigen Gestaltenkämpfe unserer Zeit* (*The Myth of the 20th Century. An Evaluation of the Spiritual-Intellectual Confrontations of Our Age*) was first published in 1930. It was republished in different editions and sold more than one million copies by 1944. I will quote Rosenberg’s *Myth of the 20th Century* from the translated selections printed in: *Race and Race History and Other Essays by Alfred Rosenberg*, trans. by

major contribution to Nazi ideology includes both an anthropological foundation of animalistic dehumanization and one of its most repulsive accounts. Rosenberg shaped the Nazi image of the 'Jewish parasite' and established this vicious motif by a framework which combined racist, anti-Semite, social Darwinist and philosophical views to an eclectic whole.²³ There is no reason to doubt that he believed in the truth of his doctrine. He still held and defended it during the Nuremberg trials, where he was sentenced to death by hanging.

In addition to his role as influential ideologue of National Socialism, Rosenberg was also a relevant politician. Moreover, his political influence was based on his ideological work. A member of the NSDAP since 1919, Rosenberg shaped its ideology by many talks and writings as well as by his administrative work. From 1923 to 1938 he was editor-in-chief (*Hauptschriftleiter*) of the party's newspaper *Völkischer Beobachter* (Völkisch Observer) which was published on a daily basis. Rosenberg belonged to the political leadership of the NSDAP after its seizure of power in 1933. Hitler appointed him to the role of the Leader of the Foreign Policy Office of the NSDAP and in 1934 to the role of Commissar for Surveillance of Intellectual and Ideological Training and Education of the NSDAP. As head of the so-called *Amt Rosenberg* (Rosenberg office), he was responsible for the spiritual and philosophical education of members of the party and all related organizations. Thus, Rosenberg's views were also disseminated in schools and through ideological training programmes for party members and soldiers.²⁴ Moreover, Rosenberg attempted to influence academia politically. He appointed Baeumler as head of the office's division for science. Baeumler should supervise and influence the development of philosophy, education and the humanities at German universities. Rosenberg also wanted to establish a new institution, but his attempt to establish a Nazi model university (*Hohe Schule der NSDAP*) failed, despite the support of Hitler.

Rosenberg clearly played a major role in the establishment of Nazi ideology. However, the amount of his actual political power is controversial. While Rosenberg was long presented as politically irrelevant by historians, recent approaches emphasize the more subtle influence of an ideologue on the politics of a state with an ideological character and even suggest a reevaluation of his participation in the planning and organization of the genocide as Reich Minister for the Occupied Eastern Territories from 1941 to 1945.²⁵ I concentrate on Rosenberg's version of Nazi ideology and hence analyse his main work *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts* in the following.

Robert Pois (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971). If I quote Rosenberg in English, I will always provide a reference to the German original in brackets. I use the 1938 edition for these references. It is always noted, when I translate a passage from the following German edition myself, *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts. Eine Wertung der seelisch-geistigen Gestaltenkämpfe unserer Zeit*, ed. pp. 125–128 (München: Hoheneichen-Verlag, 1938).

²³Rosenberg used the standard sources of Nazi racism such as Houston Stewart Chamberlain and Paul de Lagarde. He mentions Nietzsche a few times, but is more concerned with Meister Eckhardt, Kant, Schopenhauer and Spengler. For the intellectual influences on Rosenberg's worldview see Robert Cecil, *The Myth of the Master Race: Alfred Rosenberg and Nazi Ideology* (London: Batsford 1972), pp. 12–14, 85–90.

²⁴See Kroll, op. cit., pp. 101–102; Piper, op. cit., pp. 57–80; Raphael, op. cit., pp. 84–85.

²⁵For recent accounts which emphasize Rosenberg's significance see Kroll, op. cit.; Piper, op. cit. For previous accounts which belittle Rosenberg's role see Joachim C. Fest, 'Alfred Rosenberg. Der vergessene Gefolgsmann' in *Das Gesicht des Dritten Reiches. Profile einer totalitären Herrschaft* (München: Piper 1963), pp. 225–240. Reinhard Bollmus, 'Alfred Rosenberg—"Chefideologe" des Nationalsozialismus?' in Ronald Smelser and Rainer Zielmann (eds) *Die braune Elite. 22 biographische Skizzen* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1989), pp. 223–235.

The Nazi concept of race: between biology and metaphysics

Rosenberg understands National Socialism as a comprehensive worldview that offers a solution to a deep crisis of humanity in itself. He regards WWI as the decisive moment in the development of this crisis, which encompasses all levels of human existence. The catastrophe of the war is tantamount to the factual collapse of what Rosenberg defines as the ‘old world’. But beyond that, he emphasizes that this dramatic end of an epoch enables a new human self-understanding. The *Mythus* begins with this theoretical claim and depicts the deep impact of the Nazi doctrine:

Today an epoch begins in which world history must be rewritten. The old images of the human past are faded; the outlines of the actors seem blurred and their inner motivation falsely depicted, which the collective essence (of the human past) has been almost completely misunderstood. A life-feeling, both young and yet known in ancient times, is pressing towards articulation; a *Weltanschauung* is being born, is beginning to struggle with older forms, hallowed usages and accepted substances. This struggle is no longer merely an historical one, but one of principle. It is not confined to a few particular areas; but it is a general one.²⁶

This passage reveals a basic element of Nazi ideology: National Socialism is defined as a total revolution that creates a new human, reshapes the existing world and reevaluates the whole past. This complete reconceptualization of what humanity is—in the present and in the past, in theory and in practice—is directed against a more or less specific enemy. Because of the significance of the agonal and polemic orientation of Nazi ideology, we shall take a first look at Rosenberg’s concept of the enemy to which I will return later.

Note that Rosenberg announces many different enemies. In the *Mythus*, he fiercely attacks, e.g. Judaism, Catholicism, Liberalism, Marxism, humanism, pacifisms and materialism.²⁷ These rather disparate views share, according to Rosenberg, a general attitude: they develop universal concepts of humanity and embrace universal values. Rosenberg argues that universalist doctrines provide only abstract accounts of human life which do not capture its actual reality. He concludes that such approaches are false and, moreover, suggests that they are deceitful fictions.²⁸ Universalist claims are defined as purely ideological mechanisms that should hide the imperialist aspirations of certain actors on the world stage. On Rosenberg’s view, universalists suggest that a certain way of life is the only way of life and thus threaten the identity of all other people. Many Nazi thinkers shared this line of thought and often combined it with a critique of modern culture. They believed that in the wake of modernity many people, in adapting to the Western culture, lost their particular identity. This idea of an ‘endangered identity’ was not only a major motif of the Nazi version of cultural criticism, but was also the starting point of a specific political anthropology. The invocation ‘Remember who you are’ was a key formula of Nazi ideology which also propagated a specific solution to that problem of identity:²⁹ ‘Race always tells us what we are.’³⁰

²⁶Rosenberg, *Race and Race History*, op. cit., p. 35 (*Mythus*, op. cit., p. 21).

²⁷The preface to the third edition of 1931, consists, e.g. in an attack on all of these enemies. See Rosenberg, *Mythus*, op. cit., pp. 5–18.

²⁸See, e.g. Rosenberg, *Mythus*, op. cit., pp. 639 ff., 671 f. See also Rosenberg, *Krisis und Neubau Europas* (Berlin: Junker und Dünhaupt, 1934), pp. 8 f.

²⁹Baeumler, ‘Der Sinn des großen Krieges’ in *Männerbund und Wissenschaft*, op. cit., p. 6.

³⁰Baeumler, ‘Nationalsozialismus und “Idealismus”’ in *Bildung und Gemeinschaft*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Junker und Dünhaupt, 1943), p. 93.

Rosenberg calls time and again for such a ‘racial awakening’ and explicitly defines it as ‘perfection through *self-development*’.³¹ The ‘experience of the myth of the blood’ enables self-consciousness and hence creates a ‘new human type’, namely the ‘racial type’.³² Rosenberg also emphasizes the world historical and political significance of the re-discovery of the significance of race. The ‘racial standpoint’ reveals the general structure of human history and provides a guideline for political actions.³³ Rosenberg presents the racial concept of history as an important victory of National Socialism that confirms its political vision for the future of humanity. Looking at the present, he sees the final, apocalyptic fight between ‘racial particularism’ on the one hand, and ‘raceless universalism’ on the other hand.³⁴ Again, National Socialism is defined as a worldview that changes human self-understanding significantly. The Nazi image of humanity is characterized by the concepts of race and struggle. Rosenberg claims for instance:

Present and past are suddenly appearing in a new light, and as a result we have a new mission for the future. The actions of history and the future no longer signify class struggle or warfare between Church dogmas, but rather the conflict between blood and blood, race and race, people and people. And this means combat between spiritual values.³⁵

The general outline of Rosenberg’s doctrine shows, not surprisingly, that the concept of race is at the core of the political anthropology of National Socialism.³⁶ Most Nazi thinkers were convinced that race is an essential property of humans that structures the world. However, it was controversial what race is, even among the key ideologues. Some of them regarded race as a strictly biological concept and advocated a complete naturalization of the human sphere. In his article *Kultur und Volk* (*Culture and Volk*), Baeumler presents a typical biologist line of thought. Directly after criticizing idealism and its humanistic values, he claims that ‘the preservation of the purity of the race’ (*Reinerhaltung der Art*) is a political consequence of his philosophy.³⁷ He justifies this political duty by a comparison between humans and animals. Baeumler claims that mongrels lose their ‘true reproductive power’ (*echte Fortpflanzungskraft*) and that the same holds for humans.³⁸ He justifies this comparison with the argument that humans are like animals part of the natural world. Hence, according to Baeumler, humans also have to submit to the laws of nature. He calls for the recognition and acceptance of biological laws and the pursuit of all human affairs in accordance with them.³⁹ Here, Nazi anthropology

³¹Rosenberg, *Race and Race History*, op. cit., p. 87 (*Mythus*, op. cit., p. 689).

³²Ibid., p. 34 (*Mythus*, op. cit., p. 2).

³³Rosenberg, *Mythus*, op. cit., p. 17 (my translation).

³⁴See, e.g. *ibid.*, 33, 81 f., 84 f., 105, 106 f. 479 f., 482 f.

³⁵Rosenberg, *Race and Race History*, op. cit., 33 f. (*Mythus*, op. cit., 1 f.).

³⁶Rosenberg’s doctrine demonstrates that the concept of race is also at the core of the historical vision of the beginning of a new world. It is thus misleading ‘to de-centre the interpretative hegemony of racial ideas in the Third Reich’, as Confino proposes. See Confino, *A World Without Jews*, 2014, op. cit., p. 33; Amos Goldberg, Helmut W. Smith, Simone Gigliotti, Marc Buggeln and Confino, ‘Alon Confino, *Foundational Pasts: The Holocaust as Historical Understanding* (Cambridge University Press, 2012) and *A World Without Jews: The Nazi Imagination from Persecution to Genocide* (Yale University Press, 2014)’, *Journal of Genocide Research*, 18:1 (2016), p. 125.

³⁷Baeumler, ‘Kultur und Volk. Die Begründung der deutschen Leibesübungen’ in *Politik und Erziehung* (Berlin: Juncker und Dünhaupt, 1937), p. 127 f. (my translation).

³⁸Ibid., p. 128 (my translation).

³⁹For a detailed analysis of Baeumler’s philosophy see Johannes Steizinger, ‘Politik versus Moral. Alfred Baeumlers Versuch einer philosophischen Interpretation des Nationalsozialismus’ in Werner Konitzer and David Palme (eds) *‘Arbeit’, ‘Volk’, ‘Gemeinschaft’. Ethik und Ethiken im Nationalsozialismus* (Frankfurt a. Main and New York: Campus, 2016), pp. 29–48.

seems to be a simple form of naturalism that regards humans, first and foremost, as animals. From such a perspective, the social world, cultural achievements and political claims are explained and justified by biological concepts.⁴⁰

However, several Nazi thinkers explicitly rejected biologism. Rosenberg is a striking example of this wider tendency in Nazi ideology.⁴¹ He explicitly claims that the concept of race is not merely biological. According to Rosenberg, the property of race is tantamount to the essence of humans that distinguishes them fundamentally from the animal world. He uses the term ‘race-soul’ to signify the deep, spiritual unity of human groups that cannot be found in nature. Rosenberg thinks that ‘each race has its soul, each soul its race’.⁴² Moreover, the human world is shaped by the activity of the ‘race-soul’ that connects nature and spirit, biology and history. Thus, Rosenberg characterizes the ‘racial history’ that is developed in his *Mythus* as ‘both natural history and spiritual mystique’.⁴³ Here, the metaphysical elevation of the concept of race gives rise to a dualistic anthropology that places the essence of humanity in the spiritual realm. Only humans, but not all humans possess a ‘race-soul’, which enables them to develop a collective identity.

The combination of natural and metaphysical features in the concept of humanity grounds one of the most vicious forms of Nazi racism: the animalistic dehumanization of other groups of people, a well-known instance of which is their identification with parasites. The naturalistic dimension of racist anthropology, on the one hand, explains why humans could be animalized in a literal sense. For instance, Rosenberg claims that his characterization of the Jews as parasites has to be seen as a description of a biological fact.⁴⁴ Such a conviction is only possible if humanity is seen as part of the natural world and if biological concepts can be used to explain social relationships. The metaphysical dimension, on the other hand, explains why animalization could be used as a form of dehumanization. In Nazi anthropology, natural features were not enough to be considered as fully human. Rosenberg, e.g. regards a specific disposition as the essence of humanity: the capacity to develop a collective identity which is restricted to certain groups of people.⁴⁵

Rosenberg’s metaphysics of race is an extreme example of the cultural dimension of Nazi racism. Rosenberg regards culture as the manifestation of the essential property that separates humans from animals and mere human animals. Similar views can also be found in less metaphysical approaches. Take Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*. In the chapter *Volk and Race*, Hitler contrasts the social attitude of humans to the natural egoism of animals. He claims that humans are characterized by a sense of community that transcends the instinct of self-preservation. Hitler thinks that all culture depends on this social disposition (*Gesinnung*) that demands the sacrifice of the individual for the sake

⁴⁰Richard Walter Darré held such a strict biologist view. See Kroll, op. cit., pp. 198–205.

⁴¹For another metaphysical concept of race see, e.g. Krieck, *Völkisch-politische Anthropologie*. Philosophers also developed classical idealist (e.g. Max Wundt) and transcendental interpretation (e.g. Hermann Schwarz) of National Socialism. See Sluga, op. cit., pp. 108–119.

⁴²Rosenberg, *Race and Race History*, op. cit., p. 83 (*Mythus*, op. cit., p. 116).

⁴³Ibid., p. 37 (*Mythus*, op. cit., p. 23).

⁴⁴See Rosenberg, *Mythus*, op. cit., p. 461.

⁴⁵In his analysis of the image of the ‘Jewish parasite’, Alex Bein emphasizes its naturalistic dimension. He also shows that this image was often connected with older anti-Semitic motifs such as the image of the Jew as demon. He does not consider the metaphysical dimension of the Nazi concept of humanity and its role for the dehumanization of Jews. I concentrate on these new aspects of Nazi ideology and will not examine its relation to older forms of anti-Semitism for pragmatic reasons. See Alex Bein, ‘The Jewish Parasite’, *Yearbook of the Leo Baeck Institute*, 9 (1964), pp. 3–40.

of the community.⁴⁶ According to him, only this ‘true idealism’ creates the ‘concept of human’.⁴⁷ Thus, the heroism of a community shows the humanness of the race it belongs to. The Aryans and its people are, of course, at the top of this ranking. They founded and preserve, according to Hitler, human culture.⁴⁸ However, there are also races which are not capable of being human in the full sense. Hitler claims that the Jews possess no ‘idealistic disposition’ (*idealistische Gesinnung*). Since they are only driven by the instinct of self-preservation, they basically remain animals.⁴⁹

The significance of such arguments demonstrates that Nazi racism is not simply a biologist doctrine, but combines biological, cultural and metaphysical perspectives. Although the naturalization of the human sphere is a prerequisite of Nazi anthropology, it is often only used for a specific racist motif: the animalization and thus exclusion of the Jews. This more complex understanding of Nazi ideology enables us to show that its core elements—the belief in the superiority and historical mission of the German *Volk*, the racism and anti-Semitism, the emphasis on community and the social Darwinism—support each other and, indeed, form one worldview. It is not necessary to highlight a primary element, e.g. the belief in German privilege, and to conclude that the racist anti-Semitism is a mere means to justify the nationalistic agenda.⁵⁰ My detailed analysis of Rosenberg’s doctrine will show that both attitudes rest on and are meant to be justified by the same anthropological framework.

Nordic humanity: identity and culture

I have argued that Rosenberg captures the historical situation as an identity crisis of humanity in itself. Thus, he characterizes his own approach as the pursuit ‘of seeking men who become self-conscious’.⁵¹ According to Rosenberg, becoming self-conscious can only mean to experience the myth of the race you belong to. The ‘myth of the blood’ is the ‘new belief’ that is arising.⁵² Here, identity always means collective identity and the latter is constituted by belonging to a community. Moreover, you belong to a community by birth, and hence the identity of a person is a fixed property. The scope of the concept of the ‘race-soul’ plays a crucial role for this sublation of individuality to community: ‘blood’ and ‘soul’ can be seen as the forces which create the only lasting entities of history. Thus, with ‘blood’ and ‘soul’ a person is bound to its ‘people’. If the body and the thought of an individual is shaped by descent from a particular group, then belonging to this community becomes the essential and sole dimension of a person’s identity. According to Rosenberg, race is not only an intrinsic, immutable and essential part of a person. It rather *is* the essence of a person and hence constitutes his or her identity. Thus, we have to ask: what is the racial essence of a person?

⁴⁶See Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf. Erster Band: Eine Abrechnung* (München: Franz Eher, 1925), pp. 313–317. Kroll emphasizes that the social explanation of the Aryan superiority is one of Hitler’s few original contributions to the racist discourse. See Kroll, op. cit., pp. 47 f.

⁴⁷Hitler, *Mein Kampf. Erster Band*, op. cit., p. 316.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 311–312.

⁴⁹See *ibid.*, pp. 317–320.

⁵⁰As e.g. Sluga proposes. See Sluga, op. cit., pp. 102–104.

⁵¹Rosenberg, *Mythus*, op. cit., p. 8 (my translation).

⁵²Rosenberg, *Race and Race History*, op. cit., p. 83 (*Mythus*, op. cit., p. 114).

Rosenberg develops a metaphysical understanding of race. He claims that the unique inner and outer character of a race is shaped by a 'spiritual centre'. This 'essential unity' of a race is expressed in its myth and thus remembering that myth enables a community to develop self-consciousness, i.e. to become the *Volk* it is. As Rosenberg claims on behalf of the German *Volk*:

This old-yet-new *Mythus* already has activated and embraced millions of souls. [...] we want to become a total *Volk*, 'at one with ourselves', something Meister Eckhart once longed for. For hundreds of thousands of souls *Mythus* is [...] the cellular rebirth of the spiritual centre.⁵³

Such an 'awakening' of a 'race-soul' is tantamount to its historical realization. History is, according to Rosenberg, nothing but the battlefield of races, a fight of 'blood against environment' and 'blood against blood'.⁵⁴ The experience of the myth of a race enables the breeding of a 'racial type' whose physical and spiritual 'purity' is defined as a necessity: 'racial mixture' leads to the vanishing of a particular type. Thus, a community has to assert itself against all forms of otherness to become and remain the *Volk* it is: it has to be itself physically as well as spiritually, inwardly as well as outwardly. This self-realization of a community is guided by a specific 'highest value' ('*Höchstwert*').⁵⁵ Each race develops a different core value that is passed on by its myth and has to be recognized. The evaluative centre of a race is expressed in the moral, political and religious systems of its communities. The establishment of a type-appropriate (*artgerechte*) culture is also an essential part of the self-realization of a community. The distinction between communities comes in degrees: communities from the same 'racial type' are akin to each other and may understand each other on a basic level. However, some races are totally alien to each other and hence lack any mutual understanding.

Note that Rosenberg does not only carve up the human world into different races. He also embraces a clear hierarchy of races. Indeed, Rosenberg is convinced that only one race, namely the 'Nordic race', is capable of developing 'Volkish personalities' ('*völkische Persönlichkeiten*').⁵⁶ These Nordic communities share, of course, the same 'highest value', namely the concepts of honour and duty. These 'spiritual essences' of the 'Nordic race' enable its members to create particular communities.⁵⁷ Rosenberg depicts the Vikings as an example of a community that is solely shaped by its own intrinsic values and thus constitutes a complete unity. He claims that they 'appeared on the historical scene with a historically unique self-assurance'.⁵⁸ Generally speaking, only communities of the 'Nordic race' are able to develop a collective identity. Here, selfhood becomes the most important criterion to assess the value of a community: the more a community knows, realizes and expresses itself, the better, and the degree of this indicates how human the community is. Thus, it is the relationship to themselves that constitutes the superiority of these communities. Rosenberg regards this particularist disposition as a prerequisite of cultural development and hence of full humanness. He thinks, like most of his fellow Nazi thinkers, that only the 'Nordic race' possesses the 'creative strength' ('*Schöpferkraft*') to develop

⁵³Ibid., p. 97 f. (*Mythus*, op. cit., p. 698).

⁵⁴Rosenberg, *Mythus*, op. cit., p. 23 (my translation).

⁵⁵See ibid., pp. 116 f. (my translation).

⁵⁶Rosenberg, *Race and Race History*, op. cit., p. 116 (*Mythus*, op. cit., p. 249).

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Ibid., pp. 102 f. (*Mythus*, op. cit., p. 152).

culture.⁵⁹ Thus, all cultural goods such as art, science or technology are defined as achievements of the ‘Nordic race’.⁶⁰ Again, culture is the distinctive feature of the superior race and its humanness. Thus, the German privilege rests on the metaphysical dimension of Rosenberg’s anthropology.

Rosenberg dedicates large parts of his *Mythus* to the bizarre history of the ‘Nordic race’. The story begins with the mythical Atlantis, includes historical communities such as Aryan Persia, Doric Hellas or Italian Rome, and ends with the present hope: Germany. Here both the racist foundation and the anthropological dimension of the political mission of German nationalism becomes apparent. Rosenberg thinks, again like many of his fellow Nazi thinkers, that, today, only the Germans are capable of the deliberate particularism that is essential for being fully human. While the Germans have to fight for their place at the top of the racial hierarchy, other groups of people are characterized as completely without the capacity for identity, culture and thus full humanness. Actually, the German ‘creation’ of a ‘unique civilisation [*arteigene Gesittung*] which will penetrate into all areas of human life’ is explicitly targeted against ‘the presumptuous domination of sub-humans’.⁶¹ The anthropological privilege is tantamount to a political mission.

Ideological dehumanization: the ‘Jewish parasite’

The racist characterization of other groups of people rests on the naturalistic dimension of Nazi anthropology. Rosenberg’s anti-Semitism is an example of the conviction that there are humans who do not possess the essence of humanity and thus are mere human animals. He emphasizes time and again the ‘uncreative character’ of Jews and contrasts their properties to what he regards as uniquely human. Jews are, according to Rosenberg, ‘copycats’ (*Nachäffer*), ‘plagiarizers’ and ‘nihilists’ who possess ‘no talent for indigenous growth, no organic shape of the soul and therefore no racial shape’.⁶² Thus, he defines the Jews as an ‘anti-race’ (*Gegenrasse*) whose members lack what it means to be fully human: collective identity. Moreover, he claims that Jewish life is without any metaphysical and cultural dimension and hence animal-like. This dehumanizing naturalization of the Jews is a major motif of the *Mythus*. Rosenberg claims, e.g. that the ‘Jewish relationship to the world’ is only guided by ‘instinct’ and that Jews are always driven by selfish, material, superficial and libidinous interests.⁶³ He suggests that this disposition causes a completely inhumane behaviour and gives one absurd example after the other of alleged Jewish cruelties in history.⁶⁴ However, Rosenberg does not only claim that the Jews have never behaved like humans in the entire history. Furthermore, he holds that Jewish life is necessarily a ‘parasitical devaluation’ that promotes a ‘bestial materialization’ of the human world.⁶⁵ This is because Jews essentially are, according to Rosenberg, nothing but human animals. He leaves no doubt that his dehumanization of Jews is

⁵⁹Rosenberg, *Race and Race History*, op. cit., p. 83 (*Mythus*, op. cit., p. 115).

⁶⁰See, e.g. Hitler, *Mein Kampf. Erster Band*, op. cit., p. 306.

⁶¹Rosenberg, *Race and Race History*, op. cit., p. 83 (*Mythus*, op. cit., p. 115).

⁶²Rosenberg, *Mythus*, op. cit., p. 461 (my translation).

⁶³See, e.g. *ibid.*, pp. 263 f., 272, 363 f., 460.

⁶⁴See, e.g. *ibid.*, pp. 123 f., 455 f., 459–466.

⁶⁵See, e.g. *ibid.*, pp. 265 f., 460.

literally meant as an animalization. Rosenberg insists on the literal meaning of his characterization of Jews as parasites:

In this context the concept [of parasitism] will not be grasped as a moral evaluation but as the characterisation of a biological fact, in exactly the same way as we speak of parasitical phenomena in the plant and animal world. The sack crab bores through the posterior of the pocket crab, gradually growing into the latter, sucking out its last life strength. This is an identical process to that in which the Jew penetrates into society through the open wounds in the body of the people, feeding off their racial and creative strength until their decline.⁶⁶

The image of the 'Jewish parasite' is a prime example of the animalistic dehumanization that also shapes the Nazi concept of the enemy. According to Rosenberg, Nordic communities seek to develop and sustain their particular identity. Thus, these 'Volkish personalities' concentrate, first and foremost, on themselves. All subhuman groups of people and especially the Jews lack this ability and hence have to spread for survival: they are 'eternal wanderers' without a homeland and dependent on their host societies whom they 'suck dry'.⁶⁷ Because of this 'expansive' and 'destructive' form of life, the Jews are defined as a permanent threat to the particular communities of the 'Nordic race' and thus to all cultural forms of human life.⁶⁸ Here, the political significance and existential dimension of the conflict between 'particularism' and 'universalism' becomes apparent. Rosenberg explicitly claims that the Jews are a threat to humanity in itself and emphasizes that 'we are face to face with a final decision today'.⁶⁹

Also, Hitler was clearly obsessed with the notion of a final battle between Aryan humanity and Jewish subhumans whom he characterizes, first and foremost, as 'parasites'.⁷⁰ Take, e.g. the apocalyptic image which Hitler presents as a conclusion of his study of Marxism as a Jewish doctrine:

Should the Jew, with the aid of his Marxist creed, triumph over the people of this world, his Crown will be the funeral wreath of mankind, and this planet will once again follow its orbit through ether, without any human life on its surface, as it did millions of years ago.⁷¹

Note the perfidious consequence of the political anthropology of National Socialism: it was meant to justify the aggression and violence against Jews as self-defence. Moreover, the Nazis pretended to defend not only themselves, but also the future of humanity against the permanent attack of bestial subhumans.⁷²

Summary: the Nazi model of dehumanization

We are now able to define more precisely the ideological mechanism of dehumanization which characterizes the political anthropology of National Socialism. The dehumanization

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 461 (my translation).

⁶⁷This motif is most developed in Rosenberg's early work *Die Spur des Juden im Wandel der Zeit* (1920). Passages from this anti-Semitic treatise are published in Rosenberg, *Race and Race History*, op. cit., pp. 175–190.

⁶⁸Rosenberg, *Mythus*, op. cit., p. 671 (my translation).

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 82 (my translation).

⁷⁰See, e.g. Hitler, *Mein Kampf. Erster Band*, op. cit., pp. 322 f.; *Mein Kampf. Zweiter Band: Die nationalsozialistische Bewegung* (München: Franz Eher, 1927), pp. 279–281. For the general character of Hitler's anti-Semitism see Kroll, op. cit., pp. 49–56.

⁷¹Hitler, *Mein Kampf. Erster Band*, op. cit.; trans. James Murphy, *Mein Kampf* (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1939), p. 61.

⁷²This ideological meaning of the image of the 'Jewish parasite' and its significance for Nazi propaganda has been emphasized by several authors. See, e.g. Bein, op. cit., pp. 33 f. Herf, op. cit.; Strub, op. cit., pp. 195 f.

rests on a separation within humanity in itself. The dividing line between being human in a naturalistic sense, on the one hand, and being human in the metaphysical sense, on the other hand, creates a fundamental distinction. According to Nazi thinkers, only some groups of people meet the metaphysical criterion of being human. Members of these groups are considered as essentially and hence fully human. However, other groups of people are reduced to the biological sense of being human. They simply lack the metaphysical essence of humanity and thus are characterized as mere human animals. These creatures are human only from the naturalistic point of view, but not human from a metaphysical point of view. Thus, they are regarded as subhumans who are not fully human, but also not completely non-human.

I think that this anthropological framework and its dehumanizing mechanism is an important feature of Nazi ideology and shapes its racism. However, I do not deny that Nazi thinkers, even the authors whom I discuss, also used other racist and anti-Semitic motifs in their writings. I only analysed one line of thought within a political ideology, a line of thought that had, first and foremost, an instrumental value. Most Nazi writings were intended to mobilize as many people as possible, and thus they promulgated a flexible doctrine. Nazi philosophers who wanted to justify National Socialism theoretically had to consider political demands, as well. If we take the political function and general structure of Nazi ideology into account, it is surprising that the analysis of its anthropological strand revealed a coherent line of thought at all.

Note that my critical analysis of Nazi ideology arrived at a different model of dehumanization than the psychological literature suggests.⁷³ Take, e.g. David Livingstone Smith's model of dehumanization. Smith generally concentrates on cases in which other people are conceived as subhuman creatures and insists on the literal meaning of this kind of dehumanization. Thus, the Nazi dehumanization of Jews is one of his exemplary cases. Smith argues that any case of literal animalistic dehumanization rests on psychological processes that can be distinguished from the content of dehumanization.⁷⁴ This form of dehumanization is established by our psychological essentialism. According to Smith, we intuitively distinguish between the essence and the appearance of a thing. This intuition also guides our perception of human beings. If we think of someone as a human being, we attribute a human essence to that person. This 'imaginary "something"' is shared by all humans and tantamount to what makes them human.⁷⁵ If we dehumanize someone, we think of him or her as lacking this essence. These beings are humans only in appearance, not in essence. We attribute a subhuman essence to them and thus imagine them as subhuman animals.⁷⁶

This radical view has recently been confronted with a serious challenge. Several authors claimed that the notion of a complete dehumanization, which is put forward by approaches such as Smith's, is not sufficiently supported by the concrete cases. The critics emphasize a certain ambivalence in either the behaviour of the dehumanizers towards their victims or their account of them. Although the perpetrators use

⁷³The psychological research on dehumanization is proliferating. For an overview of recent studies see Nick Haslam and Steve Loughnan, 'Dehumanization and Infrahumanization', *The Annual Review of Psychology*, 65 (2014), pp. 339–423. I concentrate on the approaches of Smith and Lang because they represent competing paradigms in the field of genocide studies and regard National Socialism as prime example of their theories.

⁷⁴Smith, 'Paradoxes of Dehumanization', op. cit., p. 419.

⁷⁵Smith, *Less Than Human*, op. cit., p. 263.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 261–262; Smith, 'Paradoxes of Dehumanization', op. cit., pp. 423 f.

dehumanizing images, they treat or depict their victims in a way that implies the acknowledgement of the victim's humanity. Thomas Brudholm highlights, e.g. that Hitler's *Mein Kampf* attributes features, traits and intentions to the Jews that can only be attributed to other human beings, such as being shameless and calculating.⁷⁷ The same holds, as now we can add, for Rosenberg's *Mythus*. Smith replies to this challenge with a slight modification of his theory. He holds that the contradiction between the appearance of a being as human and the attribution of a subhuman essence to that being cannot be removed easily. Smith introduces a psychological explanation for this resistance to dehumanize: He claims that humans are hypersocial and hence tend to classify beings who look like humans as humans. Thus, dehumanized people are conceived as simultaneously human because of their appearance and subhuman because of their alleged essence. Smith regards this ambivalence as an unintended consequence of the process of dehumanization and emphasizes its psychological effect: the human/subhuman chimeras make us feel uncanny because of the transgression of ontological boundaries.⁷⁸

Smith clearly presents a refined account of dehumanization which captures many features of this complex phenomenon. However, we may doubt whether his enhanced theory indeed meets the challenge of, e.g. Brudholm's objection. Authors such as Hitler or Rosenberg attribute features to the Jews which presuppose not only the appearance of being human, but the biological and psychological nature of humans. The Jews are depicted as clever liars, greedy egoists and shameless frauds. Moreover, the accounts of their alleged inhumane behaviour are often characterized by a moral indignation which would not make much sense, if they are deprived of any human quality. I claim that my model of dehumanization which resulted from the examination of Nazi ideology captures these ambivalent cases more thoroughly than Smith's theory. I do not have to refer to a psychological confusion that rests on general assumptions such as 'our hypersocial nature' to explain the ambivalences of dehumanization.⁷⁹ My account rests on the critical analysis of the anthropological framework that was developed by the Nazis themselves.

On my account, dehumanization is tantamount to the reduction of certain people to the animalistic nature of humans and hence is never complete. This model allows the attribution of basic human traits to the victims of dehumanization. The Jews lack, on my reading of Hitler and Rosenberg, not the natural features of humans, but their metaphysical essence, i.e. spiritual dispositions which account for the higher developments of humanity such as morality, culture, art and so on. The alleged 'shamelessness' of the Jews is a good example of this motif, since shame is generally regarded as a product of human culture. I can read the depictions of Jews which are cited by Brudholm as examples of their identification with human animals. Moreover, I consider the mixed character of dehumanized people as an intentional result of the ideological process. Nazi anthropology allowed for the existence of beings who are partially human, since full humanness is reached only by the realization of a spiritual essence that is not available to all natural humans. This ascribed intermediate position of subhumans readily explains the moral indignation about their existence: Human animals are regarded as a disgrace because they *are* partially human. Thus, my model also explains the 'genocidal twisting of ordinary moral

⁷⁷Brudholm, op. cit., p. 300.

⁷⁸See Smith, 'Paradoxes of Dehumanization', op. cit., pp. 430–433.

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 435.

assumptions' that is emphasized by Brudholm.⁸⁰ He shows that the Jews were defamed and attacked for what they are and not for what they have done.

I think that the shortcomings of Smith's account also suggest a methodological conclusion. It is simply not sufficient to study a historical case of dehumanization only from a psychological point of view, as Smith suggests.⁸¹ The ideological content must be taken into account to understand the process of dehumanization. This is because, as the psychologist Nick Haslam has recently claimed, 'any understanding of dehumanization must proceed from a clear sense of what is being denied to the other, namely humanness'.⁸² And our concepts of humanity are shaped by the given intellectual and cultural context. Human history gave rise to a variety of concepts of humanity. These attempts to define human nature were often accompanied by the exclusion of certain people from the human species. Here, images of dehumanization proliferated. When we look at the diverse history of anthropology, we also find a veritable panorama of dehumanization.⁸³ The psychological studies on dehumanization have thus to be complemented by a thorough analysis of the actual anthropological theories that ground each historical case of dehumanization.

Conclusion: the psychological consequences of ideological dehumanization

Some authors have recently questioned whether dehumanization is a psychological prerequisite of mass violence. The social psychologist Johannes Lang denies, for instance, that the dehumanization of victims is an essential feature of the psychology of Nazi perpetrators.⁸⁴ He argues that humans are capable of extreme cruelties against *other* humans, and that it is exactly the human quality of the victim which gives excessive violence against him or her its psychological meaning. Lang interprets the cruel behaviour of certain perpetrators in concentration camps as an ultimate kind of self-expression by the realization of absolute power over another human being.⁸⁵ According to him, such intersubjective elements of violence cannot be captured by the concept of dehumanization because it assumes that any human relationship between perpetrator and victim is erased. Lang concludes that the empirical evidence from the concentration camps does not support the idea of a complete dehumanization of the victims of the Nazi mass murder.⁸⁶ His argument is primarily based on psychological self-reports of Nazi perpetrators. Moreover, Lang criticizes psychologists who characterize the treatment of concentration camp inmates as dehumanizing for applying their own concept of humanity to this context. According to him, such interpretations tell us more about the mind-set of the commentator than

⁸⁰Brudholm, *op. cit.*, p. 300.

⁸¹See Smith, 'Paradoxes of Dehumanization', *op. cit.*, pp. 419 f.; *Less Than Human*, *op. cit.*, pp. 169 f., 272 f.

⁸²Nick Haslam, 'Dehumanization: An Integrative Review', *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 10:3 (2006), pp. 252–264.

⁸³See, e.g. Gustav Jahoda, *Images of Savages. Ancient Roots of Modern Prejudice in Western Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

⁸⁴Weißmann adopts Lang's critique of psychological dehumanization. He argues that the impact of dehumanizing images is primarily social: The victims of dehumanization are excluded from the human community. With his emphasis on social exclusion, Weißmann analyses an important function of dehumanization. But he does not consider the cognitive content of the process of dehumanization and hence does not capture its mechanism fully. See Weißmann, *op. cit.*

⁸⁵Lang, 'Questioning Dehumanization', *op. cit.*, pp. 235, 238–240.

⁸⁶See *ibid.*, pp. 230–235.

about the psychology of the perpetrators. Lang claims that his analysis traces the processes which unfold in the minds of the killers ‘from the inside’.⁸⁷

Lang’s close look at some psychological constellations in concentration camps shows us that the perpetrators do not transform their victims in completely non-human beings. However, my model of dehumanization is consistent with the fact that perpetrators recognized some kind of humanity in their victims. The image of the human animal is characterized by an irreducible ambivalence and does not lead to a complete dehumanization of the other. Moreover, I derive this more complex understanding of dehumanization from the critical analysis of the concept of humanity that was developed by Nazi thinkers themselves. I do not apply my own or an idealized concept of humanity to the historical context. Thus, Lang’s critique does not rule out my understanding of dehumanization. In the following, I cite several types of empirical evidence which support the thesis that this kind of dehumanization had psychological consequences and hence was an important feature of Nazi reality. I shall also argue that psychological self-reports of perpetrators are a questionable source and hence not enough evidence to verify a specific speculation about their mind-set.

Already in 1964, Alex Bein claimed that the image of the ‘Jewish parasite’ belongs to the ‘psychological roots’ of the Shoah.⁸⁸ From a current perspective, such general claims seem to be too bold. Recent research on perpetrators emphasizes the complexity of Nazi networks of persecution. Since several groups played a crucial role for the organization and execution of mass murder, overgeneralization about the psychology of perpetrators should be avoided at any level. Most historians and psychologists agree that there is no perpetrator type who exemplifies the true horror of the Shoah. However, they also agree that the racist ideology has recaptured the attention it deserves regarding the explanation of the motivational complexity of Nazi perpetrators: Ideology is regarded as a necessary, but not sufficient cause for participation in genocide.⁸⁹ Images of dehumanization played a crucial role in Nazi ideology and occurred frequently in the perpetual flow of propaganda. In November 1940, General Wilhelm Keitel, commander-in-chief of the *Wehrmacht*, tasked the Party’s Reich office of Intellectual and Ideological Training with the political education of soldiers. Since this office was led by Rosenberg, it is not surprising that one of the themes which were covered during the winter of 1943 was ‘The Jew as universal parasite’.⁹⁰ It is very likely that such an ideological training had an impact on the psychology of perpetrators.

This modest claim is supported by the psychological self-ascriptions of perpetrators who conducted the most extreme form of violence. The testimonies of camp guards often suggest that they perceived the inmates as subhumans with whom they did not share a common ground.⁹¹ However, these psychological self-testimonies have to be

⁸⁷Ibid., p. 230. Lang repeats the key motifs of his criticism of the concept dehumanization in a more recent reading of Arendt’s analysis of Nazi ideology. See Lang, ‘Explaining Genocide’, op. cit., pp. 198, 193 f.

⁸⁸Bein, op. cit., p. 37.

⁸⁹See Mann, op. cit.; Browder, op. cit., p. 495; Szejnmann, ‘Perpetrators of the Holocaust’, op. cit., p. 39–41; Weißmann, op. cit., pp. 92–99.

⁹⁰See Raphael, op. cit., p. 84.

⁹¹See, e.g. the self-reports of Franz Stangl, commandant of the Sobibor and Treblinka extermination camps, in the extensive interviews with his biographer: Gitta Sereny, *Into that Darkness: An Examination of Conscience* (New York: Vintage, 1974), pp. 200–203, 232 f. See also the summary of self-reports of female camp guards in Szejnmann, ‘Perpetrators of the Holocaust’, op. cit., p. 42.

approached with some degree of caution. There are not many primary sources, and most of the primary sources that do exist are controversial and hardly meet scientific standards. Moreover, the reliability of self-knowledge is generally disputed. Many psychologists and philosophers deny that self-reports are a reliable source for the understanding of complex mental states.⁹² The psychological dehumanization of other human beings is by definition a complex psychological process, and hence we cannot assume that it is in the scope of naïve introspection. Briefly speaking, our ability to analyse the individual psychology of Nazi killers is severely limited. Since neither the concrete situation nor the ideological context can be reproduced in an experimental situation, it is hard to verify any specific speculation about a Nazi perpetrator's mind.⁹³

There is yet another, neglected indicator of the psychological significance of dehumanization for the Nazi genocide. Dehumanization is a practical concept that guides the interaction with another group of people. It can be a forceful tool of social oppression that has a strong psychological impact on its victims. Thus, the perspective of the victims has to be taken into account, if we want to know whether their treatment involved mechanisms of dehumanization. Primo Levi's *If this is a man*, written just after his release from Auschwitz, is an example of a victim's testimony that demonstrates that the social reality of National Socialism was characterized by dehumanizing practices. The social psychologists Chiara Volpato and Alberta Contarello show that Levi's account of his concentration camp experience can be used as a source for examining this social situation. The results of their quantitative and qualitative analysis reveal striking similarities between the Nazi worldview on the one hand, and Levi's description of the KZ-reality on the other hand. Levi portrays the KZ as 'a great machine to reduce us to beasts' and emphasizes the importance to fight this animalistic dehumanization.⁹⁴ He depicts the loss of a personal identity as a main consequence of camp life and claims that the fierce struggle for survival induces instinctive and selfish behaviour.⁹⁵ The reduction to biological needs and the necessity of immoral behaviour are characterized as forceful mechanisms of dehumanization. Moreover, this Darwinian 'experiment' made it, according to Levi, impossible to establish a collective identity among inmates.⁹⁶

These few examples already demonstrate that, from Levi's perspective, the concentration camp is characterized by practices of dehumanization which mirror the commitments which we found in the writings of Nazi ideologues such as Rosenberg. Levi shows us an eerie correspondence between the Nazi worldview and the Nazi world.⁹⁷ His testimony demonstrates that a specific kind of dehumanization was an important feature of both the ideological and the psychological dimension of National Socialism. The Nazis created a social reality that forced upon the Jews the image of the human animal that was shaped by their ideology. Both dimensions of dehumanization supported each other: The

⁹²Some scholars deny the reliability of psychological self-knowledge in principle. See, e.g. Eric Schwitzgebel, 'The Unreliability of Naïve Introspection', *Philosophical Review*, 117:2 (2008), pp. 245–273. Even advocates of the significance of first person self-knowledge mostly restrict its scope to the phenomenological content of basic emotions like the feeling of pain. See, e.g. Annalisa Coliva, *The Varieties of Self-Knowledge* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan 2016).

⁹³There are historians and psychologists who acknowledge these methodological problems. See, e.g. Mann, op. cit., pp. 333 f. Szejnmann, 'Perpetrators of the Holocaust,' op. cit., p. 46. Volpato and Contarello, op. cit., p. 242.

⁹⁴Primo Levi, *If this is a Man*, trans. Stuart Wolf (New York: The Orion Press, 1959), p. 39. See also Volpato and Contarello, op. cit., pp. 251 f.

⁹⁵See, e.g. Levi, op. cit., pp. 101 f., 204. See also Volpato and Contarello, op. cit., p. 250.

⁹⁶See Levi, op. cit., pp. 99 f. See also Volpato and Contarello, op. cit., p. 253.

⁹⁷This correspondence is also emphasized by recent historical accounts. See, e.g. Kröll, op. cit., pp. 311 f. Herf, op. cit.

ideological commitments could motivate and justify the concrete practices of dehumanization. And the dehumanizing reality of the concentration camps practically reinforced the conceptual structures and images of Nazi racism.

Nevertheless, the evidence for the ideological significance of dehumanizing images and the psychological impact of dehumanizing practices does not settle the question of the psychological motivation of individual perpetrators. I think that it is very likely that Nazi ideology did have a psychological impact on the perpetrator's mind-sets and that the victimizers experienced the camp life like their victims.⁹⁸ However, the empirical evidence on psychological motives on the individual level remains problematic. The lack of adequate psychological data suggests a general conclusion: The historical case of National Socialism demonstrates that we should not study only the psychological mechanisms of dehumanization. The enquiry into the history of human atrocities shows the significance of the ideological contexts and social practices for a critical understanding of this troubling phenomenon.

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⁹⁸Michael Mann provides important empirical evidence for the significance of the ideological commitment that is reflected in the social practices of concentration camps. His quantitative study of the biographies of 1581 men and women involved in Nazi genocide shows that they resemble 'real Nazis' more than they do 'ordinary Germans'. See Mann, op. cit.