



Volume 6. Weimar Germany, 1918/19 –1933
Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, “The Third Empire” (1923)

Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, one of the most important authors of the Conservative Revolution, originally wanted to name his best-known work “The Third Party” (“The Third Standpoint” was another suggestion). The title that he ultimately chose, “The Third Empire” (also translated as “The Third Reich”) made reference to the chiliastic view of history put forth by medieval theologian Joachim von Fiore. By linking this vision to a specific nation, Moeller arrived at the idea of a “Third Rome,” a concept that he had encountered in the works of Russian writers Fyodor Dostoevsky and Dmitri Merezhkovsky. Moeller considered the Holy Roman Empire the first empire; the second was the Kaiserreich founded in 1871 (on account of the exclusion of Austria, however, he only regarded this as a “transitional empire”). The greater German “Third Empire” – the “final empire” – was supposed to represent the fulfillment of German history and the harmonious incorporation of all oppositional social and political tendencies, which would thereupon cease to exist. Furthermore, Moeller argued against Marxism as well as distorted liberalism, which he especially hated; and set himself apart from reactionary liberalism while at the same time advocating a synthesis of “German” socialism and revolutionary conservatism.

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The attempt this book makes was not possible from any party standpoint; it ranges over all our political problems, from the extreme Left to the extreme Right. It is written from the standpoint of a third party, which is already in being. Only such an attempt could address itself to the nation while attacking all the parties; could reveal the disorder and discord into which the parties have long since fatefully fallen and which has spread from them through our whole political life; could reach that lofty spiritual plane of political philosophy that the parties have forsaken, but which must for the nation’s sake be maintained, which the conservative must preserve and which the revolutionary must take by storm.

Instead of government by party we offer the ideal of the third empire. It is an old German conception and a great one. It arose when our first empire fell; it was early quickened by the thought of a millennium; but its underlying thought has always been a future that should be not the end of all things but the dawn of a German age in which the German people would for the first time fulfill their destiny on earth.

In the years that followed the collapse of our second empire we have had experience of Germans; we have seen that the nation’s worst enemy is herself: her trustfulness, her casualness, her credulity, her inborn, fate-fraught, apparently unshakable optimism. The

German people were scarcely defeated—as never a people was defeated before in history—when the mood asserted itself: “We shall arise again all right!” We heard German fools saying: “We have no fears for Germany!” We saw German dreamers nod their heads in assent: “Nothing can happen to me!”

We must be careful to remember that the thought of the third empire is a philosophical idea; that the conceptions which the words *third empire* arouse—and the book that bears the title—are misty, indeterminate, charged with feeling; not of this world but of the next. Germans are only too prone to abandon themselves to self-deception. The thought of a third empire might well be the most fatal of all the illusions to which they have ever yielded; it would be thoroughly German if they contented themselves with daydreaming about it. Germany might perish from her third-empire dream.

Let us be perfectly explicit: the thought of the third empire—to which we must cling as our last and highest philosophy—can only bear fruit if it is translated into concrete reality. It must quit the world of dreams and step into the political world. It must be as realist as the problems of our constitutional and national life; it must be as skeptical and pessimistic as befits the times.

There are Germans who assure us that the empire that rose out of the ruins on the ninth of November is already the third empire: democratic, republican, logically complete. These are our opportunists and eudaemonists. There are other Germans who confess their disappointment but trust to the “reasonableness” of history. These are our rationalists and pacifists. They all draw their conclusions from the premises of their party—political or utopian wishes, but not from the premises of the reality that surrounds us. They will not realize that we are a fettered and maltreated nation, perhaps on the very verge of dissolution. Our reality connotes the triumph of all the nations of the earth over the German nation; the primacy in our country of parliamentarism after the Western model—and party rule. If the third empire is ever to come it will not beneficently fall from heaven. If the third empire is to put an end to strife it will not be born in a peace of philosophic dreaming. The third empire will be an empire of organization in the midst of European chaos. The occupation of the Ruhr and its consequences worked a change in the minds of people. It was the first thing that made the nation think. It opened up the possibility of liberation for a betrayed people. It seemed about to put an end to the “policy of fulfillment” that had been merely party politics disguised as foreign policy. It threw us back on our own power of decision. It restored our will. Parliamentarism has become an institution of our public life, whose chief function would appear to be—in the name of the people—to enfeeble all political demands and all national passions.

When the revolution overwhelmed the war, burying all prospects and all hopes, we asked ourselves the inner meaning of these events. Amidst all the insanity we found a meaning in the thought that the German nation would be driven into becoming politically minded: now, at last, belatedly.

[. . .]

Today we call this resolution not conservative but nationalist.

This nationalist will desires to conserve all that in Germany is worth conserving. It wills to preserve Germany for Germany's sake, and it knows what it wills.

The nationalist does not say, as the patriot does, that Germany is worth preserving because she is German. For him the nation is not an end in itself.

The nationalist's dreams are of the future. He is a conservative because he knows that there can be no future that does not have its roots in the past. He is also a politician because he knows that past and future can only be secure if the nation is secure in the present.

But his thoughts range beyond the present. If we concentrate exclusively on the past, we might easily imagine that German history is closed. It is nowhere written that a people has a right to life eternal. For every people the hour at length strikes when they perish either by murder or by suicide. No more glorious end could be conceived for a great people than to perish in a world war where a world in arms overcame one single country.

German nationalism is in its way an expression of German universalism, and turns its thought to Europe as a whole, not in order—as Goethe in his middle period expressed it—to “lose itself in generalities” but to maintain the nation as a thing apart. The German instinct of self-preservation is penetrated by the experience to which Goethe in his age confessed that art and science alone are “poor comfort” and no substitute for the “proud consciousness” of “belonging to a strong people, respected at once and feared.” Roman nationalism thinks only of itself. German nationalism thinks of itself in relation to other things. The German nationalist wants to preserve Germany not merely because she is Germany, which might easily mean simply to preserve the past. He wants to preserve Germany as a country arising out of the revolutionary upheavals and changes of a new age. He wants to preserve Germany because she holds a central position from which alone the equilibrium of Europe can be maintained. The center, not the west as [Rudolf] Pannwitz thought and not the east as Spengler too rashly anticipated, is the creative focus of our hemisphere. The German nationalist wants to preserve German nationhood, not to exchange it for the “supernational culture” of a [Friedrich Wilhelm] Foerster—in whom the bastardization of German idealism reached its zenith—but to preserve Germany in the consciousness that the Germans have a task in the world which no other people can take from them.

[. . .]

Nationalism seeks to secure for the nation a democratic participation in which the proletariat shall also have a share.

The ideals of a nationalist movement differ as greatly from the ideals of a merely formal democracy as from the ideals of a class-conscious proletariat—above all in this: that it is a movement from above and not from below. Participation implies consciousness of the values that are to be shared. This consciousness can never be imparted unless a movement of ready acceptance comes from below; it must, however, be imparted from above.

The democrat, who always leans towards cosmopolitan points of view, and still more the proletarian who hankers after international trains of thought, both like to toy with the thought that there exists a neutral sphere in which the differences between the values of one people and of another vanish. The nationalist instead holds that its own peculiar values are the most characteristic and precious possession of a nation, the very breath of its being. These give a nation form and personality; they cannot be transferred or interchanged. [. . .]

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