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The longing for leadership

Collective memory of nobles, the perception of their present days, and the need for ‘noble-minded personalities’ in the Weimar Republic

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In 1918, a world collapsed for the German nobility. The end of World War I caused the downfall of the monarchy, made the Emperor flee to the Netherlands, established the first German democracy, and led to the abolishment of the nobility as a legal status. This may have been disturbing enough for the nobility, but it was not the end of shocking events: the economic crises of the 1920s, the inflation, and the Great Depression resulted in the loss of many landed estates and the consequent impoverishment of numerous nobles. A similar effect was caused by the reduction of the army (*Reichswehr*) to 100.000 men. Thus, the nobility lost its hold on two of its traditional occupational sectors: agriculture and military service. In short, the old regime, in many respects still dominated by nobles,¹ had gone. A world was lost, the noble world of the *Kaiserreich*. Now the nobility had to get along with the democratic order of the Weimar Republic and live in a, at least formally, ‘denobilized society’ (*entadelte Gesellschaft*).² Nevertheless, the nobility did not vanish as a social group – they remained, to some extent, a decisive factor in German history.³ An important question on this

- 1 In a European perspective: E. Glassheim, *Noble nationalists. The transformation of the Bohemian aristocracy* (Cambridge, Mass.-London, 2005) 5, 12; overdone: A.J. Mayer, *The persistence of the old regime. Europe to the Great War* (New York, 1981).
- 2 H.-G. Haupt, ‘Der Adel in einer entadelten Gesellschaft. Frankreich seit 1830’, in: H.U. Wehler, ed., *Europäischer Adel 1750-1950* (Göttingen, 1990) 286-305.
- 3 E. Conze, *Von deutschem Adel. Die Grafen von Bernstorff im zwanzigsten Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart-München, 2000); S. Malinowski, *Vom König zum Führer. Sozialer Niedergang und politische Radikalisierung im deutschen Adel zwischen Kaiserreich und NS-Staat* (third edition; Berlin, 2003).

topic concerns how the nobility reacted to the end of the monarchy and how it interpreted the circumstances of the Weimar Republic. The number of nobles who opted for democratic reform before 1918 had been very small. What was their mentality after 1918? I would like to address this question, not by analyzing the political activities of nobles in the 1920s and early 1930s, but by studying their recollection of the past.

This essay examines three topics: firstly, the collective memory of the nobility of the *Kaiserreich* after 1918, secondly, the perception of the Weimar Republic which was closely related to this remembrance, and, thirdly, the concepts of being noble, or aristocratic, articulated explicitly or implicitly in the collective memory of the nobility. Taken together, these three topics draw a vivid picture of the noble mindset in the Weimar Republic. In particular, this contribution will show the conviction that some kind of a 'noble' or 'aristocratic' attitude was necessary for the political and social order, regardless if in the past, the present, or the future. Stephan Malinowski has written a good deal on similar subjects,⁴ but we will see that my findings add some important aspects which are not treated by him in detail.

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The German historiography has recently turned attention to the fact that since the beginning of the twentieth century a longing for a 'new nobility' (*neuer Adel*) as a coming elite had pervaded the intellectual milieu of the *Kaiserreich*, the Weimar Republic, and even the Third Reich.⁵ In the diverse mentalities of this so-called 'aristocratism' (*Aristokratismus*) the 'old' or 'historical' nobility (or at least some aspects of a 'noble' way of life and worldview) were regarded as a model for a new, future elite.⁶ Vague notions of noble or aristocratic qualities exercised a charismatic power that made the nobility, or rather the *idea* of nobility, look like the epitome of appropriate rule and a ruling class in general.⁷ This elitist stratum would be constituted by the best individuals of the German society who had to be judged solely by their personal merit and character, regardless of their social background – hence the term 'aristocratism', derived from 'aristocracy' in the literal sense of the word, meaning 'rule of the best'. In 1920, the right-wing writer Ernst Freiherr von Wolzogen (1855-1934) put it this way: A state could only be governed the right way 'if the best, the aristoi, are leading it'.⁸ Discourses

4 Malinowski, *Vom König zum Führer*; idem, 'From king to Führer. The German aristocracy and the Nazi Movement', *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute London*, XXVII (2005) 5-28.

5 Malinowski, *Vom König zum Führer*; A. Gerstner, *Neuer Adel. Aristokratische Elitekonzeptionen zwischen Jahrhundertwende und Nationalsozialismus* (Darmstadt, 2008); E. Conze et al., 'Aristokratismus und Moderne 1890-1945', in: Conze et al., eds, *Aristokratismus und Moderne. Adel als politisches und kulturelles Konzept, 1890-1945* (Cologne-Weimar-Vienna, 2013) 9-29.

6 Conze et al., eds, *Aristokratismus*.

7 On noble charisma, see P. Bourdieu, 'Postface. La noblesse: capital social et capital symbolique', in: D. Lancien and M. de Saint Martin, eds, *Anciennes et nouvelles aristocraties de 1880 à nos jours* (Paris, 2007) 388; Malinowski, *Vom König zum Führer*, 44-46. On the concepts of charisma and power, see M. Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriss der verstehenden Soziologie* (Tübingen, 1972) 654-687; M. Foucault, *Power. Essential works of Foucault 1954-1984*, ed. by J.D. Faubion (3 vols; London, 2000), III.

8 E. Freiherr von Wolzogen, *Offenes Sendschreiben an den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation* (Leipzig, 1920) 8.

like this have also been labelled ‘neo-aristocratism’ (*Neoaristokratismus*), emphasizing the distinctions that they draw between the ‘old’ and the ‘new aristocracy’.⁹ Inspired by this, my essay poses the question of whether there was any kind of ‘aristocratism’ or ‘neo-aristocratic’ thinking in the autobiographic writings of the ‘old’ nobility during the Weimar Republic that was related to their collective memory. Were there any notions of ‘aristocratic’ values or personal qualities that were supposed to be independent of the social class ‘nobility’, but that were yet conceived of as the expression of a ‘noble’ essence?

Focusing on these aspects, the following main questions will be answered: What was the image of the *Kaiserreich* in the collective memory of the nobility? Which aspects were remembered positively and which were remembered negatively? How did this affect the noble perception of the present during the Weimar Republic? Which concepts of nobility or being noble emerged from this memory and the view on contemporary society? Was there any kind of neo-aristocratism among the authors in the Weimar Republic?

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One of the main purposes of this essay is to take a look at the shift of the traditional semantics of both the terms ‘nobility’ and ‘aristocracy’ towards more or less pronounced forms of neo-aristocratism that frequently took place in the Weimar Republic. This has never been done before by considering the collective memory of the nobility. There is also no survey of the collective memory of nobles in general. So an important desideratum will be fulfilled. Furthermore, all people treated in this essay were ‘ordinary’. Unlike the focus of many studies on the discourses of a ‘new nobility’, these people were not intellectuals, philosophers, or obscure scholars.¹⁰ Here we are confronted with vague ideas of ‘normal’ people in everyday life, although some of them were surely political activists or politicians. This may also deepen our understanding of the process that led to Hitler’s rise to power in 1933.

The sources consist of fifteen autobiographies. Occasionally, some other works of the authors are added. Of these memoirs, three are written by women and the others are written by men. So there is obviously a male bias in the sample. All authors were born in the 1850s and 1860s – with one exception: one of the female authors was born in 1878 (Helene von Nostitz). Nonetheless, nearly all authors belong to the same generation.¹¹ Because of this, the autobiographies provide deep insights into the memory and mentality of nobles who entered their 60s and 70s in the Weimar Republic. These writings were published between 1922 and 1933; one autobiography has been published in autumn 1933, half a year after the ‘seizure of power’ of the Nazi Party (Karl von Einem). The rest was printed long before that date.

9 S. Breuer, *Die radikale Rechte in Deutschland 1871-1945. Eine politische Ideengeschichte* (Stuttgart, 2010) 21, 72-80, 218-246.

10 For example Gerstner, *Neuer Adel*. The writer Ernst Freiherr von Wolzogen might be an exception.

11 Friedrich von Bernhardt was born in 1849, but he belongs, of course, to this generation, too.

The authors came both from the so-called ‘old’ nobility and the newly ennobled strata. That is to say that they were members of families that had belonged to the nobility for several centuries as well as members of families who had just recently received their noble status (for example some decades ago). Both ‘kinds’ of nobilities were chosen deliberately in order to analyze possible differences and similarities between them. The conclusion is clear: there are no essential differences as far as the topics of this essay are concerned.¹² This is especially important for our conclusions on the significance of neo-aristocratic schemes of perception amongst the nobility.

Some other remarks on internal differentiations are necessary: the authors had various professional and social occupations. The men were not only engaged in the military or high politics. Among other things, some were diplomats, writers, and journalists; there was also a member of the court and a policeman. The women were not only gentlewomen, but also writers, salonnières, and a lady of the manor. The authors came also from different socio-cultural regions of the German nobility (*Adelslandschaften*), including the northern German protestant as well as the southern German catholic nobility (with a strong tendency towards the Prussian and protestant nobility). Even a member of the Baltic German nobility is in the sample, Hugo Freiherr von Freytag-Loringhoven: he had been living in the *Reich* since the age of thirteen and became naturalized after serving in the Prussian Army. Among this sample are also five ‘renegades’.¹³ This means that they were democrats, at least by reason and necessity (*Vernunftrepublikaner*: Alexander Prinz zu Hohenlohe-Schillingsfürst),¹⁴ but also by conviction (Marie von Bunsen, Berthold von Deimling). Sometimes they even rejected the nobility outright (Hellmut von Gerlach, Paul Freiherr von Schoenaich), for which the mainstream of their peers (*Standesgenossen*) regarded them as misfits. The authors are thus chosen because of their different biographies.¹⁵ This wide ranging spectrum allows us to draw some conclusions from our findings on the German nobility as a whole.

The approach of this essay is inspired by a Foucauldian discourse analysis.¹⁶ It takes a look at central ‘statements’ (*énoncés*) or reoccurring patterns of thinking and speaking which shaped the noble remembrance of the German Empire, the perception of the Weimar Republic, and the image of the ‘noble’. The autobiographies studied in this article did not conduct one single discourse. The authors did not always share the same opinions, sometimes they even disagreed largely, but there are common features among them. This permits building an abstract ensemble of statements

12 Malinowski, *Vom König zum Führer*, 35, stresses the differences.

13 On this term compare *ibidem*, 460-475.

14 P. Bormann, ‘Prinz Alexander zu Hohenlohe-Schillingsfürst (1862-1924). Der adlige “Friedensfreund” im Schweizer Exil’, in: A. Hannig and M. Winkelhofer-Thyri, eds, *Die Familie Hohenlohe. Eine europäische Dynastie im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Cologne-Weimar-Vienna, 2013) 169.

15 For more information see the appendix.

16 M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of knowledge and the discourse on language* (New York, 1972).

which can be combined in the Weberian sense of an ideal type.¹⁷ This means that the whole pattern does not appear in every autobiography, but large parts of the statements reoccur in most of the writings. An 'ideal' form of such a discourse would feature all of these elements. In the following, a compilation of basic themes will be given. These themes are selected by their importance for the topics of this article and by their frequency in the analyzed discourse. Therefore aspects which occur less often are not taken into account, for instance cultural criticism.

Memory of the *Kaiserreich*

The authors regarded the end of World War I as the 'end of an epoch' (*Untergang einer Epoche*), as a transition from 'old times' to 'new times'.¹⁸ In 1918, 'old Europe' had declined, as Helene von Nostitz (1878-1944), a writer and salonnière, put it in 1924.¹⁹ From this perspective the lost war did not only mean the collapse of the German monarchy. Rather, it stood for the breakdown of the whole European culture. In 1919, Hugo Freiherr von Reischach (1854-1934), *Oberhofmarschall* at the courts of Wilhelm I and Wilhelm II, interpreted the Great War as the 'destruction of Europe', a process that inevitably lead to the decline of the 'old world'.²⁰

The democratic pacifist Alexander Prinz zu Hohenlohe-Schillingsfürst (1862-1924), diplomat, publicist, and son of former Chancellor Chlodwig Fürst zu Hohenlohe-Schillingsfürst, perceived the year 1918 as the 'downfall of the old system'.²¹ For the nobility this 'system' did not only signify the political, but also the cultural and social order of 'old Europe'. The former diplomat Oscar Freiherr von der Lancken Wakenitz (1867-1939), for example, was convinced that the European 'culture' had been destroyed by World War I 'up to its deepest core'.²² The 'good old days' of the former society had passed, as one might say in accordance with journalist Adolf von Wilke (1867-1934; family ennobled in 1881).²³ The conclusion was depressing: the world of the nobility had crumbled to the ground.

The negative tendency of these statements is clear, but the image of the times before 1918 and 1914 was not always completely positive. Although most of the authors

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- 17 M. Weber, 'Die "Objektivität" sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis', in: idem, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, ed. by Johannes Winkelmann (fifth edition; Tübingen, 1982) 146-214.
- 18 H. [von] Nostitz, *Aus dem alten Europa. Menschen und Städte* (fourth edition; Berlin, 1933 [1924]) 167; B. von Deimling, *Aus der alten in die neue Zeit. Lebenserinnerungen* (Berlin, 1930).
- 19 Nostitz, *Aus dem alten Europa*.
- 20 P. Freiherr von Schoenaich, *Mein Damaskus. Erlebnisse und Bekenntnisse* (Berlin, 1926) 254.
- 21 A. [Prinz] zu Hohenlohe[Schillingsfürst], *Aus meinem Leben* (Frankfurt, 1925) 326.
- 22 O. Freiherr von der Lancken Wakenitz, *Meine dreißig Dienstjahre 1888-1918. Potsdam – Paris – Brüssel* (Berlin, 1931) 263; Nostitz, *Aus dem alten Europa*, 138.
- 23 A. von Wilke, *Alt-Berliner Erinnerungen* (Berlin, 1930) 1; compare M. von Bunsen, *Die Welt in der ich lebte. Erinnerungen aus glücklichen Jahren 1860-1912* (Leipzig, 1929).

had fond memories of the *Kaiserreich* and tended towards a nostalgic apology of the ‘good old days’, there was also explicit criticism. This disapproval was not restricted to the nobility and existed in other social groups as well, but it had a specific noble trait. This criticism is important for a comprehensive understanding of the noble mindset after 1918.

The main point of this criticism was that since the death of Wilhelm I in 1888 and the dismissal of Bismarck in 1890 things had only gotten worse. Friedrich von Bernhardt (1849-1930), for example, a former general and adherent of the radical right, whose father had been ennobled in 1873, saw it this way.²⁴ Wilke, too, stated that there had never been any criticism of the *Kaiser* in the officer corps before 1888, but since that year discontent with the sovereign had been growing.²⁵ The Emperor himself, Wilhelm II, became one of the main targets of noble criticism. At least after the defeat in 1918, the nobility joined the choir of those who explicitly uttered their disapproval of the *Kaiser*.²⁶ Marie von Bunsen (1860-1941), a member of the high society who had frequently visited the court before the war and whose grandfather had been ennobled in 1857, gave an impressive characterization of Wilhelm II. It is representative for most of the authors. Although she did not deny any positive aspects of his personality, she described Wilhelm II as an ambivalent person with many flaws: ambitious, reckless, overestimating his personality, diffident, embarrassed, restless, full of contradictions, and without scruples – these were just some of the attributes she used to characterize him.²⁷ Hohenlohe, for his part, disrespected the Emperor’s opinions because of their ‘lack of originality and depth’. As we will see later on, many nobles regarded this as a serious reason to doubt his personal qualification to rule the German people. Hohenlohe was convinced that, due to his inferior character, the Emperor would do more damage to the monarchy and the ‘monarchic principle’ (*monarchisches Prinzip*) than the most revolutionary communist could ever do.²⁸ In this view, the Emperor turned out to be a mediocre personality. Wilke always put the venerable address ‘his majesty’ in brackets, expressing that way his disapproval of the monarch.²⁹ In the collective memory of the nobility, Wilhelm’s reputation suffered immensely from such accusations – although there were also some positive comments.³⁰ In the

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24 F. von Bernhardt, *Denkwürdigkeiten aus meinem Leben nach gleichzeitigen Aufzeichnungen und im Lichte der Erinnerung* (Berlin, 1927) III.

25 Wilke, *Alt-Berliner Erinnerungen*, 104-105.

26 On bourgeois criticism before 1918, see M. Kohlrausch, *Der Monarch im Skandal. Die Logik der Massenmedien und die Transformation der wilhelminischen Monarchie* (Berlin, 2005).

27 Bunsen, *Die Welt in der ich lebte*, 189, 194, 196-197, 199; compare H. Freiherr von Reischach, *Unter drei Kaisern* (Berlin, 1925) 187; H. von Tresckow, *Von Fürsten und anderen Sterblichen. Erinnerungen eines Kriminalkommissars* (Berlin, 1922) 133.

28 Hohenlohe, *Aus meinem Leben*, 357, 363.

29 Wilke, *Alt-Berliner Erinnerungen*, 226-227.

30 K. von Einem, *Erinnerungen eines Soldaten 1853-1933* (Leipzig, 1933) 40; H. Freiherr von Freytag-Loringhoven, *Menschen und Dinge[,] wie ich sie in meinem Leben sah* (Berlin, 1923) 67-70; Reischach, *Unter drei Kaisern*, 72-73; Wilke, *Alt-Berliner Erinnerungen*, 17.



Hugo Freiherr von Reischach (1854-1934)
(photo in: *Berliner Leben*, VIII, 1905, Heft VIII, 6)



Alexander Prinz zu Hohenlohe-Schillingsfürst (1862-1924) (photo in: *Erinnerungs-Blatt an das III. oberelsässische Gausängerfest zu Münster i. E. am 29. Juni 1902*)

end, Wilhelm II remained at best controversial and far more often heavily criticized.

A central accusation concerned Bismarck's dismissal in 1890. Several critics regarded this decision as one of the major faults, if not *the* major fault, of Wilhelm II. Reischach wrote that no German could stand this fact without pain. 'Many upright monarchists suffered immensely from this time on', he summarized briefly.³¹ The former minister of war (*Kriegsminister*), Karl von Einem (1853-1934), perceived the retreat as a 'personal and political tragedy' with 'terrible consequences' because none of Bismarck's successors could compete with his grandeur.³² Reischach was convinced that none of them had been prepared for their task, and Hohenlohe dismissed them as 'epigones' putting Bismarck's work at stake.³³ The unanimous interpretation was that since the dismissal of the 'great chancellor' the government had pursued a bad

³¹ Reischach, *Unter drei Kaisern*, 72, 168.

³² Einem, *Erinnerungen*, 40; Freytag, *Menschen*, 66.

³³ Reischach, *Unter drei Kaisern*, 171; Hohenlohe, *Aus meinem Leben*, 292.



Karl von Einem (1853-1934) (photo in: *Berliner Leben, VIII (1905), Heft VIII, 5*)

policy.³⁴ Once again this fell back on Wilhelm II because in the eyes of his critics, for instance the former chief inspector Hans von Tresckow (1863-1934), he was unable to choose the right people.³⁵

This criticism culminated in the complaint that the Wilhelminian era suffered from a serious lack of important personalities and true leaders. Hugo Freiherr von

34 For example, Wilke, *Alt-Berliner Erinnerungen*, 46 (quoted), 227; Bernhardi, *Denkwürdigkeiten*, 528, 531-532; Einem, *Erinnerungen*, 61, 157; Freytag, *Menschen und Dinge*, 139, 148, 150, 280; Lancken, *Meine dreißig Dienstjahre*, 87, 125, 212, 268.

35 Tresckow, *Von Fürsten*, 133.

Freytag-Lornighoven (1855-1924), a former general, put it in a nutshell: 'We missed a strong, leading hero'.³⁶ This feeling did not only concern World War I, but also the times before 1914. In retrospect, the need for leadership (*Führung*) had become one of the most important issues of the *Kaiserreich* since 1890.³⁷ Once again, Freytag-Lornighoven found explicit words: after the removal of Bismarck, the German nation had just been administrated instead of being 'truly led'; there had been no 'leader [*Führer*] of the nation', he moaned.³⁸ Even democratic renegades as Hohenlohe or Paul Freiherr von Schoenaich (1866-1954) saw it this way. Hohenlohe deplored the retirement of the first generation of influential politicians in the parliament, the *Reichstag*, and their disastrous replacement by 'epigones'. As a dramatic result he identified the Germans being 'bewitched by wrong leaders'.³⁹ Schoenaich, a former officer who turned into a pacifist after World War I, agreed with this opinion. In a tractate published in 1924 he identified one decisive factor for the failure of the 'old system': the unsuccessful 'quest for leadership' (*Führerfrage*).⁴⁰ Looking back from the 1920s and early 30s, the opinion was clear: the Wilhelminian era was fundamentally affected by the shortcomings of the political leaders and the lack of adequate alternatives.

Although many contemporaries disapproved of the Emperor's flight to the Netherlands at the end of World War I,⁴¹ this motive appears rarely in the sample.⁴² Whereas Reischach criticized Wilhelm II at the same time as he tried to find an apology for his behaviour, the renegades Hohenlohe and Schoenaich condemned the escape harshly.⁴³ This may depend on the fact that convinced monarchists believed the monarch to be beyond criticism. This 'monarchic principle' postulated keeping the faith in the 'idea of monarchy' even if the 'bearer of the crown' was criticisable.⁴⁴ During the German Empire many monarchists had internalized this so strongly that they never criticized the Emperor in public.⁴⁵ Although this changed after 1918, faith in

³⁶ Freytag, *Menschen und Dinge*, vi.

³⁷ Compare the different, but adaptable perception of nobles around 1900: M. Seelig, 'Die "soziale Aristokratie" in der Krise der Moderne. Adelsvorstellungen und Weltbild des *Deutschen Adelsblatts* um 1900', in: Conze e.a., eds, *Aristokratismus*, 148-170.

³⁸ Freytag, *Menschen und Dinge*, 65, 150; compare Einem, *Erinnerungen*, 83, 157, 189.

³⁹ Hohenlohe, *Aus meinem Leben*, 377, 344.

⁴⁰ P. Freiherr von Schoenaich, *Vom Chaos zum Aufbau!* (Bielefeld, [1924]) (= Junge Republik. Bausteine zum neuen Werden, issue 8) 40; compare idem, *Mein Damaskus*, 215, 239.

⁴¹ M. Kohlrausch, 'Die Flucht des Kaisers. Doppeltes Scheitern adlig-bürgerlicher Monarchiekonzepte', in: H. Reif, ed., *Adel und Bürgertum in Deutschland II. Entwicklungslinien und Wendepunkte im 20. Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 2001) 65-101.

⁴² Compare, by contrast, the criticism analyzed by Malinowski, *Vom König zum Führer*, 228-246.

⁴³ Reischach, *Unter drei Kaisern*, 285-286; Hohenlohe, *Aus meinem Leben*, 344; Schoenaich, *Mein Damaskus*, 204-205, 209.

⁴⁴ Freytag, *Menschen und Dinge*, 67; compare M. Seelig, 'Der Kampf gegen die Moderne. Krisenwahrnehmung und -bewältigung im *Deutschen Adelsblatt* um 1900', in: M. Grunewald and U. Puschner, eds, *Krisenwahrnehmungen in Deutschland um 1900. Zeitschriften als Foren der Umbruchszeit im wilhelminischen Reich* (Berlin, 2010) 459, 473-475.

⁴⁵ Einem, *Erinnerungen*, 40; Hohenlohe, *Aus meinem Leben*, 261; Wilke, *Alt-Berliner Erinnerungen*, 226.

the ‘monarchic principle’, in some way still intact, may be a reason for the general silence on this subject in the autobiographies.

Besides criticism, there was also nostalgia in the autobiographies. The authors did not reject the *Kaiserreich* in general. On the contrary, the generation treated here appreciated it in many respects. Bunsen, for example, looked back on ‘happy times’, as she put it in the title of her book. She was convinced that the Wilhelminian epoch had not been insignificant.⁴⁶ Freytag-Loringhoven felt the same way. He tried to defend the ‘old system’ by saying *en passant* that it had not been condemnable at all.⁴⁷ The memoirs of Nostitz and Wilke struck a similar tone, and the others followed implicitly – except for, of course, the democratic renegades who criticized the political system vehemently. The rest agreed that the German Empire as such had been glorious and successful.⁴⁸ To a large extent, the authors explained this implicitly by the ‘aristocratic’ structure of the German Empire. In the opinion of the noble mainstream, the *Kaiserreich* was an admirable achievement by admirable personalities that had just been led by incapable people later on. Freytag-Loringhoven, for instance, could not recognize any internal faults leading to its ruin.⁴⁹ In the eyes of Bernhardi, the years from 1871 to 1890 were the culmination of German history and glory after Wilhelm I and Bismarck had achieved the German unification.⁵⁰ Nearly all authors regarded the Emperor and his chancellor as outstanding statesmen and honourable individuals who were representative for the zeitgeist of the early Empire. Sometimes they mentioned men like Moltke, Schlieffen, or Tirpitz as remarkable leaders, too, but their characterization could vary widely. Wilhelm I and Bismarck remained *the* examples of charismatic leadership that almost everybody could agree on, even the renegade Hohenlohe, though he criticized Bismarck for his authoritarian character and politics.⁵¹ The first Emperor and the ‘great chancellor’ symbolized the type of an exceptional ‘personality’ (*Persönlichkeit*) or a ‘great man’ (*großer Mann*) that most of the authors had been missing since 1890.⁵² After 1918 this should become an enormous problem.

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Perception of the Weimar Republic

In the end, most authors recalled the German Empire as a time of splendour, despite all criticism. The Weimar Republic, contrarily, appeared in a very different light.

⁴⁶ Bunsen, *Die Welt in der ich lebte*, 189.

⁴⁷ Freytag, *Menschen und Dinge*, 328; compare *ibidem*, vi.

⁴⁸ For example L. [Gans Edle Herrin] zu Putlitz, *Aus dem Bildersaal meines Lebens 1862-1931* (Leipzig, 1931) 174.

⁴⁹ Freytag, *Menschen und Dinge*, 150.

⁵⁰ Bernhardi, *Denkwürdigkeiten*, iii.

⁵¹ Hohenlohe, *Aus meinem Leben*, 253-297.

⁵² *Ibidem*, 265, 270.

Schoenaich and Wilke regarded their present days as times of ‘misery’ and ‘sorrow’; Hohenlohe, Nostitz, and Wolzogen deplored the chaos and the loss of any order in the aftermath of the revolution in November 1918.⁵³ While the 1860s and 1870s symbolized for Einem the glorious rise of Germany, the year 1918 symbolized its pitiful decline. He remembered the German revolution as the most depressing event of his life.⁵⁴ Like many of his contemporaries, Freytag-Loringhoven condemned the Treaty of Versailles as a disgrace putting Germany into slavery.⁵⁵ Evidently the Weimar Republic did not enjoy much prestige among the majority of the nobility.

Unsurprisingly, most nobles disrespected the republic as a political system.⁵⁶ The cohorts born in the 1850s and 1860s remained largely loyal to the monarchy.⁵⁷ They considered the Weimar Republic an unworthy successor of the glorified *Reich*. Many criticized the democracy for its alleged tendency to put inadequate people in power. Lancken Wakenitz pronounced a classical stereotype of this antidemocratic attitude: he rejected parliamentarianism because it was ruled by parties. Since in the contemporary system all members of the parliament would just act as professional representatives of their parties and their clientele, he demanded that all parliamentarians had to be independent of any party ties. He asked for political reforms bringing true ‘personalities’ back into the parliament⁵⁸ – ‘personalities’ as he thought to recall them from the early days of the Empire. In this mindset, the term ‘personality’ (*Persönlichkeit*) designated a certain image of the human individual as, for example, in the phrase ‘Cabinet of Personalities’ (*Kabinett der Persönlichkeiten*), a cabinet of independent politicians established in 1928.⁵⁹ Although essential features of this important concept are already known, the concrete contents should be spelled out more precisely by future research. For Lancken Wakenitz a ‘personality’ meant an outstanding character full of will and power, and free of any coercion. Thus, he identified the ‘personalities’ he asked for with ‘political talents’. ‘Germany needs proactive personalities’, he stated (*Persönlichkeiten mit Initiative*). Lancken Wakenitz believed that the Weimar Republic suffered gravely from a lack of ‘personalities’.⁶⁰ Even the renegade Hohenlohe shared this opinion. In the typical manner of cultural criticism,

53 Wilke, *Alt-Berliner Erinnerungen*, 233; Schoenaich, *Mein Damaskus*, 244; Hohenlohe, *Aus meinem Leben*, 287; Nostitz, *Aus dem alten Europa*, 128; E. [Freiherr] von Wolzogen, *Wie ich mich ums Leben brachte. Erinnerungen und Erfahrungen* (Braunschweig-Hamburg, 1922) 316.

54 Einem, *Erinnerungen*, 5, 17-18; compare Putlitz, *Aus dem Bildersaal*, 168, 174; Wolzogen, *Wie ich mich ums Leben brachte*, 322.

55 Freytag, *Menschen und Dinge*, 9, 61; compare Hohenlohe, *Aus meinem Leben*, 384, 411; Lancken, *Meine dreißig Dienstjahre*, 36; Reischach, *Unter drei Kaisern*, 244.

56 Freytag, *Menschen und Dinge*, 67; Reischach, *Unter drei Kaisern*, 157; Wilke, *Alt-Berliner Erinnerungen*, 19; compare Malinowski, *Vom König zum Führer*.

57 Explicitly Bernhardi, *Denkwürdigkeiten*, 529; Einem, *Erinnerungen*, 142; Putlitz, *Aus dem Bildersaal*, 101, 174; compare *ibidem*, 168-170.

58 Lancken, *Meine dreißig Dienstjahre*, 281-282.

59 Compare Putlitz, *Aus dem Bildersaal*, 184; Bernhardi, *Denkwürdigkeiten*, for example 256.

60 Lancken, *Meine dreißig Dienstjahre*, 281-282; compare *ibidem*, 285.

he lamented that the levelling tendencies of the present days (*nivellierendes Zeitalter*) would diminish the number of ‘outstanding individuals’.⁶¹ His political fellow Schoenaich wished for more ‘men of character’ (*Charaktere*), too, and demanded a ‘democratic creation of leaders’ (*Schaffung von Führern auf dem demokratischen Wege*).⁶² On the other side of the political spectrum, Wolzogen, who later sympathized with the Nazi Party, also longed for the arrival of a leader as early as in 1922.⁶³ These examples clearly show that the need for leadership and strong ‘personalities’ was often diagnosed by nobles as a deficit of the Weimar Republic, regardless of their political orientations. But this was also true for the German Empire after 1888/90. In their memory, most authors identified a development that arose from conditions before 1918 and now reached its climax.

Concepts of nobility and aristocratism

68

This longing for leadership depended on a specific image of ‘nobleness’ (*Adeligkeit*) that had been widespread those days inside and outside the nobility.⁶⁴ Male and female members of the nobility considered themselves to embody certain values and character traits. Especially noblemen believed, and were believed, to be sincere, dutiful, and just.⁶⁵ Nobles entitled themselves as ‘originals’ (*Originale*),⁶⁶ meaning people ‘independent in thought and action’.⁶⁷ The nobility claimed a special kind of attitude that has often been called *vornehm* (genteel, refined, or excellent).⁶⁸ Malinowski does not pay very much attention to this notion in his comprehensive study of the noble mindset, but it might be the key for understanding more traditional semantics of ‘nobleness’ and correlated (neo-)aristocratisms among older nobles at the beginning of the twentieth century. Since the 1840s the nobility has been defining themselves increasingly by immaterial values.⁶⁹ *Vornehmheit* (gentility, refinement, excellence) sometimes served as an umbrella term for the noble scale of values. Therefore, it is worthwhile to take a closer look at it. This vague notion meant something exqui-

61 Hohenlohe, *Aus meinem Leben*, 270; compare Wilke, *Alt-Berliner Erinnerungen*, 80.

62 Schoenaich, *Vom Chaos zum Aufbau*, 22, 39.

63 Wolzogen, *Wie ich mich ums Leben brachte*, 327.

64 M. Funck and S. Malinowski, ‘Geschichte von oben. Autobiographien als Quelle einer Sozial- und Kulturgeschichte des deutschen Adels in Kaiserreich und Weimarer Republik’, *Historische Anthropologie*, VII (1999) 236-270; Malinowski, *Vom König zum Führer*; Gerstner, *Neuer Adel*.

65 Lancken, *Meine dreißig Dienstjahre*, 24, 26, 42; Freytag, *Menschen und Dinge*, 5; Putlitz, *Aus dem Bildersaal*, 64, 97.

66 Wilke, *Alt-Berliner Erinnerungen*, 79-86; this is a chapter called ‘Originals’, just treating nobles and, nota bene, ennobled persons.

67 Lancken, *Meine dreißig Dienstjahre*, 24.

68 For example, Einem, *Erinnerungen*, 141, 144; Hohenlohe, *Aus meinem Leben*, 80; Reischach, *Unter drei Kaisern*, 74-75, 115, 165, 275.

69 D. Menning, *Standesgemäße Ordnung in der Moderne. Adlige Familienstrategien und Gesellschaftsentwürfe in Deutschland 1840-1945* (München, 2014).

site or superior which, in its nebulous quality, was supposed to express the essence of nobility.⁷⁰ The members of the nobility defined themselves as *edel* (gallant, noble), as refined in their whole being. Hence, the contemporaries often called a male noble *Edelmann* (noble-man in its literal sense).⁷¹ *Vornehmheit* was one of the main characteristics of being noble in the unsophisticated modes of thought that our authors adhered to in everyday life. There are numerous passages in the autobiographies describing the ‘inner refinement’ (*innere Vornehmheit*) of a ‘nobleman’.⁷² Although these characteristics are just mentioned in passing, the charismatic notions of the terms *Vornehmheit* and ‘nobility’ in general are clear. In our sample, a truly noble person was regarded as a ‘sincere character’ (*lauterer Charakter*) full of ‘righteousness’ (*Gerechtigkeit*), ‘goodness’ (*Güte*), ‘helpfulness’ (*Hilfsbereitschaft*), and ‘dignity’ (*Würde*).⁷³ Wolzogen, for instance, believed that such qualities caused a ‘noble attitude’ (*vornehme Gesinnung*).⁷⁴ For several authors another way of expressing the exceptional attitude of male nobles was to call them *ritterlich* (chivalrous).⁷⁵ This referred to the historical myth of the knight (*Ritter*) and provided the nobility with an implicit reservoir of venerable, but nonetheless nebulous ascriptions. Among them were notions of the gentleman or the righteous soldier.⁷⁶ Most of them were inspired by the images of the *honnête homme* and the cavalier of early modern times, although they were not quite the same. Sometimes ‘chivalrous’ just meant being polite, in other cases it indicated more complex notions as, for example, ‘respect for the human dignity of the subordinate’, as the democrat Schoenaich put it.⁷⁷ But in the end, these characteristics were never spelled out. Instead they remained ambiguous, which is exactly what made them useful in constructing the alleged superiority of the nobility.⁷⁸ In the common opinion, such values were usually regarded as typically noble because they were handed down through the history and the traditions of the nobility.⁷⁹ Nobles – especially men, but also women – understood themselves as perfect embodi-

70 On the French aristocracy compare E. Mension-Rigau, *Aristocrates et grands bourgeois*. Éducation, traditions, values (Paris, 1994) 264-265.

71 Einem, *Erinnerungen*, 167; Freytag, *Menschen und Dinge*, 5, 280; Hohenlohe, *Aus meinem Leben*, 261; Wilke, *Alt-Berliner Erinnerungen*, 16.

72 For example, Putlitz, *Aus dem Bildersaal*, 52.

73 Ibidem, 64; Bernhardi, *Denkwürdigkeiten*, 191; Einem, *Erinnerungen*, 141, 167; Hohenlohe, *Aus meinem Leben*, 261; Wolzogen, *Wie ich mich ums Leben brachte*, 327.

74 Compare ibidem, 148, 327.

75 Einem, *Erinnerungen*, 141; Freytag, *Menschen und Dinge*, 41, 54; Hohenlohe, *Aus meinem Leben*, 80; Reischach, *Unter drei Kaisern*, 165; Putlitz, *Aus dem Bildersaal*, 138.

76 For changes of these ideals in the officer corps see M. Funck, ‘Vom Höfling zum soldatischen Mann. Varianten und Umwandlungen adeliger Männlichkeit zwischen Kaiserreich und Nationalsozialismus’, in: E. Conze and M. Wienfort, eds, *Adel und Moderne. Deutschland im europäischen Vergleich im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Cologne-Weimar-Vienna, 2004) 205-235.

77 Putlitz, *Aus dem Bildersaal*, 102-103; Schoenaich, *Vom Chaos zum Aufbau*, 23.

78 Compare Conze, *Von deutschem Adel*, 388; Mension-Rigau, *Aristocrates*, 234, 273.

79 Freytag, *Menschen und Dinge*, 5, 35; Hohenlohe, *Aus meinem Leben*, 329; compare Mension-Rigau, *Aristocrates*, 271.



Hugo Freiherr von Freytag-Lornighoven
(1855-1924) (photo Staatsbibliothek zu
Berlin/Preußischer Kulturbesitz)



Lita zu Putlitz (1862-1935) (Ferdinand Keller,
1889)

ments of refined ‘personalities’.⁸⁰ This is the second key to the noble mindset studied in this essay.

The nobility considered a ‘personality’ an extraordinary individual with an excellent ‘character’. A large number of nobles believed that such dispositions could be acquired by education and tradition.⁸¹ This benefited the nobility because they defined themselves by history and tradition.⁸² Due to their descent and customs, nobles believed to possess the perfect requirements for becoming ‘personalities’. Hohenlohe identified a ‘personality’ with the concept of a great individual or a ‘great man’.⁸³ The

⁸⁰ Compare Putlitz, *Aus dem Bildersaal*, 64, 94-97, 167.

⁸¹ Compare Hohenlohe, *Aus meinem Leben*, 332.

⁸² For example Einem, *Erinnerungen*, 7; Freytag, *Menschen und Dinge*, 3-5; Hohenlohe, *Aus meinem Leben*, 245-251; Lancken, *Meine dreißig Dienstjahre*, 13-14; Schoenaich, *Mein Damaskus*, 9; Tresckow, *Von Fürsten*, 12-13.

⁸³ Hohenlohe, *Aus meinem Leben*, 265.

same goes for Einem: he regarded ‘personalities’ as unique characters or impressive ‘people of great originality’ (*Gestalten von großer Originalität*).⁸⁴ Such persons were supposed to be independent and to act in accordance with what they believed in.⁸⁵ Thus, a ‘personality’ always stayed true to its convictions, regardless of any adversities confronting it. Hohenlohe, for instance, regarded himself as an ‘independence loving character’, not only able to ‘think on his own’, but also free to speak his mind and to act accordingly.⁸⁶ One main characteristic of a ‘personality’ consisted in its alleged will and ability to be active (*Wille zur Tat*).⁸⁷ Therefore Hohenlohe imagined a ‘personality’ a ‘man of the deed’ or ‘of action’ (*Tatmensch*).⁸⁸ This kind of individual always had the power to exercise his ‘will’ – in each and every moment.⁸⁹

Unsurprisingly, Hohenlohe chose the Nietzschean term ‘overman’ (*Uebermensch* [sic]) to designate this type of human being.⁹⁰ Nietzsche’s philosophy had an enormous impact on neo-aristocratic belief systems because they originated in Nietzscheanism.⁹¹ In Hohenlohe’s opinion, the term ‘overman’ denoted an ‘extraordinary individuality’ superior to others. Lita zu Putlitz (1862-1935), a gentlewoman and unmarried lady of the manor, regarded one of her female noble friends as a *Herrenmensch* (dominant person). In her opinion ‘true’ noblemen and noblewomen were sovereign people.⁹²

Freytag-Loringhoven understood ‘personalities’ as ‘natural leaders’ (*geborene Führernaturen*) or even some sort of a ‘master race’ (*Herrenrasse*).⁹³ This term could be used without any references to racism. In this context, it is rather meant in a spiritual or cultural way. Here the discourses on neo-aristocracy coincided with those on leadership. Freytag’s view on ‘natural leaders’ emerging from a ‘master race’ meant that true ‘personalities’ capable of leadership were supposed to rule the masses by their natural disposition to be *Herren* (masters). This is also what Putlitz intended. In the same vein Wolzogen regarded himself as a ‘natural-born leader’.⁹⁴ The ‘herd men without character’ (*charakterlose Herdenmenschen*), as the ‘leftist’ Schoenaich

84 Einem, *Erinnerungen*, 45; compare Hohenlohe, *Aus meinem Leben*, 136.

85 Freytag, *Menschen und Dinge*, 332; Hohenlohe, *Aus meinem Leben*, 412-413; Putlitz, *Aus dem Bildersaal*, 94, 167; Reischach, *Unter drei Kaisern*, 239; Schoenaich, *Mein Damaskus*, 15, 203, 242; Wolzogen, *Wie ich mich ums Leben brachte*, 280; H. von Gerlach, *Erinnerungen eines Junkers* (Berlin, [1925]) 14.

86 Hohenlohe, *Aus meinem Leben*, 18-19.

87 Einem, *Erinnerungen*, 27; compare Bernhardi, *Denkwürdigkeiten*, 57.

88 Hohenlohe, *Aus meinem Leben*, 283.

89 Nostitz, *Aus dem alten Europa*, 117.

90 Hohenlohe, *Aus meinem Leben*, 265, 282.

91 Compare Nostitz, *Aus dem alten Europa*, 102-103; Schoenaich, *Vom Chaos zum Aufbau*, 223; idem, *Mein Damaskus*, 223; Wolzogen, *Wie ich mich ums Leben brachte*, especially 267-268; critically on Nietzsche: Bernhardi, *Denkwürdigkeiten*, 271; on Nietzsche and neo-aristocracy in general see Breuer, *Die radikale Rechte*, 72-80; Gerstner, *Neuer Adel*, 166-167.

92 Putlitz, *Aus dem Bildersaal*, 167; compare Wolzogen, *Wie ich mich ums Leben brachte*, 319, 327.

93 Freytag, *Menschen und Dinge*, 44, 116.

94 Wolzogen, *Wie ich mich ums Leben brachte*, 273.

put it in a Nietzschean phrase,⁹⁵ needed the care of ‘shepherds’, some sort of watchful masters leading the disoriented ‘masses’. The German word *Herr* (lord, master, nowadays used as ‘Mr.’) derives from the verb *herrschen* (to rule) and was once exclusively used to designate noblemen.⁹⁶ This explains why (pseudo-)Nietzschean terms like *Herrenmensch*, *Herrenrasse*, or *Herdenmensch* fitted perfectly into neo-aristocratic discourses. Here, Nazism comes instantly to mind, but these concepts were in use long before the Nazis entered the political scene. They were already adaptable to the common and somehow old-fashioned understanding of nobles as *vornehm*. Nonetheless, political translation into radical right-wing ideologies was possible.⁹⁷ Concerning Interwar Romania, for example, Constantin Iordachi speaks of an “‘aristo-fascist’ discourse” in order to indicate the affinities between neo-aristocratic and fascist concepts of a new elite.⁹⁸

72 In our sample, ‘personalities’ and leaders could also be called *vornehm*, which in this case can be additionally translated as ‘distinguished’ or ‘of superior rank’. Once again the attributes used by the authors for leaders and ‘personalities’ make clear that such individuals were supposed to stay high above the rest, as real *over-* or *super-*men do. Furthermore, *vornehm* was another German word associated closely with ‘nobility’. Being *vornehm*, consequently, meant some kind of being ‘noble’. Wolzogen obviously had a similar association because in his opinion refinement (*Vornehmheit*) was the primary virtue of a leader.⁹⁹ He understood a leader as an ‘aristocratic’ individual in the literal sense. Who else should therefore be more qualified to produce such ‘personalities’ and leaders than the nobility? The answer was clear: Wolzogen was convinced that, for example, the Baltic German nobility were ‘leaders’ because of their ‘master-like and self-confident attitude’ (*herrenmäßige selbstsichere Haltung*).¹⁰⁰

Given the similarities between these concepts of aristocracy and leadership, it is clear that ‘nobility’ or ‘aristocracy’ were equated with charismatic leadership.¹⁰¹ Most of our authors believed that a true nobleman was a charismatic ‘personality’ and therefore a perfect leader of his fellowship.¹⁰² Max Weber defines charisma as an extraordinary quality attributed to someone by his followers. The powers exercised by this person are neither hereditary nor authorized by any legal statute. They are personal qualities, perceived as an exceptional gift that has to be proven every-

95 Schoenaich, *Vom Chaos zum Aufbau*, 223.

96 W. Demel, *Der europäische Adel. Vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich, 2005) 54.

97 Compare Malinowski, *Vom König zum Führer*.

98 C. Iordachi, ‘Aristocracy, fascism, and the social origins of mass politics in Romania’, in: K. Urbach, ed., *European aristocracies and the radical right 1918-1939* (Oxford, 2007) 229.

99 Wolzogen, *Wie ich mich ums Leben brachte*, 327; compare *ibidem*, 307.

100 *Ibidem*, 299.

101 Compare the “‘charismatic aristocracy’” of the Romanian Iron Guard treated by Iordachi, ‘Aristocracy’, 226-228.

102 Gender questions could not be treated here, but they should surely be taken into account.

day anew.¹⁰³ This means that true leaders can emerge, theoretically, from every social group, for there are no legal, socio-political, or socio-economic restraints defining charismatic leadership. It is rather a socio-cultural or cultural-political phenomenon that does not depend on any class specific origins. As long as charismatic leaders are able to use their charismatic skills they are acknowledged as leaders. If their charismatic powers vanish, they also lose their potential to be leaders. Some of these considerations perfectly fit into neo-aristocratic opinions.

The authors of our sample did not believe that ‘personalities’ and leaders existed solely among the historical nobility: the charismatic ability to become a ‘personality’ could also be found in other social groups. They adhered to a form of neo-aristocracy or ‘open’ semantics of the ‘aristocratic’ that attributed ‘aristocratic’ values to non-noble people as well. This community of ‘aristocratic’ people was conceptualized as an open elite, independent of birth, wealth, title, or any other formal status. Its decisive features were specific inner values and character traits – in this case especially *Vornehmheit*. Sometimes the contemporaries called this ‘new nobility’ ‘true nobility’ or ‘true aristocracy’ in order to distinguish it from the merely legal and hence, in terms of character, potentially ‘false’ nobility.¹⁰⁴ One way of defining this ensemble of extraordinary individuals was to understand it as a ‘nobility of the mind’ or ‘of attitude’ (*Geistesadel* or *Gesinnungsadel*). In this context, the German term *Geist* does not mean ‘education’ or ‘intellect’. It rather implies ‘way of thinking’ or *ethos*. This is exactly what Wolzogen meant by the term ‘aristocracy of the mind’ (*Aristokratie des Geistes*).¹⁰⁵ Implicitly, this idea is best expressed in the autobiography of Nostitz. She talks, for example, about a non-noble friend of hers, the artist Philipp Fiedler, who tried to refine or ennoble life (*veredeln*).¹⁰⁶ This is precisely what this kind of neo-aristocracy was all about: refining human life and cultivating *Vornehmheit*. It was not based on racist assumptions, as they are stressed in Malinowski’s study.¹⁰⁷ Hohenlohe, for example, interpreted the political intrigues during the German Empire as an example of the ‘eternal war of the low and the mean against the noble and the beautiful’ (*ewige Kampf des Niedrigen und Gemeinen gegen das Edle und Schöne*).¹⁰⁸ The memoirs of Putlitz are also pervaded by the desire to refine her personal circumstances through art and a ‘noble’ way of life – an ability she also attributed to non-nobles.¹⁰⁹ This kind of (neo-)aristocracy based on the supposed refinement, gentility, and excellence of ‘truly’ noble people. Even the radical racist Wolzogen regarded *Vornehmheit*, or in other words an ‘honourable attitude’, as

103 Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, 654-661.

104 Gerstner, *Neuer Adel*, 144-147.

105 Wolzogen, *Wie ich mich ums Leben brachte*, 287; compare *ibidem*, 325.

106 Nostitz, *Aus dem alten Europa*, 109.

107 Malinowski, *Vom König zum Führer*.

108 Hohenlohe, *Aus meinem Leben*, 240.

109 Putlitz, *Aus dem Bildersaal*, 137, 152-155.

the key feature of the coming new aristocracy. Therefore, he called his credo an 'aristocratic worldview'.¹¹⁰

Hohenlohe also stated that a person should only be judged by his character.¹¹¹ If a person had a 'noble' character, he consequently belonged to the 'nobility of attitude'. Einem agreed with this opinion. He believed that politics should only be done by 'noble-minded' or, literally, by 'aristocratically disposed personalities' (*aristokratisch gesinnte Persönlichkeiten*).¹¹² Significantly, he did not say 'by aristocrats'. His idea of 'aristocratic characters' included non-nobles as well. Freytag-Loringhoven saw it the same way. He was convinced that the democratic and levelling developments of recent times prevented the emergence of 'self-confident aristocratic personalities'.¹¹³ 'Germany needs personalities', Lancken Wakenitz claimed, regardless of their social background and political orientation. Nobody should be excluded, as long as they were appropriate. The most important task of the present days, he believed, was the 'systematic selection of personalities', even from the working classes.¹¹⁴ All mentioned authors wished for a new elite, an elite of true 'personalities' or leaders. Even Schoenaich felt an urgent longing for leadership, although he regarded himself as a democratic outcast vehemently opposing his noble peers.¹¹⁵ Nevertheless, he demanded a 'true democracy' combined with a 'true aristocracy'. He wished for 'natural leaders' (*Führernaturen*) gaining the confidence of the 'masses' by 'veritable merit'. Only the people (*Volck*), the ones who are led, should have the right to empower their leaders. This is what he meant by a 'democratic creation of leaders', although he did not point out exactly how this was to happen.¹¹⁶

The need for leadership seemed to be legitimized by the political immaturity of the German people.¹¹⁷ Some of the 'right-wing' authors explained this immaturity by an inborn racial or cultural trait of the German people, the 'left-wing' by the authoritarian structures of the *Kaiserreich*.¹¹⁸ On the 'right', the lower and middle classes were believed to be incapable of autonomous decision-making because of their lack of political maturity and know-how. Like little children, the Germans needed the guide of a paternalistic custodian. On the 'left' such an immaturity was diagnosed, too, but it was explained by the oppressive character of the German *Obrigkeitsstaat* (authoritarian state) before 1918. From this perspective, the German nation had to be

110 Wolzogen, *Offenes Sendschreiben*, 18; idem, *Wie ich mich ums Leben brachte*, 307.

111 Hohenlohe, *Aus meinem Leben*, 329.

112 Einem, *Erinnerungen*, 81.

113 Freytag, *Menschen und Dinge*, 166.

114 Lancken, *Meine dreißig Dienstjahre*, 282-285.

115 Schoenaich, *Mein Damaskus*, 7; compare Malinowski, *Vom König zum Führer*, 469.

116 Schoenaich, *Mein Damaskus*, 21-22, 39.

117 For this belief outside the nobility see Kohlraush, *Der Monarch im Skandal*, 417.

118 Bernhardt, *Denkwürdigkeiten*, 121; Einem, *Erinnerungen*, 66; Reischach, *Unter drei Kaisern*, 193; Wilke, *Alt-Berliner Erinnerungen*, 48; Hohenlohe, *Aus meinem Leben*, 26, 128, 394-395; Schoenaich, *Mein Damaskus*, 223; idem, *Vom Chaos zum Aufbau*, 35-36.

educated in liberty first before getting the chance of becoming a self-governing democracy. Teachers were necessary to achieve this. Although the reasons differed, the result was the same: both spectra demanded the creation of new leaders helping the Germans out of their contemporary misery. ‘Leadership’ became the task of the day – on the ‘right’ as well as on the ‘left’ of our sample.

Is there a future?

Although almost all authors criticized the present times intensely, they were not hopeless. There was no radical pessimism or fatalism. On the contrary, most of the authors were cautiously optimistic. They hoped for better times and believed in a realistic chance of achieving them.¹¹⁹ Reischach was the most optimistic because he believed resolutely in the resurrection of the German nation – at least as a rhetoric device.¹²⁰ Others were less optimistic, but they hoped for a better future, too.¹²¹ Hohenlohe was convinced that the Germans stood at a decisive turning point of their history: either the German nation would rise again or it would perish.¹²² At the turning point of a crisis, for example the turning point of a disease, there are usually two possibilities expected as the most likely developments: one for the worst or one for the best.¹²³ In Hohenlohe’s opinion, the German nation now faced a moment of fateful decision that the ancient Greeks called *krisis*. Bernhardt, too, recognized such a ‘crossroad’. In his opinion, it consisted just of two possible directions: one way leading to the resurrection of the German nation and the other to its doom.¹²⁴ Both definitely hoped for a positive development.

Whatever the individual degree of optimism might have been, the majority saw at least the possibility of a brighter future. Wolzogen, for instance, was confident that one day a leader would appear and that his concept of an ‘aristocratic art’ would be triumphant.¹²⁵ Einem shared this optimistic view. In 1933, his dream finally came true. He was convinced that after Hitler’s ‘seizure of power’ a ‘new Reich’ would emerge – ‘maybe even more glorious than the one before’. The so-called ‘Day of Potsdam’ on 21 March 1933, as Hitler pretended allegiance to President Paul von Hindenburg and

119 On optimism in the Weimar Republic, see R. Graf, *Die Zukunft der Weimarer Republik. Krisen und Zukunftsaussagen in Deutschland 1918-1933* (Munich, 2008).

120 Reischach, *Unter drei Kaisern*, 244, 255.

121 Deimling, *Aus der alten in die neue Zeit*, 281; Freytag, *Menschen und Dinge*, 303; Gerlach, *Erinnerungen*, 158; Nostitz, *Aus dem alten Europa*, 51; Schoenaich *Vom Chaos zum Aufbau*, 28, 45; idem, *Mein Damaskus*, 204; Tresckow, *Von Fürsten*, 221; Wilke, *Alt-Berliner Erinnerungen*, 231.

122 Hohenlohe, *Aus meinem Leben*, 336, 343-344, 395.

123 Compare R. Koselleck, ‘Krise’, in: O. Brunner, W. Conze and R. Koselleck, eds, *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland* (8 vols; Stuttgart, 1982), III, 617-650.

124 Bernhardt, *Denkwürdigkeiten*, 528.

125 Wolzogen, *Wie ich mich ums Leben brachte*, 319, 327.

the Prussian monarchy, reinforced his confidence in the ‘coming Germany: *the Third Reich*’.¹²⁶ Now, things seemed to get better, and Einem could hope again for a glorious future.

Conclusion

The last example clearly shows that the generation of nobles born in the 1850s and 1860s could come to terms with the Nazi movement. As this article has shown, this did not only result from the perception of the present days in the Weimar Republic or the defeat in World War I, but also from the memory of the *Kaiserreich*. Although most nobles had fond memories of the past and believed in the superiority of the political and social order of the German Empire in comparison to the new democratic system, they recognized serious flaws in the last two and a half decades before 1918. In hindsight, they regarded the alleged lack of leadership in the Weimar Republic as a consequence of the circumstances in the late Empire. However, deep down in their hearts most nobles remained loyal to the monarchy and its ‘aristocratic’ principles,¹²⁷ but times had changed – and the supposed socio-political requirements for ‘leadership’ had changed along with them. Now, a new type of leader was expected.¹²⁸ Many were convinced that this leader should emerge from some kind of a ‘new nobility’ or ‘new aristocracy’. For a lot of contemporaries, Adolf Hitler seemed to be the right one, even for nobles.¹²⁹ Although the generation of nobles treated here did not reproduce exactly the same discourses on a ‘new nobility’ that were widespread those days and that are described elsewhere,¹³⁰ they were sympathetic to certain aspects of these neo-aristocratic mindsets. Most of them yearned for more refinement (*Vornehmheit*), a quality they did not only miss in the present, but also in the past. Moreover, their specific notion of a refined and gallant (*vornehm, edel*) ‘personality’ made them willing to accept neo-aristocratic ideals. Although many of the studied authors did not intend to create a new nobility in the proper sense, their concept of a socially ‘open’ or unrestricted ‘aristocratic’ attitude could at least be integrated into neo-aristocratic discourses. Most of them believed that true ‘noble’ or ‘aristocratic’ values existed outside the nobility itself. This could lead to the conviction that a new kind of ‘aristocracy’ should be built – maybe in addition to the old one. This longing for a ‘new aristocracy’ consisting of truly ‘noble’ (*vornehm*) ‘personalities’ and adequate

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¹²⁶ Einem, *Erinnerungen*, 5, 189 (emphasis in the original).

¹²⁷ On the ‘aristocratic principle’ around 1900 see Seelig, ‘Der Kampf gegen die Moderne’.

¹²⁸ Conze, *Von deutschem Adel*, 148-176; E. Conze, “Only a dictator can help us now.” Aristocracy and the radical right in Germany’, in: Urbach, ed., *European aristocracies*, 129-147.

¹²⁹ Malinowski, *Vom König zum Führer*; idem, ‘From king to Führer’.

¹³⁰ Malinowski, *Vom König zum Führer*; idem, ‘From king to Führer’; Gerstner, *Neuer Adel*; Conze et al., eds, *Aristokratismus*; Breuer, *Die radikale Rechte*.

leaders promoted the rise of the Nazi Party.¹³¹ Large parts of older nobles were not fanatic believers of Nazi ideology or even moderate adherents – none of the authors examined here were, at least while they were writing their autobiographies –, but the younger nobles were more likely to be attracted to Nazism or comparable right-wing attitudes.¹³² Nonetheless, even among older nobles there were many dispositions for adopting the mindset of the radical right. The ideas of neo-aristocratism were one factor among others that drew many younger and older nobles to right-wing mentalities. First steps of this process or, with a Foucauldian term, its genealogy can be traced back to the discourse studied here. It illuminates the mental context in which the radicalization of nobles could happen, although younger nobles were more likely to adapt to racist versions of neo-aristocratism. The findings of this article demand for a more nuanced differentiation between different cohorts, generations, socio-cultural landscapes, mentalities, and political orientations of the German nobility in order to come to general conclusions. This essay would like to give some suggestions for further research into the subtleties of noble life forms and their imaginaries.

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Most of the authors examined in this essay did not belong to the radical or ‘new’ right¹³³ – except Wolzogen and Bernhardt –, but their relatively developed notions of a ‘new’ or ‘open’ aristocracy of attitude could result in the acceptance or even in the active support of the Nazi movement. Even the classic self-perception of being *vornehm* did not prevent many nobles from flirting with Nazism, an ideology and a movement that were sometimes regarded as plebeian and vulgar. Nostitz and Wolzogen, for example, became in one way or the other supporters of the Nazis, although they understood themselves as elegant artists.¹³⁴ Reischach, on the contrary, rejected Hitler’s attempt to gain power in the Beer Hall Putsch in 1923 – at least at the time he was writing his autobiography in the middle of the twenties.¹³⁵ And the journalist Hellmut von Gerlach (1866-1935), of course, remained for his lifetime a convinced pacifist and democrat, significantly opposing the nobility as such, although he never dropped the noble particle *von*.¹³⁶ He was a true renegade, in many respects different from his usual peers.¹³⁷ He did not utter any thoughts on a ‘new nobility’ in his memoirs. Neither did Berthold von Deimling (1853-1944), a former general and militarist

131 Malinowski, *Vom König zum Führer*.

132 Ibidem, especially 577.

133 Compare Breuer, *Die radikale Rechte*.

134 E. Klee, *Das Kulturlexikon zum Dritten Reich. Wer war was vor und nach 1945* (Frankfurt, 2007) 438, 675; G. Erbe, *Das vornehme Berlin. Fürstin Marie Radziwill und die großen Damen der Gesellschaft 1871-1918* (Cologne-Weimar-Vienna, 2015) 231-232.

135 Reischach, *Unter drei Kaisern*, 255.

136 Gerlach, *Erinnerungen*, especially 34-35, 155; compare idem, *Von rechts nach links* (Zurich, 1937).

137 Malinowski, *Vom König zum Führer*, 462, does not regard Gerlach as a ‘true’ noble renegade because his family was ennobled in 1840 and did therefore not belong to the ‘ancient nobility’ (*Altadel*). But Gerlach himself claims to have been raised as a ‘proper little *Junker*’ (Gerlach, *Erinnerungen*, 21), and in the introduction to his second autobiography he is attributed several noble or ‘aristocratic’ values (E. Ludwig, ‘Einleitung’, in: Gerlach, *Von rechts nach links*, 7-15).

who was ennobled in 1905 and had adopted the aristocratic attitude of the Wilhelminian officer corps long before. But the horrible experiences of World War I turned him into a pacifist and radical democrat.¹³⁸ However, due to their belief in the existence of ‘noble-minded personalities’ outside the historical nobility, many of the nobles treated here had an affinity for neo-aristocratic attitudes that easily led to radical right-wing opinions. This may not have been the case for the majority of the old nobles (for example between the ages of 60 or 70), but it was definitely true in the case of the younger nobles who had been raised in the worldview of their parents. Neo-aristocracy in its proper form was a seed that grew scarcely among the older generations, but it rooted in their mentality and would reach full growth among their successors. The bad memories of the developments in the German Empire after 1888/90 among older nobles supported this process. Still, nobles considered their collective memory of traditional values as a remedy for the contemporary misery: the refinement (*Vornehmheit*) of the ‘aristocratic personality’ would guarantee the cure, and so the ‘aristocratic ideas’ would finally bring forth a ‘new humanity’.¹³⁹ ‘Aristocracy’ seemed to be the solution for all problems. Even non-nobles could adhere to this way of thinking. It was an expression of a widespread longing for authority and inequality in the so-called age of republicanism and equality. In many respects, the ‘bourgeois’ era was more ‘aristocratic’ than historiography has thought for a long time.

138 Deimling, *Aus der alten in die neue Zeit*. On Deimling’s attitude, see K. Zirkel, *Vom Militaristen zum Pazifisten. Politisches Leben und Wirken des Generals Berthold von Deimling vor dem Hintergrund der Entwicklung Deutschlands vom Kaiserreich zum Dritten Reich* (Düsseldorf, 2006 PhD thesis), <http://docserv.uni-duesseldorf.de/servlets/DerivateServlet/Derivate-3519/1519.pdf> (accessed 11 Sept. 2015) 89. On the German officer corps, see M. Funck, ‘Bereit zum Krieg? Entwurf und Praxis militärischer Männlichkeit im preußisch-deutschen Offizierkorps vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg’, in: K. Hagemann, ed., *Heimat-Front. Militär und Geschlechterverhältnisse im Zeitalter der Weltkriege* (Frankfurt-New York, 2002) 83; compare Freytag, *Menschen und Dinge*, 40-41.

139 Wolzogen, *Wie ich mich ums Leben brachte*, 291.

Appendix: Biographical information

Friedrich von Bernhardt

* September 22 1849 St. Petersburg, † July 10 1930 Kunnersdorf, Silesia (Protestant), Prussian general and military historian.

Father: Felix Theodor (1803-1887), Prussian diplomat and historian, ennobled in 1873.

Friedrich grew up in Silesia and was raised in a Prussian-patriotic spirit; he joined the Prussian army and pursued a military career; after his retirement in 1909, he published well-known books on military subjects.

Political orientation: right wing, *Alldeutscher*.

Marie von Bunsen

* January 17 1860 London, † June 28 1941 Berlin (Protestant), salonnière, writer, and painter, unmarried. 79

Grandfather and father ennobled in 1857, ancestors: Prussian diplomats, father: Georg (1824-1896), liberal politician.

Marie was raised in the Rhineland and in Berlin; she considered herself North German, not Prussian; around 1900, she founded a prestigious salon in Berlin; she was a respected salonnière and *grande dame*.

Political orientation: liberal, democrat, member of the German Democratic Party (*Deutsche Demokratische Partei*), nonetheless patriotic.

Berthold von Deimling

* March 21 1853 Karlsruhe, † February 3 1944 Baden-Baden (Protestant), ennobled in 1905, Prussian general.

Ancestors: liberal bourgeoisie, Baden civil servants and clerics; father: Gottfried Berthold (1823-1876), Baden civil servant.

Before 1918, Berthold was the typical exponent of a Prussian militarist; in 1904, he joined the campaign against the Herero in Namibia; in 1913, he caused the famous Zabern affaire; although he had adopted the 'aristocratic' mentality of the Prussian officer corps, he turned into a radical pacifist after World War I.

Political orientation: former militarist, democrat and pacifist after 1918.

Karl von Einem

* January 1 1853 Herzberg, Harz, † April 7 1934 Mülheim, Ruhr (Protestant), Prussian general and minister of war.

Hanoverian nobility, ancestors in Hanoverian service; father: George (1822-1858), cavalry captain (*Rittmeister*).

Karl served in the Prussian army, became a general and minister of war (1903-1909); typical military career; pronounced Prussian self-perception.

Political orientation: conservative, monarchist.

Hugo Freiherr von Freytag-Loringhoven

* May 26 1855 Kopenhagen, †October 19 1924 Weimar (Protestant), Prussian general and military writer.

Baltic German nobility, ancestors in Russian service, father: Karl Gottlob (1811-1882), Russian diplomat.

Hugo served in the Russian and Prussian army; he became naturalized in Prussia and regarded himself as Prussian; typical military career.

Political orientation: conservative, monarchist.

Hellmut von Gerlach

* February 2 1866 Mönchmotschelnitz, Silesia, †August 1 1935 Paris (Protestant), journalist and politician.

Grandfather: Karl (1792-1863) Prussian civil servant, ennobled in 1840; father: Max (1832-1909), owner of the estate Mönchmotschelnitz.

Hellmut started his career as a Prussian civil servant, became a journalist, and wrote, for instance, for the noble journal *Deutsches Adelsblatt*; between 1900 and 1918 he turned from a conservative into a democrat and pacifist; he was in contact with Friedrich Naumann and regarded himself as a noble outcast.

Political orientation: liberal, democrat and pacifist, founding member of the German Democratic Party (*Deutsche Demokratische Partei*).

Alexander Prinz zu Hohenlohe-Schillingsfürst

* August 6 1862 Lindau, Swabia, †May 26 1924 Badenweiler, Breisgau (Catholic), diplomat, politician, and publicist.

Southwest German nobility, father: Chancellor Chlodwig Fürst zu H.-S. (1819-1901).

Hugo pursued the typical career of a politician and diplomat; from 1893 to 1903 he was a member of the *Reichstag*; although he became a democrat after 1918, he had a profound paternalistic attitude.

Political orientation: liberal, democrat, *Vernunftrepublikaner*.

Oscar Freiherr von der Lancken Wakenitz

* October 5 1867 Boldevitz, Rügen, †October 23 1939 Bergen, Rügen (Protestant), diplomat.

Prussian nobility, ancestors: military and rural nobility; father: Malte (1830-1911), cavalry captain (*Rittmeister*) and owner of the estate Boldevitz.

Oscar spent the classical life of a nobleman in the Prussian civil service; he pursued the usual career of a Prussian diplomat and inherited Boldevitz.

Political orientation: liberal conservatism.

Helene von Nostitz, née von Beneckendorff und Hindenburg

* November 18 1878 Berlin, †July 17 1944 Bassenheim, Rhineland-Palatinate (Protestant), writer and salonnière, ∞ 1904 Alfred von Nostitz (1870-1935), Saxon nobleman, politician, and culture minister (*Kultusminister*).

Prussian nobility, ancestors: military and rural nobility; father: Conrad (1839-1913), Prussian major general.

Helene considered herself an 'aristocratic' artist and belonged to the high society; since the 1920s she has been running a salon in Berlin; friendships, among others, with Harry Graf Kessler, Auguste Rodin, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Hugo von Hofmannsthal.

Political orientation: apolitical, idiosyncratic cultural or 'aristocratic' conservatism.

Lita Gans Edle Herrin zu Putlitz

* October 27 1862 Retzin, Westprignitz, † February 3 1935 Retzin (Protestant), gentlewoman, canoness, and lady of the manor, unmarried.

Prussian nobility, father: Gustav (1812-1890), writer and artistic director (*Theaterintendant*) at several courts.

Lita spent the usual life of a noble gentlewoman and lady's help (*Haustochter*) after being briefly a canoness; she inherited Retzin after the death of her mother in 1901 and became a lady of the manor.

Political orientation: conservative, monarchist.

Hugo Freiherr von Reischach

* September 1 1854 Frankfurt, Main, † August 12 1934 Berlin (Protestant), *Oberhofmarschall* of Wilhelm I and Wilhelm II, *Hofmarschall* of 'Kaiserin Friedrich', wife of Friedrich III.

Swabian nobility; ancestors: court and military nobility; father: Albert (1826-1876), lieutenant colonel.

Hugo started his career as a cavalry officer; he held different offices at the Imperial court and became a lord steward; Prussian self-perception.

Political orientation: conservative, monarchist.

Paul Freiherr von Schoenaich

* February 16 1866 Klein-Tromnau, Westprussia, † January 7 1954 Reinfeld, Holstein (Protestant), officer, political activist.

Prussian nobility, ancestors: military and rural nobility; father: Eduard (1827-1880), owner of the estate Klein-Tromnau.

Until 1914, Paul spent the typical life of an officer; the Great War changed his mind and turned him into a pacifist; in the Weimar Republic, he fought for pacifism; since 1919 owner of the estate Reinfeld.

Political orientation: liberal, democrat and pacifist, member of German Democratic Party (*Deutsche Demokratische Partei*).

Hans von Tresckow

* May 3 1863 Neiße, Silesia, † April 3 (or August 14) 1934 Rinteln, Lower Saxony (probably Protestant), Prussian chief inspector (*Kriminalkommissar*).

Prussian nobility; ancestors: military nobility; father: Karl (1829-1889), Prussian lieutenant general.

Since 1889 Hans has been a police officer in Berlin; in 1891, he became a chief inspector; main area of responsibility: so-called 'homosexual offenses'.

Political orientation: partly conservative, partly indifferent.

Adolf von Wilke

* June 13 1867 Berlin, † January 21 1934 (probably Protestant), journalist.

Father: Hermann Karl (1827-1896), legation councillor (*Geheimer Legationsrat*), ennobled in 1881; ancestors: Prussian civil servants and lawyers.

Adolf was the editor of the journals *Neue Gesellschaftliche Correspondenz* and *Allgemeine Armee-Correspondenz*; he was acquainted with the high society of Berlin, took pride in being noble, and had an elitist self-perception.

Political orientation: conservative.

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Ernst Freiherr von Wolzogen

* April 23 1855 Breslau, † June 30 1934 Puppling, Bavaria (Protestant), writer.

Prussian nobility (former Austrian nobility, since the eighteenth century based in Prussia); father: Alfred (1823-1883), Prussian civil servant and artistic director (*Theaterintendant*) at the court in Schwerin.

Ernst was the founder of a cabaret in Berlin; he wrote novels, dramas, and poems; his brother Hans (1848-1938), also a writer, was an ardent adherent and friend of Richard Wagner; both shared a racist attitude.

Political orientation: right wing, *völkisch*.

Michael Seelig

The longing for leadership

Collective memory of nobles, the perception of their present days, and the need for ‘noble-minded personalities’ in the Weimar Republic

This article analyzes the collective memory of older nobles in the Weimar Republic. It studies their correlated views on the past, the present, and the future. Although most nobles despised the newly established Weimar Republic, their memory of the German Empire was ambivalent. On the one hand, they recalled glorious times before 1918. On the other, they recognized a serious lack of leadership after the dismissal of Bismarck in 1890. This longing for ‘true’ leadership did not only concern the past, but also the present and the future. The generation of older nobles had ‘open’ concepts of the noble that are similar to discourses on a ‘new aristocracy’ known so far in historiography, but they differ in their specific notions of genteelness and refinement (*Vornehmheit*). However, even these images of a ‘truly’ noble (*vornehm*) person were adaptable to radical right-wing attitudes, especially if they were combined with leadership.

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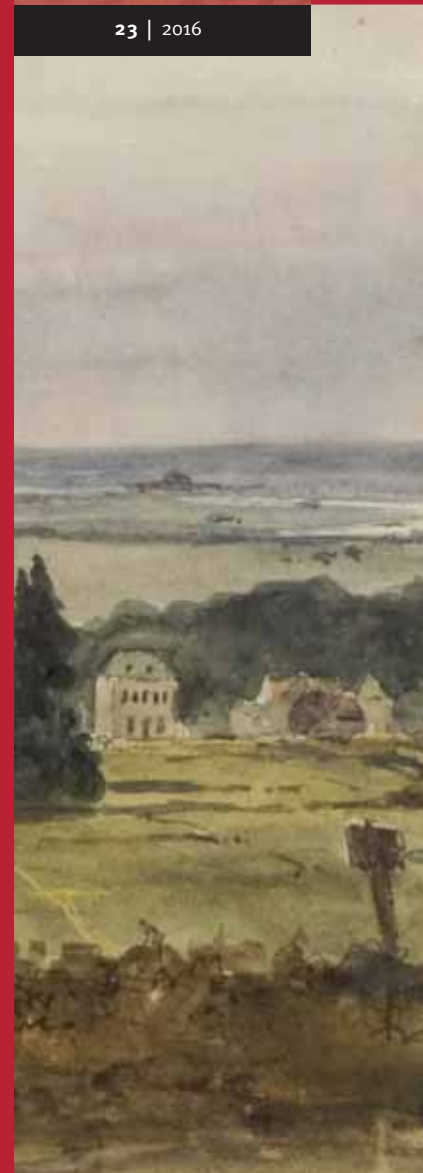
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