The «Conservative Revolution» is back. With the rise of populist right-wing political movements and parties all over Europe (and the USA), the question has been raised as to whether «Weimar conditions» are returning. The increasing success of a nationalist and authoritarian political agenda that is openly hostile to the values of liberal democracy and is accompanied by a poisoned and aggressive political discourse certainly invites historical comparisons and has encouraged an increasing interest in the historical origins of the intellectual background of the new Right. In German history, the quest for the origins of these ideas quickly leads to the intellectual counter–movement to liberalism, democracy and internationalism of the Weimar period for which the term «Conservative Revolution» has been established.¹ It has been used to describe rightist conservative intellectuals whose radical nature went beyond classical conservatism but nonetheless remained distinct from National Socialism before 1933.² For today’s new Right, the «Conservative Revolution» serves as an intellectual benchmark and a spiritual lieux de mémoire.³

1. Return of the «Conservative Revolution»

To the historian, many patterns of argument, themes and ways of thinking in current public discourse sound familiar, such as those behind the rhetoric of politicians of the right-wing Alternative für Deutschland (AFD) or of speakers at the rallies of the move-

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² Before the phrase «Conservative Revolution» became a historical category, it had an opalescent dimension that was hard to pin down. From its first use by Thomas Mann in 1921, through to its use by Hugo von Hofmannsthal six years later, to Edgar Julius Jung’s definition in 1932, the phrase became ever more political while retaining a mystical and nebulous character. On the history of the phrase: A. Mohler, Die Konservative Revolution in Deutschland 1918–1932, Stuttgart 1950, 9–12.

«Conservative Revolution» in Europe?

In journals such as *Junge Freiheit*, *Compact* and *Sezession*: the motif of a degeneration of the «system» and the «old» political parties, the idea of a broad corruption of the «elites» and the press in particular, the alleged abolishment of Germanness, and subsequent fantasies of a right of resistance and even of a coup d'état. Like their modern counterparts, the original ideologists of the «Conservative Revolution» argued in terms of a state of crisis and emergency that required immediate and radical action. Against the chaos and demise of the liberal and pluralist order, they put forward the idea of a homogeneous unity of the German ethnicity. Conspiracy theories, anti-Americanism, a geostrategic leaning towards Russia, sympathies for authoritarian leaders, an openly expressed disgust for the parliamentary political process, and the defamation of elected representatives as «traitors to the people»: Many patterns of the right-wing discourse of the 1920s and the 1930s have returned and seem to have a broad appeal.4

The historical experience of National Socialism and the Holocaust did not immediately discredit the ideas of the «Conservative Revolution» after the Second World War, and, in fact, certain traditions of conservative-revolutionary thought (in the context of a pessimistic skepticism towards Western modernity) experienced a «revival» in the 1950s.5 In the long run, however, the (West-)German political culture of coming to terms with the past kept this line of thinking confined to the fringes of the political system. Anxieties over a renaissance of the «Conservative Revolution» were articulated in the early 1990s in connection with the emergence of a «New Right» after the German Reunification.6 Ultimately, this ideological renaissance was restricted to rather marginal circles and did not attract a wider audience. Today it seems that this is no longer the case and that the old-new right-wing anti-liberalism is manifesting itself not only in the shape of substantial electoral success for right-wing parties such as the AfD, but also in shifts in the parameters of legitimate public political discourse.

4 In journals such as *Junge Freiheit* and *Sezession*, as well as in think tanks such as the Institut für Staatsspolitik (IfS), the tradition and theories of the Conservative Revolution are specifically cultivated and continued. For this line of tradition before AfD and Pegida cf. V. Weiß, *Deutschlands Neue Rechte: Angriff der Eliten – Von Spengler bis Sarrazin*, Paderborn 2011.


The diachronic comparison with Weimar has been deeply ingrained in the political culture of Germany since the Second World War. The period of the Weimar Republic generally served as a counter-model to the new political and social order of the Federal Republic of Germany, and even for German historians it proved to be difficult to think about and narrate Weimar «without making its final breakdown the pivotal point of its history». It is doubtful that Weimar’s role as a counter-model still works in the same way today, whether for historiography or for political culture in general. In fact, a fixation on the German Weimar comparison hinders taking into account the global and transnational dimensions of the current right-wing anti-liberalism that has occurred, in various degrees, in almost all European democracies, and must be understood in the context of the global dissolution of boundaries pushed by forces such as digitalisation, neoliberalism and the globalisation of terrorism and migration. Most importantly for the historian, however, a fixation on the German Weimar-comparison obscures the view on the transnational dimension of the right-wing anti-liberalism of the interwar period itself.

The starting point of this special issue of the Journal of Modern European History is that the «Conservative Revolution» was not restricted to the «mortified» loser of the First World War. According to their self-definition, the authors of the «Conservative Revolution» saw themselves as the visionaries of a specifically German way that stood in direct opposition to the development of the West. The Conservative Revolutionaries’ identification of liberal democracy as the victors’ system is what gave their criticism of democracy its aggressive tone. A lost war and humiliated national pride may have explained the radical nature and the success of this form of anti-liberalism, but they were not prerequisites for its existence. Other European countries also saw the emergence of radical conservative movements in the 1920s and the 1930s that sought to counter the «soul-destroying» impact of liberalism, industrialism and mass democracy, and were at the same time much too elitist to associate itself with their countries’ Fascist movements.

This special issue seeks to explore this European-wide phenomenon by taking a comparative view of such radical conservative (but not fascist) movements. The emphasis will be on the transnational implications of this right-wing discourse as well as the various organisational attempts to connect the movements and to form an «Interna-

from a liberal or social-democratic point of view. This line of research has always been linked to the critical «Sonderweg» interpretation of German history that sought to understand the roots of National Socialism in a «special path» to modernity, i.e. in the purported anti-modern deviations of German history and political culture from Western norms. In this view, the Conservative Revolution has its illiberal ideological roots in the cultural pessimism and romanticism of the nineteenth century. The influence of the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche in particular had encouraged an apolitical irrationalism which, according to Sontheimer, represented the «spiritual basis from which the antidemocratic ideological trend of the new nationalism draws its strength».16

With the «special path» paradigm facing intense criticism and losing much of its dominating power since the 1980s,17 historians have turned to address questions other than the problem of the intellectual delegitimisation of the Weimar Republic, and the vanishing point of German history in general shifted increasingly from 1933 to 1941.18 The question was no longer so much about how the rise of National Socialism was possible, but rather what might explain the origins of the Holocaust.19 Connected with this is a different understanding of modernity that followed the research of Zygmunt Bauman and Detlev Peukert.20 Against the idea of the Weimar Republic as the penultimate episode in a German anti-modern special path, Peukert reinterpreted the history of the Weimar Republic as a «crisis of classical modernity». Refuting any notion of a «normal modernisation» or Western role models of societal transformation, Peukert placed National Socialism and the Holocaust within the disciplinary logic of modernity. This attention to the «dark side» of modernity opened up the question of the specific modernity of the «Conservative Revolution». Indeed, scholars such as Panajotis Kondylis, Stefan Breuer and Rolf-Peter Sieferle have stressed that the Conservative Revolutionaries’ bitter hostility towards modernity should not disguise the fact that their thinking was deeply rooted in modernity itself.21 After the fundamental disruption of the First World War, the Conservative Revolutionaries fought not against modernity altogether but for a different project of modernity in which the reasonable individual as the centre point of history was replaced by broader forces such as the German nation or the German race.22 The specific «reactionary» modernity of the Conservative Revolution was then often proven by some of its advocates’ affirmative attitude to technology or even, as in the case of Ernst Jünger, a fascination with technology as a resource for power and vitality.23

16 Sontheimer, Antidemokratisches Denken 46.
20 D. Peukert, Die Weimarer Republik: Krisenjahre der klassischen Moderne, Frankfurt am Main 1989;
23 J. Herf, Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich, Cam-
All this research adopted more or less a classical history of political ideas approach. This has changed more recently under the heading of a cultural history of politics. Political clubs, networks, organisational bodies, political rituals, political staging and discourses of crisis have moved to the centre of the historical analyses of the Weimar Republic in general and of the «Conservative Revolution» in particular.\textsuperscript{24} The importance of this new research is indisputable. It seems, however, that some of the questions of the 1980s and the 1990s have yet to be answered satisfactorily. When the Sonderweg thesis was buried, the importance of historical comparisons for future research was stressed. Although this was done for the time before the First World War, there is still very little comparative research into the anti-liberalism of the interwar period. And, as justified as much of the criticism against the western «standard» development path might be, it remains perfectly clear that the political development and the political culture of Germany diverged significantly from that of England, France and the USA. This makes the comparative examination of the European interwar period still interesting from a German point of view: Andreas Wirsching’s pointed question, «a crisis of classical modernity or German Sonderweg?», has not lost its significance.\textsuperscript{25} And only through further comparative studies can it be clarified «in what proportions German idiosyncrasies and common European phenomena contributed to the catastrophic escalation of the modernisation crisis at the beginning of the 1930s».\textsuperscript{26}

Radicalised conservatism of the interwar period is surely one of the most striking forms of the «contradictions of modernity». Fantasies of a return to «traditions» or a golden past coexisted with visions of a «clean», frictionless modernity to be achieved by authoritarian political means. Unlike mainstream constitutional conservatism, which in most European countries reluctantly came to terms with political modernity and zeit: Deutschland und Frankreich im Vergleich», in: H. Möller / U. Wengst (eds.), 50 Jahre Institut für Zeitgeschichte. Eine Bilanz, München 1999, 365–381.

\textsuperscript{26} Peukert, Die Weimarer Republik, 10. Only in the case of France has an attempt to understand the European interwar period in total as «a crisis of classical modernism» been systematically pursued with a strong empirical foundation; see A. Wirsching, Vom Weltkrieg zum Bürgerkrieg? Politischer Extremismus in Deutschland und Frankreich 1918–1933/39, Berlin und Paris im Vergleich, München 1999; M. Kittel, Provinz zwischen Reich und Republik, Politische Mentalitäten in Deutschland und Frankreich, 1918–1933/36, München 2000; H. Möller / M. Kittel (eds.), Demokratie in Deutschland und Frankreich 1918–1933/40, Beiträge zu einem historischen Vergleich, München 2002; T. Raithel, Das schwierige Spiel des Parlamentarismus. Deutscher Reichstag und französische Chambre des Députés in den Inflationskrisen der 1920er Jahre, München 2005.
successfully appealed to new groups of voters, radicalised conservatism was a fundamental challenge to the legitimacy of the political developments of the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. It was anti-liberal, anti-capitalist, anti-socialist and anti-Semitic. The shape and nature of the «Conservative Revolution» that was meant to overthrow the political order remained, however, strangely abstract. The authors of the «Conservative Revolution» certainly did not have in mind a revolution in the Leninist sense and the place of the «revolutionary subject» remained vacant.27

These authors admired Italian Fascism but were neither ready to commit themselves to a political party nor submit themselves to a fascist cult of the Leader, and despite all the rhetoric of violent action, they broadly remained passive intellectuals. In contrast to their revolutionary and activist theory, their political practice was conservative and elitist. The political clubs, salons, informal circles and networks around journals and newspapers that formed the cultural habitat of the «Conservative Revolutionaries» cannot be understood in terms of the fascist concept of political mobilisation. However, the «Conservative Revolution» is, of course, only one element of a bigger picture: it was part of a diverse German Right that was anything but a homogeneous political force and that ranged from the German National People's Party (DNVP) and the Catholic Right to the Pan-German League, the Combat Leagues and the National Socialist German Workers’ Party (NSDAP).28

As noted, far from being confined to Germany, radical conservative responses to modernity were common in interwar Europe. Radical conservative political answers to the multiple contradictions and discomforts of modernity were not just provided in Germany. The challenge to parliamentary democracy from radical conservatism is in fact a phenomenon of whole Europe. Comparative research into fascism since Ernst Nolte,29 especially Anglo-American historians such as Roger Griffin, Walter Laqueur and Stanley G. Payne,30 assume a pan-European phenomenon of «fascism» between the world wars. Although this perspective has proven very fruitful in identifying the different national characteristics of the phenomenon (despite the resultant problems),31


and has very recently also concentrated on fascist concepts of Europe, the European dimension of the «Conservative Revolution» has for a long time been completely neglected. Comparative historical research has concentrated on an analysis of the relationship between traditional conservatism and fascism or asked for Nazi sympathisers and «Fellow Travellers of the Right» in other countries. A comparative survey of the ideological field between traditional conservatism and fascism did not take place until the turn of the century. Since then, France and the United Kingdom have both been subjected to first attempts towards of a complete analysis of the phenomenon, and some very interesting approaches to the issue have come from examining smaller European countries. Less attention has been given to the transnational flow of ideas and the spread of right-wing ideology across Europe after the First World War. Only recently have right-wing figureheads such as Oswald Spengler and Charles Maurras come to be understood as European phenomena, and the impact of Spengler’s cultural philosophy and Maurras’ Action Française been analysed systematically from a transnational perspective. The European dimension of right-wing thinking during the interwar years was also reflected in the self-image of the principal agents. The British Neo-Tories, for instance, strengthened by the reaction to them by authors such as Oswald Spengler and Charles Maurras, saw themselves as part of a pan-European movement against the ideas and political implications of the Enlightenment. In 1938, Douglas Jerrold wrote, «The battle between the ideas of 1789 and those of the Counter-Revolution will be fought to a finish in the lifetime of many living, and the results of the struggle will be decisive in Europe for several generations».
3. «Conservative Revolution» as a Research Concept?

Using the term «Conservative Revolution» for a European-wide phenomenon is, of course, not unproblematic. It stems specifically from German history and German historiography, and has been used to describe a huge variety of right-wing authors, clubs and networks of the Weimar Republic. Unsurprisingly, the term has been criticised as too broad for a too diverse phenomenon.\(^\text{39}\) This criticism was broadly rejected, and the term is still used by historians – not least because of a lack of serious alternatives. And indeed, the German «Conservative Revolution» remains a popular area of research,\(^\text{40}\) but it is important to use the term with a lot of conceptual sensitivity toward and awareness of its specific conceptual history. This is particularly important because the apologetic historiography on the subject continues to exist.\(^\text{41}\) In fact, it seems that the «Conservative Revolution» has in part become an academic battleground for revisionist historians.\(^\text{42}\) The European dimension of the «Conservative Revolution» in particular is a field of research that should not be left to the authors of the new right and the devotees of right-wing intellectuals of the interwar period.\(^\text{43}\)

Whilst it will always be a complicated – if not impossible – task to formulate a precise ideal type of the «Conservative Revolution» in a Weberian sense, the term is still useful as an analytical tool for other countries. It helps us to identify and understand an ideological formation of the extreme Right that cannot sufficiently be described with the terms «conservatism» or «fascism». The term «Conservative Revolution» can help us to identify and explain a phenomenon that has often been described as a «grey area» between conservatism and fascism or, vaguely and imprecisely, as proto-fascism. It offers the possibility of analysing structural equivalents to the German case in other countries, such as the Neo-Tories in Great Britain or the Jeune Droite in France. The specific national manifestations of the phenomena become in this way more clearly


visible, making it less surprising that these right-wing ideologies could be a «curious amalgam» of reactionary and modernist ideas.\(^4\)

The basic assumption of this special issue is also that the concept «Conservative Revolution» is useful on a European level because it helps to create an understanding of the European traffic of ideas on the radical Right and the various networks and organisations; in short, the transnational and pan-European dimensions of radicalised Conservatism in the interwar period. The historiographical use of the term «Conservative Revolution» is reasonable because it can be traced to the primary sources: It is an authentic term from the 1920s and the 1930s that was used in many countries, and it fits with the self-understanding of the radical Conservatives, who not only saw themselves as part of the European anti-liberal counter movement but also sought contact with other right-wing intellectual movements. They shared with them a certain mentality, a framework of understanding the world that went beyond national borders, and found its expression in their self-styling as the war generation (or the «Lost Generation») rebelling against the «degenerated» post-war order. This right-wing intellectual community was based on social and moral codes, and was far less bound together by tight international organisations than was the Left.

From this perspective, radicalised conservatism in the interwar period is to be understood as a pan-European phenomenon that can be described using the concept of «Conservative Revolution». Whilst the individual cases will be analysed within the respective national terminology (e.g. «Neo-Tories»), the term «Conservative Revolution» offers a higher level of comparison and allows for an understanding of the European traffic of ideas, the informal transnational networks and the various international attempts to give the new radical Right an organisational framework. All the national varieties of the European phenomenon of «Conservative Revolution» had the same ideological foundation: anti-liberalism, anti-capitalism, a rejection of parliamentarian democracy and – even though it is not covered to a full extent here – anti-Semitism. Unlike the German or Russian cases, the British and the French variants of the «Conservative Revolution» were, in a way, more «conservative»: Their project of a «return to the past» was utopian, but it had clear anchor points, namely 1688 and 1789. Their «revolutions» related to their own national histories in which state and nation were identical. The «enemy» was from within and could not be identified with the «foreign» West as with Eurasianism or in Germany, where the identification of liberalism as the victors’ system gave anti-liberalism its aggressive dynamic. In fact, in the French case it was the concept of Western civilisation itself – with Germany intentionally excluded – that was at the centre of the conservative utopia.

Another reason why radical Conservatism in France and the United Kingdom was more «conservative» is that their nationalism was introversive. Their national projects lacked the expansionist fantasies of a new living space that was behind many of the

German dreams of national revival. The temporality of all radical Conservatives in Europe was paradoxical, as they turned to the resources of an idealised pre-modern past in order to transcend modernity. Yet, it seems that French and British anti-liberalism lacked – despite of their radicalism – the ultimate urgency and the feeling that «time worked against us», which was typical of the «Conservative Revolution» and German nationalism in general.

This special issue of the *Journal of Modern European History* consists of four essays: Following this introduction, Sarah Shurts explores the French version of European «Conservative Revolution» in the 1920s and the early 1930s through the example of *La Revue Universelle*’s conceptualisation of Western civilisation. Led by Henri Massis, Jacques Bainville, and Jacques Maritain, the intellectuals of the *Revue Universelle* developed a unique cultural politics that evoked the decadence and decline of Western civilisation under the forces of modernity, and called for the defence and renewal of this civilisation through a revitalisation of the conservative values of Catholicism, authoritarian leadership, elitism, and a return to the spiritual sources of Western culture. However, while the *Revue Universelle* team intentionally cultivated a pan-European scope for its journal and promoted its cultural politics as a common language for all European conservatives, their francocentric and germanophobic conceptualisations of the Western civilisation compromised their aim. Shurts’s article will look at the effort by the *Revue Universelle* intellectuals to appropriate the generic trope of Western civilisation’s decline and to imbue it with a meaning that was unique to the perspective of the French «Conservative Revolution» in the 1920s and the early 1930s.

In the subsequent article, Stefan Wiederkehr analyses the Russian intellectual movement of Eurasianism of the 1920s and the 1930s as part of European intellectual history in general and in particular as the Russian version of «Conservative Revolution». Eurasianism was a movement by young Russian Anti-Bolshevik intellectuals based mainly in Paris and Prague, whose central idea in their «geostrategic» theory was that «Eurasia» constituted a third continent between Europe and Asia, coinciding more or less with the borders of the former Russian Empire. In their conservative utopia, Eurasia was to be a single state uniting the peoples of the former Russian Empire in a non-democratic and non-capitalist order. The article analyses this particular strand of thinking by looking at its transnational dimension and the role Europe played in this theory. This historical research is even more important because today’s advocates of the theory, the Neo-Eurasianists, play an integral part in the European networks of the New Right, and their most prominent thinker, Alexander Dugin, is styling himself as the intellectual mastermind in a cultural war against Western universalism.

In the final article, Bernhard Dietz portrays the British Neo-Tories as part of a pan-European counter-movement against the political implications of modernity. The European networks of the Neo-Tories included thinkers of the French Action Française, Italian fascist intellectuals and Spanish Falangists. The Neo-Tories contributed to anti-liberal visions of Europe that were developed in these circles as alternatives to capitalism and parliamentary democracy. The article addresses the German counterparts of...
the Neo-Tories and offers an analysis of the intellectual exchange with German «Conservative Revolutionaries». It emphasises how this exchange of ideas was affected on the British side by National Socialism, and what the possibilities and limits of right-wing exchange between Germany and England were after Hitler’s rise to power. The article argues that for the Neo-Tories, the European exchange of ideas was a source of inspiration, reassurance, and hope; however, it also eventually meant their downfall, as the beginning of the Second World War marked the end of British participation in transnational radical Conservatism.

There are many aspects of the topic that this special issue is not able to cover and are left for future inquiry. For example, a re-evaluation of the perception of Italian fascism as the starting point for radical conservative ideology in many European countries – and therefore a challenge to the established position that the positive reception of Italian fascism was nowhere as significant as it was in Germany – is needed. Additional case studies would be desirable, in particular from East and Southeast Europe. Furthermore, the establishment of a European perspective on radical conservatism could lead to a proper re-evaluation of the German case: To what degree were pan-European phenomena and to what degree were specific German traditions and political circumstances responsible for the success of the ideas of the «Conservative Revolution» among the German bourgeoisie? What factors were critical in creating the particular intellectual climate that brought to life the political ideas of Oswald Spengler, Arthur Moeller van den Bruch and Carl Schmitt, ideas so powerful that they were not only embraced widely across interwar Europe but are also still able to unleash their toxic impact today?

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