STEFAN GEORGE AND ADOLF HITLER: IS THERE AN IDEOLOGICAL CONNECTION?
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Introduction

The idea that there is an “ideological connection” between Adolf Hitler and Stefan George is not new. When Hitler came to power some National Socialist journalists spoke of him as the realization of George's prophecy of a rebirth of the German spirit. But it is important to remember that, in the first months of the dictatorship, the National Socialists looked anywhere they could for traces of a “legitimate” heritage. Soon after they consolidated their power in 1934/35, and no longer needed to look respectable, since with all power in their hand no one would dare to say that the emperor was naked, their enthusiasm for Stefan George diminished markedly.

In the early days of the regime some conservative journalists who were not National Socialists also tried to bring George’s name into connection with Hitler’s. But here too it was wishful thinking and not reality. First conservatives had every desire to hide from themselves the brutal nature of the dictatorship which they had helped to put into power. This was a common reaction in the early days of National Socialist rule. When something really terrible happened one could hear the phrase: “If the Führer only knew!” No one wanted to believe that the Führer not only knew but had given orders for the atrocity. But, for as long as they could, conservative politicians and conservative journalists tried to pretend to themselves that the chickens had not put a fox in charge of the hen house.

In addition to conservatives who did not want to face the truth of Nazi brutality, and Nazi journalists who wanted to hide it, there were also people near to George himself, who tried to use George's name to “enchant” or “charm” the barbarians into more civilized behavior. They wanted to lead the leader (“den Führer führen”). And they thought that by flattering him they might be able to. But, as history has taught us, the Nazis had not seized power in order to let others guide them in their use of it.¹

World War Two also provided the occasion for bringing the names of George and Hitler together. In the allied countries between 1939 and 1945 all of German culture and history was under suspicion of having contributed to the rise of Hitler. One of the typical works of this class of writing appeared in 1941 under the title, *From Luther To Hitler*. In other words, four hundred years of German intellectual history was supposed to have culminated in Hitler's dictatorship. Thus, between Nazis and conservative opportunists in the early days of the regime, and the anti-German propaganda of the allies during the Second World War, the idea was firmly planted that Stefan George was somehow partly responsible for Hitler and Nazism. This position persisted after the war and can still be found in historical works and books of political science. The historian finds the “elitism” and “authoritarianism” of the George circle is also present in the Nazis, he notes that the George circle used the symbol of the “Reich”, and that the “Swastika” appears on its biographical and scientific works, and he concludes that George must have influenced Hitler.

I do not believe that much can be said for the thesis that tries to bring Stefan George into a relationship with Adolf Hitler and National Socialism and I will present my arguments against it in the following steps.

First, a biographical look at Hitler and George in which the differences between their idea of Germany will be made clear. Second, I will look at three areas of thought that were important to Hitler and ask if we find any similar views in George. These three areas are the questions of

a) War
b) Weltanschauung (“world view”)
c) Race.

In examining these topics and comparing Hitler's and George's thought I will try to demonstrate how Hitler's views are rooted in the notion of a biologically constituted people, and how George's views are rooted in the notion of spiritual rebirth, an act which is in no

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3 For example: „I am convinced that George and his circle significantly contributed to the creation of a psychological, cultural, and even political climate that make the events in Germany leading up to and following 1933 not just imaginable, but also feasible.“, Robert E. Norton, *Secret Germany: Stefan George And His Circle*, Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2002, xvi.
way connected with a biological community, and which has nothing to do with power-politics.

Biographies

Shakespeare's Hamlet says that while the good men do is often buried with their bones, the evil men do lives after them. In this regard the facts of Hitler's life are pretty well known and I can be brief about his biography. He was born in 1889 in a small Austrian town on the border to Germany. This was 18 years after German unification under the rule of Prussia and as a child he imbibed a heavy dose of German nationalist propaganda. His father died when he was young leaving him pretty much free to do what he wanted. As an adolescent he journeyed several times to Vienna. Although rejected by the Viennese art academy he remained in the city and supported himself by painting prominent buildings and selling his pictures to art dealers. He continued this impoverished, but free bohemian, way of life when he moved to Munich in 1913.

At the outbreak of the First World War Hitler volunteered to serve in the German Army. He was wounded several times and was awarded the high decoration of the Iron Cross, First Class. The end of the war found him in a hospital recovering from a wound. He stayed in the army purveying nationalist propaganda to enlisted men as part of the army's effort to keep the soldiers loyal to the state and to prevent them from turning to socialism or communism. As a paid agent of the army Hitler attended his first meeting of the small party that was later to become the National Socialist German Workers' Party. In other words, Hitler's political career began as an informer for the German army. He soon quit the military and joined the party. Many of those who subsequently joined the party in the early days of his political activity were his former soldierly comrades. In 1923 an attempted coup in Munich failed. After serving less than one year in prison, during which time he dictated volume one of Mein Kampf, he founded the National Socialist party anew and began his quest for the control of the German parliament. In 1933, during the world economic crisis, he succeeded in attaining state power and established a brutal and repressive dictatorship.

The events following 1933 are well known: Germany was remilitarized. Austria and part of Czechoslovakia were annexed. The attack on Poland in 1939 led to the out break of the European war which soon developed into a world war. Germany enjoyed a series of
victories until 1942. Afterwards her fortunes declined. Hitler committed suicide in April 1945, just days before total political collapse. To sum up: Hitler’s life began in an atmosphere of nationalism, developed into a fanatical chauvinism, and ended in suicide during a fanatic nationalist-racist war which he had unleashed.

Stefan George was born in 1868 in the Rhineland. This is the part of Germany that was colonized by the Romans and which, to this day, retains its Catholic cultural traditions. Many of the inhabitants of this area find the parts of Germany East of the Roman *limes*, to be uncivilized. George was no exception. He regarded Prussia with great suspicion, admiring its efficient organization but deploring its lack of culture. George’s forefathers were partly French and he was fluent in that language. His family were wine growers and wine merchants and their prosperity made it possible for him to pursue a vocation without having to work for a living.

When George began to consider devoting his life to poetry he was undecided for a long time in what language he would write. In addition to French and German he also considered Spanish. For awhile he planned to emigrate to Mexico. In the light of these biographical details of his early years one can see that George was not a man who by birth, upbringing, or inclination, tended to a narrow nationalism or indeed to chauvinistic politics.

After finishing secondary school George traveled in Italy, England, Spain, and France. During his time in France he was introduced to the circle of the symbolist poets whose views on the sacred role of poetry had a lasting effect on him. He returned to Germany in 1889 and, in the same year, began the study of the Romance Languages at the University of Berlin. He only studied three semesters. Nevertheless he made friends in Berlin who were influential in academic and artistic circles and enjoyed a reputation among a small but culturally powerful group.

Until the age of thirty George’s works were privately printed. And even when he gave up this policy his publications were confined to small editions.

George never married. He never had a home or an apartment of his own. He lived in hotels or with friends, traveling by train from city to city to be with them. He had few personal belongings and lived solely for his work.

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The nature of this work reveals itself in three phases of his adult life. In the first, until about the age of thirty, he devoted himself exclusively to poetry. In this period he was surrounded by men of his own generation and associated with them more or less on terms of equality.

In the second phase he expanded his poetic mission into a pedagogical one. The group of equals yielded to a social group in which George was the “Master” surrounded by younger disciples. (The form of community of the “master” and his “disciples” had been taken from the French symbolists.)

In the third phase, which began shortly before the First World War, George’s pedagogical mission was institutionalized. By this time his first disciples had become university professors who brought a new generation of students into contact with the poet. George appointed “mentors” from among his older disciples to watch over the education and character development of the younger generation. This form of existence remained George’s until the end of his days.

The long range intention of this third phase was to educate a spiritual elite whose example would emanate throughout German and European society. It was not an attempt to attain power but to demonstrate a new way of life, an order of values, and a code of conduct.

What pedagogical concept did George follow? It was based on a canon of works, primarily in poetry, philosophy, and history, that extended from the ancient world of Greece and Rome through the Middle ages down to modern times. So, for example, as absolutely essential authors, the young men were directed in their reading to Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Plato, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare and Goethe. The center of George’s pedagogical concept is found in Plato’s Symposium with its notion of the ascent from the beauty of outward forms to the idea of beauty itself, and in Plato’s “Parable of the cave”, in The Republic, with its narrative of the turn away from the world to the vision of the Idea of the Good, in the light of which one can first understand reality.

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6 For the canon of texts that made up the basis of this education, Ibid., 480-498.
The third phase of George's adult life in which the mission to renew German society superceded his poetic interests lasted until George’s death in 1933. This year also marks the triumph of National Socialism. Hitler came to power in January 1933. The regime, in the person of its culture minister Bernard Rust and propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels, attempted to involve George in its activities but George declined and, on the eve of his 65th birthday, in July 1933 left the country for Switzerland in order to avoid any official celebrations. He died in Locarno in December of the same year without ever having returned to Germany, and was buried by members of his inner circle six hours before the ceremony was scheduled to take place in order to prevent the German ambassador, and other outsiders, from being present.

So much for the biographies of Stefan George and Adolf Hitler. Since some scholars maintain that Hitler's views resemble those of George's I will choose three issues that are central to an understanding of Hitler and then see if we can find anything comparable to these views in the world of Stefan George.

But first a word about Hitler's politics. They were characterized by a willingness to risk war, even when Germany was not under attack or its existence threatened. Why was he willing to take such a risk? It became apparent during the First World War that only continental powers could be world powers. Modern armies, involving millions of men and sophisticated equipment, are industrial based. War cannot be conducted without “mobilizing” millions for military duty, and other millions for work on the “home front”. War consumes great amounts of food stuffs, raw materials, and manufactured goods. The Allied blockade of the Central Powers between 1914 and 1918/19 proved the necessity of having an entire continent at one’s disposal if one was not to run out of raw materials and food. Hitler saw that in the future it would not be possible for nations that did not control a continent to be world powers. Unwilling to see Germany in the second rank of nations he was willing to risk war to gain hegemony over Europe. Thus war itself was at the center of Hitler’s world view.

The Weltanschauung, (or "world view") that Hitler used to justify war was Social Darwinism. This crude 19th century doctrine was common at the time and still exists in many forms today. It preaches a so-called “survival of the fittest” in a universal “struggle for existence".
Next to War and Social Darwinism a third aspect of Hitler’s policy was the doctrine of race. One must remember that at the beginning of the 20th century almost all Europeans and Americans were racists. We have to search deeply to find anyone who did not believe that the so-called white race was not superior to the so-called yellow and black races. At the peace talks following World War One the Japanese representative called for a resolution proclaiming the equality of all races. This was vetoed by the British who thought it might cause trouble in their African and Asian colonies. There was also a widespread prejudice against Slavic peoples, and of course anti-Semitism was common.

Stefan George did not think that Africans and Asians were the equals of white Europeans. (He also had his doubts about Russians and Americans.) But however widespread racism was at the time, Hitler’s racism took on a more radical quality. In Hitler’s view there was only one culturally gifted race, the so-called Aryans. There were the inferior races, the Asians and the Africans. Beyond these there was a third group that actively destroyed culture: these were the Jews. Thus, prevalent as racial prejudices were in the first half of the 20th century, Hitler’s racism went a step beyond the ethos of the time. He felt it was his “duty” to destroy the group which he claimed was the enemy of culture and humanity.

These three issues are of central importance to an understanding of Hitler: War, the Weltanschauung of Social Darwinism, and an extreme form of anti-Semitism. If one wants to maintain that there is an ideological connection between Adolf Hitler and Stefan George, one must confront these issues. Therefore I will now look at them in more detail.

War

In volume one of Mein Kampf Hitler has given an account of his experience in World War One and his estimation of the importance of war. Concerning the outbreak of the war he writes:

“The struggle of the year 1914 was not forced on the masses-- no, by the living God--it was desired by the whole people… .To me these days came like a release from the painful feelings of my youth. Even today I am not ashamed to say that, overpowered by stormy enthusiasm, I fell down on my knees and
thanked Heaven from an overflowing heart for granting me the good fortune of being permitted to live at this time.”

Hitler speaks of the “overflowing enthusiasm” with which he greeted the war. Whether this enthusiasm for the outbreak of the war was really so widespread as Hitler maintains is another question. And if it was we can be sure that it was because it was aided by busy propagandists, paid and unpaid. But it is undoubtedly true that what Hitler recorded in Mein Kampf, ten years after the World War broke out, reflects his reaction, and the reaction of some others, at the time.

For Hitler, the conflict was absolutely necessary. It was forced upon Germany by enemies whose sole intention was to destroy the German nation. Outnumbered and faced with the material superiority of the other side the German soldier did his duty so that "as long as there are Germans alive, they will remember that these men were sons of their nation." Hitler goes on to say that as the war dragged on into 1915 and 1916 a somberness settled over the front. Even for Hitler the holiday and parade atmosphere of the first days disappeared and he had to learn to live with the everyday fear of death. In this connection he writes:

“Now was the time to judge this army. Now, after two or three years, during which it was hurled from one battle into another, forever fighting against superior numbers and weapons, enduring hunger and bearing privations, now was the time to test the quality of this unique army.”

In Hitler's eyes the army was second to none. And, according to Hitler, the front also held in 1918. The reversals it suffered could have easily been made good. It was only because Communists and Social Democrats, who he claims were led by “Jews”, had inflamed the workers on the home front to strike, that the government collapsed. The army was not defeated, it was betrayed.

This in sum, is Hitler's view of the war. It was forced upon Germany by the enemies who wanted to destroy it. The individual German soldier took up the challenge

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7 Adolf Hitler, Mein Kampf, Two Volumes in One, Munich: Franz Eher Verlage Nachf., 1943, 177.
8 Ibid., 182.
9 Ibid., 213, et. passim.
enthusiastically. In four long years of fighting the German soldier again and again demonstrated a singular heroism. He was not defeated at the front, he was betrayed at home by the “Jews”.

What was Stefan George’s response to the outbreak of World War One?

Unlike Hitler George did not greet the outbreak of the war with enthusiasm. He was in the Swiss Alps in August 1914 and although urged by his friends to return immediately, he replied that he saw no pressing need. When his friends insisted he return because the war was such an important event and he should be in Germany to experience it, he replied that he did not think that the war was of any spiritual significance. Those who had gone to war would not come back improved by the experience. He argued that the real work of renewing Germany spiritually, to which he had dedicated his life, would have to be taken up again after the war, regardless of whether Germany won or lost.10

In 1917 George published the poem “Der Krieg”,11 (“The War”), in which he publicly presented his position on World War One. The poem opens with a group of citizens asking the poet what he thinks of the war. George responds:

“Ihr lasst euch pressen von der äussern wucht..
Das sind die flammenzeichen, nicht die kunde.
Am streit wie ihr ihn fühlt nehm ich nicht teil!”

"You yield to outward pressure…
These are merely the signs, the flames, not the meaning itself.
The struggle as you understand it is not mine."

According to George it was the materialism and greed of all the participating nations that brought about the war. Therefore it is not the enemy soldiers who bear the blame for the wounded and dead but the older generation in all of the warring countries who could not find peace in themselves and therefore could not make peace with their neighbors. For

this reason George cannot join in the praise of German virtue and in the condemnation of foreign vice. The poet:

"kann nicht schwärmen
Von heimischer tugend und von welscher tücke.
Hier hat das weib das klagt, der satte bürger,
Der graue bart ehr schuld als stich und schuss
Des widerparts an unserer söhn und enkel
Verglassten augen und zerfeztem leib."

[The poet] "cannot gush
Over our homeland's virtues and condemn the malice of the French. Here the weeping woman, the self-satisfied citizen, and the Gray bearded gentlemen are guiltier than the enemy For the bayonet and bullet wounds that have been inflicted On our son's and grandsons, and For their dismembered bodies and glass eyes."

In view of modern society’s lack of spiritual orientation and its consequent materialism, George cannot see how war can solve any significant problem. The world war is an expression of this dire situation and will only deepen it.

„Der alte Gott der Schlachten ist nicht mehr.
Erkrankte welten fiebern sich zu ende
In dem getob. Heilig sind nur die säfte
Noch makelfrei verspritz- ein ganzer strom".

"The ancient god of war no longer exists. In the confusion of battle sick and fevered worlds burn to an end. There is nothing sacred about any of it But the rivers of innocent blood that is being spent."
The chorus asks the poet if he is not impressed with the heroism of the German troops—the issue to which Hitler devoted his attention. George replies that there is heroism on both sides. But because there is no moral purpose to the conflict, but merely the attempt on all sides to increase their amoral power, there is no “public” meaning to the war. The mere triumph of one greedy group over is not an event that is in the interest of the res publica. Thus the personal sufferings of the soldiers engaged in the war remain in the realm of private sacrifice. In German this last thought reads:

"Das nötige werk der pflicht bleibt stumpf und glanzlos [...] Menge ist wert, doch zielos, schafft kein sinnbild, Hat kein gedächtnis."

That is to say, the soldiers do their duty ("Pflicht") but there is no glory in a struggle that is without a real goal or purpose ("zielos"). In this connection George makes his most important criticism. Because the soldiers’ sacrifice was made necessary by the greed and materialism of the societies that tumbled into war, it cannot symbolize any meaning: "Schafft kein sinnbild."

I want to focus on this German word, “Sinnbild”, which we can translate as “symbol”, literally an image (“Bild”) that expresses "meaning" ("Sinn"). Why can the sacrifice of the soldiers not create a Sinnbild? George is explicit. Because the war is an expression of greed it has no spiritual meaning. According to George it is therefore necessary to focus on the question of the change of heart, that is necessary on all sides, to reform the corrupt societies that have brought the war about. He has no position on the war except to get beyond to the issue of the disorder of European society. And for this matter only a „complete change of heart“ can improve the situation (“Nur vollste umkehr”).

But none of the statesmen responsible for the outbreak of the war, and who are too cowardly to end it before one or the other nation is exhausted, understands the spiritual problem. Therefore when George speaks of Europe’s wartime leaders he speaks of them with contempt: “Monarchs with paper crowns on their heads”.

There could hardly be a greater contrast between George's and Hitler's view of World War One. Hitler asserts that the war was necessary, he praises the German military
virtues, and emphasizes German heroism at the expense of other nations. He claims that the First World War was not lost on the battlefield, but at home and, as later events would demonstrate, he was therefore willing to rearm Germany and begin another war in order to tear up the treaty of Versailles.

On the other hand George has the clear insight that the First World War could have been avoided. Although he recognizes the military virtues in all armies, not just the German army, he sees that the courage of the common soldier cannot lend meaning to a cause that has no moral substance: “Schafft kein sinnbild”. Finally he argues: no matter who wins the war, without a spiritual renewal, or a conversion away from the materialistic *amor sui* of modern society to a renewed *amor Dei*, there will be no inner or outer peace.

In short: Hitler sees only the biological vitality of the nation, George focuses on a spiritual quality, the *conversio* or "Umkehr".

**Weltanschauung**

Hitler’s world view is “social Darwinism”, the doctrine that culture is created in a “struggle”, such as Darwin posited among the natural species, in which the so-called “strongest survives”. Social Darwinism takes many forms. It justified 19th century Manchester capitalism, the oppression of colonial peoples in Africa and Asia by the European nations, the extermination of the Indians in North and South America, and the institution of slavery in the United States and in the countries of South America.

Hitler presents his Social Darwinist views in many places, fairly concentrated in volume one, chapter eleven of *Mein Kampf*. For Hitler the doctrine of the "survival of the fittest" and "natural selection" expresses the essence of nature itself. He sees the so-called "human races" as natural units and satirizes those who think that the human races can become one people. If whites mix with inferior races they raise the lower races but degrade their own. According to Hitler such conduct is "contrary to nature".\(^{12}\) He insists that we must follow nature. And this means that the so-called higher race must subjugate the so-called lower race:

"The stronger [race] must dominate and not mix with the weaker, thus sacrificing its own greatness. Only the born weakling can view this [idea] as cruel, but... if this law did not prevail, any conceivable higher development of organic living beings would be

\(^{12}\) *Mein Kampf*, 312
unthinkable…. [S]truggle is always a means for improving a specie's health and power of resistance and, therefore, a cause of its higher development”.

In so arguing Hitler tries to make "brutality" morally excusable. The so-called “Struggle for survival” supposedly guarantees human development. But the assertion is meaningless since those who survive are automatically “the best”, no matter who survives, and by whatever means. The word “best” is merely a synonym for “the last one standing”.

According to Hitler only the “Aryan”, the “white Germanic race” brings forth true culture. The highest form of culture in Hitler’s eyes is found in the willingness of the individual to sacrifice himself for the community. In Hitler’s words: “In … [the Aryan] the instinct of self-preservation has reached the noblest form, since he willingly subordinates his own ego to the life of the community and, if the hour demands, even sacrifices it…. ”. With this argument the individual’s sacrifice for the preservation of the nation or the race constitutes the supreme virtue. Thus, for Hitler, the doctrine of race comes back to the issue of war.

To sum up, Hitler’s notion of culture and his assumption of progress for humankind is based 1) on the ideology that only one so-called human race, the Aryan, is capable of bringing forth culture and 2) on the notion that culture comes into being in a deadly struggle among the races. The highest cultural quality is the subordination of the individual to the biological group of the nation at war.

Do we find anything like these views in Stefan George? The answer is no. First of all George did not believe that culture was rooted in the human’s biological substance. Culture is not the result of natural birth, but of spiritual rebirth. George was of course German, but it is significant that the highest praise that George’s followers bestowed on him was to call him a “figure of the ancient world”, and to compare him to Plato. This was because in the self-understanding of George and his circle, just as Plato had tried to revive the ancient world through the creation of a spiritual, not a political empire, so George attempted to recall man to his true being through poetry, by evoking a community gathered around a divinely inspired image of man. Friedrich Gundolf, disciple of George and professor for German Literature at the University of Heidelberg, described the process by which such a vision of the divine is communicated. Leaders who penetrate to the human’s

13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., 325-326.
center do not create “doctrines” or “programs”. Socrates’ statement that “virtue is knowledge’ does not mean that one first makes clear to one self what the right thing to do is, and then goes out and does it. Rather insight into what we are as human beings goes hand in hand with the intuition of what action we should take in order to be human beings. Morality is not an afterthought. One learns virtuous conduct by orienting oneself to a virtuous model. This type of relationship is not a blood relationship. Its model is Socrates and the group of young people who followed him. To the extent that they learned from Socrates, and had their lives changed by commerce with him, they may be described as his “spiritual sons”, but there is no blood relationship involved in “spiritual birth”. George is very clear about his understanding of his task: the renewal of the Platonic-Socratic creation of a realm of the spirit. He describes his mission as that of building a “Reich des Geistes” (An “empire of the spirit”). When one enters this Reich one is “re-born”, (“umgeboren”), but not in blood:

“Durch die sendung durch den segen
Väter Mütter sind nicht mehr.
Aus der sohnschaft, der erlost,
Kür ich meine herrn der welt.”

“Through the mission and the blessing,
Father and mother are no more.
From the sons I have saved
I choose my lords of the world.”

Thus George’s attempt to revive Germany with a new elite has nothing to do with the supposed biological group of so-called “Aryans”:

“Neuen adel den ihr suchet
Führt nicht her von schild und krone! […]
Stammlos wachsen im gewühle
Seltene sprossen eigenen ranges
Und ihr kennt die mitgeburten

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16 Ibid., 243-244.
An der augen wahrer glut”. 18

„The new nobility that you seek
Does not come from crown and coat of arms! […]
Without family, and from the mass of men,
Emerge rare births who reveal their own high rank
And you will know your brothers
In the fervent glance of honest eyes.”

We may conclude that, in the question of Weltanschauung, George and Hitler have nothing in common. On the one hand we have Hitler’s Social Darwinism and his praise of the individual who sacrifices himself for the preservation of the biological group—a sacrifice in which the biological group is understood as an extension of the “ego”. On the other hand we have George’s understanding that culture is the result of spiritual rebirth, or of overcoming the ego rooted in the vital structure of man. Culture does not emerge in wars between nations but through openness to the divine. This is human “nobility”, and it is “stammlos” because it is not rooted in any heritage of blood.

Race

In Hitler’s writings the term “Jew” serves to designate all the characteristics which are of no use to his program of war. He wants to convince people to be soldiers again and to lay down their life for something called “Germany”, which he understands to be a biological unit. The will to subordinate oneself to one’s biological nation Hitler calls “idealism”. The Aryan is an “idealist”, the counter-idea, what Hitler calls the “Jew”, is not. Because, in Hitler’s eyes, the Jew lacks the “idealistic attitude” he cannot create culture, but only contribute to the decomposition of nations. For this reason Hitler identifies the Jew with Marxism and all doctrines that threaten the idea of a single unified German nation. In this regard he makes the Jews responsible for the loss of World War One:

"If we let all the causes of the German collapse pass in review, the ultimate and most decisive remains the failure to recognize the racial problem and

18 Ibid., 85.
especially the Jewish menace. The defeats on the battlefield in August, 1918, would have been child's play to bear. They stood in no proportion to the victories of our people. It was not they that caused our downfall; no, it was brought about by that power which prepared these defeats by systematically over many decades robbing our people of the political and moral instincts and forces which alone make nations capable and hence worthy of existence…”.

Hitler’s public life began as a propagandist for the German military. War was the focus of his thought. His Social Darwinism served the purpose of giving a pseudo-moral justification for war: “Nature”, his substitute for God, required that individuals and races struggle for survival. The concept of race was also conceived to serve the purpose of preparing for the next war. In order to blame German defeat in World War One on someone he developed the notion of the “Jew” who, Hitler claims, cannot build culture or the state but can only work to dissolve it. Here the racial world view comes full circle: the biological unit of Germany finds its deadly enemy in the biologically defined “Jew”. In the implacable Social Darwinist world of struggling races the victors win life and the losers are killed. Thus Hitler lays the ground for the politics of genocide.

In turning toward George’s views on race we will again find comparisons difficult to make because biological units—real or supposed – are not part of George’s understanding of culture or humanity. George was also conscious of the 19th century distinction between “Germans” and “Jews”. Indeed, the integration of both groups into a third body, the spiritual elite that he wished to create, was a part of his program. As I pointed out this third group was not a “biologically” constituted group.

Above, when I discussed George’s poem “The War”, I emphasized George's term "Sinnbild". The divine powers, which the poet is open to, must become embodied in a symbol. Around this godly symbol the poet draws his disciples together.

„Der Gott ist das geheimnis höchster weihe
Mit strahlen rings erweist er seine reihe”

19 Mein kampf, 359.
20 Der Stern, 16.
„The god is the mystery of the highest consecration
Emanating rays manifest his place and rank."

The nobility which George sought was to be constituted by the spiritually awakened individual. The godly center manifests itself in an "image": it is not “born” of blood, but formed by culture and education. This new nobility is the "Sinn-bild" that George spoke of in his poem "The War", because nobility is not the result of blood lines but is made up of individuals who through spiritual insight realize the divine in man.

“Wer adel hat erfüllt sich nur im bild.”
“The noble are only fulfilled in an image.”

The Greeks had an image of the Gods. But, according to George, the Germans, too far north of the Mediterranean, and the Jews too far south, do not know a divine image that was attained in classical culture. In regard to their distance to the Greek middle, George refers to the Jews and Germans as remote “brothers”. George wishes to bring these brothers together in a new spiritual community that will embody the divine image.

“Ihr Äusserste von windumsauster klippe
Und schneeiger brache! Ihr von glühender wüste”
[… ] gleich entfernte
Von heitrem meer und Binnen wo sich leben
Zu ende lebt in welt von gott und bild!..
Blond oder Schwarz demselben schoos entsprungne
Verkannte brüder suchend euch und hassend
Ihr immer schweifend und drum nie erfüllt!”

“You, the extremes: the one from barren snow-fields
And wave swept cliffs, the other from the glowing desert
[…] are both equally distant
From the radiant sea and fields where mortals

21 Ibid., 40
22 Ibid., 41
Live out their lives in a world of the gods and in the divine image.
Blond or dark haired, born of the same womb,
Brothers who don’t recognize each other, searching
and hating,
Always roaming and therefore unfulfilled”.

It is George’s intention to awaken the spirit of the ancient Mediterranean. This means overcoming the elements of the modern would that prevent the human being from realizing that the soul of man can be open to divinity (a position diametrically opposed to Max Weber’s notion of the “process of disenchantment”).23 The Germans, the Jews, and others who can be integrated into this spiritual norm, and realize it in the image of well formed men, will be the bearers of a world that will overcome materialism. So much for George’s relationship to the concept of race—the biological notion of race simply plays no role in his work.

Conclusion

George’s interest in a "spiritual rebirth" not only separates him from the Nazis, but from our time as well. It is George’s orientation to transcendence that makes it difficult for the contemporary world to comprehend him. Nevertheless, however much the modern world may neglect it, the idea that we are born once in carne, that we may however be reborn in spirit, is the basis of occidental culture. Upon this insight into the nature of humanity we have learned to understand ourselves and it is the yardstick we use to judge our own, and other cultures’, historical achievements.

What do we mean by spiritual rebirth? I cannot go into detail here. But the minimum of what we mean when we say that the human being is born once in the flesh and can be, need not be, born a second time in the spirit, is that there is a qualitative difference between, on the one side, biological “fitness” or vitality, and, on the other, the “good life” or summum bonum. To the brute fact that we are alive comes the principle question: What do we live for? This question does not refer to a distant goal but to how we live each day.

23 „The increasing intellectualization and rationalization...means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted.“ Max Weber, „Science as a Vocation“ in: From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology, edited with an Introduction by Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills, New York, Oxford University Press, 1946, 129-158. Here 139.
The question of the *summum bonum*, or the life of virtue, is raised in philosophy, religion, and literature. It knows no political boundaries. It inquires into “human nature”, not of our physical but, our moral nature. We cannot learn to pose such questions if all poetry, philosophy, and religion is reduced to the mere “projection” of our vital desires.

In this regard, the habit of looking at German intellectual life in terms of its relation to the ideology of National Socialism has had a bad affect on our understanding of culture in general and, therefore, of ourselves. No one has to “agree” with Plato, or Dante, or George concerning the specific details of their idea of the *summum bonum*. These questions can and must be debated. But in order to reflect on the good life, and engage in discussion with others concerning it, one has to take philosophy, religion, and literature seriously. If, for example, one merely reads George with an eye to whether a word he uses reminds one of a word the Nazis used, one is wasting one’s time.

George has something to say in the matters that are at the heart of our civilization, because they are at the center of our individual lives. What specific value his words have for us, how well they take up the tradition in which we live, and how well they express it adequately for our time, we have not discussed today. But it is here, and not in a discussion of power politics, that the contributions of Stefan George have their place. Therefore, if one wants to concern oneself with Stefan George, if one wants to compare him to others, one would profitably spend one’s time in meditating on Plato, Dante, Shakespeare, or Goethe; these are the partners in a dialog with Stefan George, not Adolf Hitler.