

Constructing a Reactionary Modernity: “White” Counterrevolutionary Mentalities and the Transformation of Politics in Central Europe after the Great War

An Introduction

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Understanding the modernities constructed in both the practices and the imaginaries of radical right-wing movements in the early 1920s has important implications for historiography. Among other things, it compels historians to adopt a holistic approach to these movements and to the societal and political contexts into which they were embedded and which they often attempted to influence or subvert. Such an approach helps to avoid reductionism, in both explanation and analysis: the right-wing radicals of the first post-war decades possessed complex ideological ancestry and were linked to intellectual milieus in which continuities survived the rupture of the Great War. Their often-violent political practices and the processes of meaning-making after the experience of defeat in the world war and of the Bolshevik threat open themselves to analysis only when this broader setting itself is interrogated.

The following papers represent the second instalment of a series of papers on how East Central European late modernities were constructed in the wake of World War I. They focus on a specific chapter in the history of ideologies and political technologies in the region and continue to explore the period as an ambiguous, multi-faceted era that pointed towards several alternative pathways into the twentieth-century world. In this contribution, we concentrate on the emergence and institutionalisation of alternative notions of politics and society that deviated markedly from the liberal patterns of the previous century, and generated distinct imaginaries

about how the political community—the referent object of ideologies—should ideally be configured.

The term “conservative revolution”—probably coined by Hugo von Hofmannsthal—was originally intended to capture more than just Weimar Germany’s right-wing ideological laboratory. It can be productively extended to the numerous and partly interconnected intellectual milieus of Central and Eastern Europe.¹ The label denotes a forward-looking desire for radical change coupled with the claim that such transformation should be achieved by reclaiming values and identities allegedly marginalised by liberal modernity. In this sense, it provides a useful framework for situating paramilitary action within its political, intellectual, and social contexts.² Without such a framework, there is a risk of reducing right-wing radicalism in 1920s Central Europe to a mechanical afterlife of wartime violence or to a mere reaction to Bolshevism. Both factors were important—but taken in isolation they tend to explain purposive and ideologically saturated action through overly simple cause-and-effect models.

Taking the conservative-revolutionary milieu seriously as an analytical category highlights a more ambitious—and in many respects quintessentially modern—project: the search for new orders of meaning and authority after the collapse of empires and established certainties. Conservative-revolutionary thought drew on *Lebensphilosophie*, vitalist notions of regeneration, and social Darwinist imaginaries of struggle to reframe politics as a confrontation of life-forms rather than interests.³ In this optic, anti-Bolshevism becomes not the origin but a potent symbol within a broader worldview. Violence, in turn, is not simply “brutalisation coming home to roost” but an instrument legitimised by a newly systematised language of national and racial renewal. Reconstructing this ideological fermentation restores historical agency and contingency: it reveals actors who did not simply react to crisis but set out to author an alternative modernity that re-shaped institutions, political cultures, and transnational horizons.

The conservative revolution, understood as a complex ideological “vessel” capable of channelling diverse impulses for action, is a practical starting point for such

1 Hofmannsthal, “Das Schrifttum als geistiger Raum der Nation.”

2 Key discussions in the literature include Klemperer, *Germany’s New Conservatism*; Gerstenberger, *Der revolutionäre Konservatismus*; Mosse, “The Corporate State and the Conservative Revolution”; Sontheimer, *Antidemokratisches Denken*; Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair*; Herf, *Reactionary Modernism*; Breuer, *Anatomie der konservativen Revolution*, as well as Mohler and Weissmann, *Die konservative Revolution* as the final iteration of Mohler’s—apologetic—series of interpretations, and more recently Kemper, *Das “Gewissen,”* Jones, *The German Right*.

3 Sontheimer, *Antidemokratisches Denken*, 56–60.

a hermeneutic exercise because it itself was a melting pot of *fin-de-siècle*, wartime, and post-war experiences. When Hans Freyer claimed that “the state manifests itself in clearest form in war,” he was at once echoing late nineteenth-century Wilhelmine *Staatslehre* in the tradition of Treitschke and reflecting on the lived experience of the world war. The legacy of turn-of-the-century *völkisch* and social Darwinist thinkers—and not only resentment at military defeat—fed into the conservative-revolutionary conviction, forcefully articulated by Edgar Julius Jung, that a people which can no longer express itself through violence is condemned to biological death.⁴ Analogous arguments emerged in contemporary Hungarian political theory. Perhaps the most important example is Mihály Réz, the sociologist and influential public intellectual, who from the 1910s until his death in 1921 developed a similarly martial conception of the “natural” struggle for supremacy between peoples.⁵

The conservative revolution also integrated nineteenth-century *völkisch* discourse through wartime cult of the *Volksgemeinschaft*—an idealized image of the people as an ethnic community. This trope later functioned both as a critique of individualism (and thus liberalism) and of cosmopolitan communitarianism (and thus Marxism).⁶ In foreign-policy terms, it underpinned the self-assertion of a people organised into a state, facing naturally hostile competitors. Predictably, this conception gained strength during the war years, but it could be reapplied to the post-war constellation of a defeated Germany, an Austria denied *Anschluss*, or a Hungary reduced to a truncated ethnic core.⁷ In all cases, it served as a foundational trope around which actors advocating decisive action against internal and external enemies in the name of the nation/*Volk* could rally. Certain iterations of this logic could even be mobilised to justify continued thinking in terms of larger power blocs, in the footsteps of wartime *Mitteuropa* projects, as a way of securing the strategic hinterland deemed necessary for the resurgence of defeated nations.⁸

Between 1919 and 1921 the perhaps most respected (if certainly not the most widely read) periodical of the early conservative revolution, *Gewissen* [Conscience], published numerous contributions on these questions.⁹ They shared what might be called an “actionist” interpretation of the unity of the German people and of Central

4 Freyer, *Der Staat*, 33; Jung, *Sinndeutung der deutschen Revolution*, 52.

5 Romsics, *Összeomlás és útkeresés*, 48–49.

6 Faulenbach, *Ideologie des deutschen Weges*, 44–45.

7 Mai, “»Verteidigungskrieg« und »Volksgemeinschaft«,” 592–94; Faber, “Zur Vorgeschichte der Geopolitik,” 393.

8 Bock, “Antipatriotismus, Westeuropa und Weltrevolution,” 216–17; Heuss, *Deutschlands Zukunft*. For a political economy perspective of the day, see Herkner, *Deutschland und Österreich*. On the *völkisch* idea of Central Europe, see Meyer, *Mitteuropa in German Thought and Action*, 292.

9 Stern, *Politics of Cultural Despair*, 280–90. Cp. also Gleichen, “Sagen, was soll.”

Europe. Politics—understood as the battlefield of peoples and states—was framed as the arena in which the German people sought self-realisation and unity, and in which a future Central Europe was imagined as emerging under the leadership of a reborn German nation.¹⁰

After the shock of the war, the emphasis on preserving *Gemeinschaft* (the organic community) became a key theme. It was taken up not only by Ernst Jünger, the veteran theorist of the new war experience, but also by German industrialists who sought to fend off class-based challenges to their economic dominance.¹¹ The notion of protecting the *Volksgemeinschaft* was inscribed into the ideological core of most movements that we now classify as far-right paramilitary organisations of the 1920s. It provided a pre-existing framework that lent legitimacy and positive meaning to the struggle against Bolshevism. In Theodor W. Adorno's later terms, it functioned as a "jargon of authenticity," justifying action in the name of an idolised notion seen as capturing the deep, inner truth of the self, the essence of Germanness (and, by analogy, Hungarianness, etc.).¹²

The conspiratorial plans to overturn domestic and international orders, the choreographies of violence (and their subsequent staging in courtrooms), and efforts to build new organisations and dense networks of like-minded activists all reflected what Walter Benjamin diagnosed as the aestheticisation of politics.¹³ Friedrich Georg Jünger argued that the "community of blood" (*Blutgemeinschaft*) trumped rationality. By doing so, he opened the way—as his brother Ernst had already done—to conceiving action in the name of that community as beautiful precisely because it was irrational, and to imagining politics as a self-referential activity capable of producing unity where there had previously been division. This line of thought was also used to justify violent transgressions in the semi-civil-war conditions of the early 1920s.¹⁴ At around the same time, the discourse of *nemzeti öncélúság* (national autotelism; the nation as an end in itself) rose to prominence among Hungarian paramilitary circles, which also embraced the organic state theory popularised by the Austrian–German philosopher Othmar Spann. Both phenomena underline that the conservative revolution was a transnational phenomenon and that complex, multidirectional patterns of ideological transfer nourished the emerging ideologies of armed radicals on the far right.¹⁵

10 Grunewald, "Reichseuropa gegen Paneuropa," 318–27.

11 Bures, "The Ineffable Conservative Revolution"; Föllmer, *Die Verteidigung der bürgerlichen Nation*, 197–204.

12 Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*.

13 Benjamin, "Theorien des deutschen Faschismus."

14 Herf, *Reactionary Modernism*, 28.

15 Pritz, "A fajvédők külpolitikai nézetei."

Finally, the specifically middle-class ethos of the paramilitaries deserves emphasis. It was more than a sociological descriptor of the groups' dominant social background. It also expressed a double movement: a step forward against old aristocratic and capitalist elites, and a step backward against communism. Jeffrey Herf's concept of "reactionary modernism" captures this paradox. Radical right-wing activism formed part of what he describes as the reinforcement of the socio-ethical milieus of the Weimar Republic: a *Mittelstand*-driven effort to consolidate a social order commensurate with an ascendant, anti-liberal middle-class sentiment.¹⁶ This sentiment demanded a reinvention of politics and willingly combined the legacies of the *Volksgemeinschaft* and the nation-in-arms.

Avoiding reductionism, the three papers approach the early 1920s counter-revolutionary right not as a set of local aftershocks of the Great War, but as a laboratory of ideas, institutions, and—importantly—transnational practices. They all demonstrate in their own way that far-right milieus adjacent to the conservative revolution were not simply reacting to Bolshevism or reenacting wartime brutalisation. They were experimenting with a distinct version of modernity around 1920—one in which anti-Bolshevism was embedded in a broader ideological synthesis drawing on *Lebensphilosophie*, vitalism, and social Darwinist grammars of struggle, decay and regeneration. The common thread binding these three studies is that they reconstruct how this ideological fermentation translated into political imaginaries, institutional habits and organised movements. Read together, they show a far right that was simultaneously anti-liberal and conceptually modern; insurgent and state-adjacent; nationalist in aims yet transnational in the process of constructing itself ideologically (Bodó), as well as in its methods and self-understanding (Bartha, Romsics).

A first axis of interpretation is the relationship between ideology and geographical scale. In Gergely Romsics's paper, he argues that counterrevolutionary actors in Munich, Vienna, and Budapest coordinated the post-1919 upheavals formed a diachronic, ideology-driven civil war across Central Europe, in which both left and right perceived the Other as an ontological threat. The result was a "civil-war habitus," sustained by myths of defeat and the spectre of Bolshevism, that produced a reactionary version of internationalism on the radical right. These actors imagined coordinated action, regime change in Vienna, and broader geopolitical reordering—mirroring the transnational logic that they ascribed to their revolutionary enemies.

The White International's conspiratorial horizon makes visible a paradox: movements that cultivated a cult of national sovereignty nonetheless embraced quasi "post-Westphalian" practices when they believed the struggle was existential.

16 Herf, *Reactionary Modernism*, 1–13.

The paper describes this as a version of the “conservative dilemma,” whereby sovereignists endorsed transnational organisation and even bloc-like *Grossraum* ideas. The implication is methodological as well as historical: to understand early interwar far-right modernity, we must look beyond domestic arenas and follow the traffic of plans, emissaries, money, arms, and imaginaries across borders.

A second axis is the translation of violence into institutional form. Béla Bodó's paper, “The White Terror in a Global Context,” shifts the focus from networks and geopolitical imaginaries to the internal mechanics of state transformation. Its core claim is that Hungary's early counterrevolution constituted not only a violent episode but also a decisive moment in the conversion of the *Rechtsstaat* into a *Rassenstaat*. It chronicles miscarriages of justice: the failure to prosecute antisemitic and political crimes committed during the hot phase of White Terror which created precedents and institutional habits that normalised legal inequality. Importantly, Bodó situates this transition in the broader context of modern racist thinking rooted in eugenics and social Darwinism, showing how it penetrated liberal states and legal orders in the late nineteenth century, ultimately catalysed by the Great War and the subsequent period of upheaval. Bodó's piece does not reduce the flow of ideas to unidirectional transfers: he makes it clear that a broader Western/European attitude to race and specifically to Jews was combined with the impact of experience (that of defeat and the two revolutions) and the institutionalisation of racism in Horthy's emergent Hungary.

This argument also suggests that brutalisation alone cannot explain the period's significance. The paper explicitly contests a historiographical drift that reduces the Red and White terrors to residual violence or episodes that can be understood separately from longer term processes in interwar Europe and Hungary. Instead, it argues that impunity was productive and the actors were also looking forward: the abuse of the justice system taught perpetrators that Jewish property and lives could be violated without meaningful state sanction, and such acts could even reappear in later theatres of violence and governance. By embedding this argument in a broader genealogy of the racial state—one that links modern biopolitics, social engineering, demographic thinking, and the fusion of scientism with nationalism—the essay positions Hungary as an early, instructive case in a transnational history of racialized modernisation.

Importantly, this essay does not present the racial state as a fixed, fully achieved reality in Hungary by the early 1920s. Rather, it treats it as a trend and an ideal type, arguing that the counterrevolution created a “hot house” for political experimentation in which paramilitary actors and racist intellectual currents pushed the state towards new forms of ethicised social ordering. This theme connects it as much with the first paper as with Bartha's piece on the Hungarian political co-entrepreneurship behind the Anti-Semitic International.

Providing a third axis of interpretation focused on organisational form and political entrepreneurship, Ákos Bartha's study of Tibor Eckhardt's efforts of rebuilding a domestic radical movement (the Association of Awakening Hungarians or ÉME) while staking its claim to a leadership role in Europe's nascent antisemitic networks narrows the lens to a key movement that links paramilitary subcultures to mass politics. The paper shows how the ÉME rapidly evolved from a base of white terror into a nationwide organisation and a hub for transnational far-right networking. Eckhardt emerges as a political entrepreneur attempting to position the movement between the extreme right and the pro-consolidation conservative establishment, while also internationalising Hungarian racist thinking through ties with Italian fascism, German *völkisch* circles, and Romanian, Austrian, and Russian partners.

The case of the 1925 antisemitic congress in Budapest—presented as the culmination of this transnational push and simultaneously a demonstration of its limits—offers a crucial bridge between the first two papers. It shows how the international imaginaries and networks highlighted in “The White International” could be institutionalised in the form of organised congresses, ideological exchanges, and movement-building. It also shows how the racist logic analysed in “The White Terror in a Global Context” did not remain confined to state legislation or judicial precedent; it was cultivated and popularised through associations that mediated between street politics, scientific-racial discourse, and the increasingly consolidated authoritarian state.

Seen together, the three papers trace a coherent, though not linear, story about the conservative revolutionary milieu's relationship to modernity. The far right's early interwar ‘modernity project’ was not an abstract intellectual posture; it was all action and practice, in keeping with the voluntarist and activist philosophical underpinnings of these movements. Progress towards its goals could be achieved through transnational conspiratorial practice, a recalibration of the legality of violence in and against society, or through the building of racist networks and organisations that operated partially in the public eye. The trilogy thus moves across levels of analysis—regional strategy, state institutions, and movement politics—while staying anchored in a shared historical problem: how to explain the far right's capacity to reinterpret defeat, revolution, and social dislocation not only as crises to be survived but as opportunities for ideological and institutional innovation.

This integrated perspective also helps refine the place of anti-Bolshevism. Across all three papers, Bolshevism functions less as a standalone cause than as a catalytic symbol within broader frameworks. In the first, it is the spectre that legitimises a reactionary internationalism and sustains civil-war mentalities across borders. In the second, it forms part of the context in which violence against Jews and political

enemies is rationalised and then retroactively normalised through legal concessions and exclusionary statutes. In the third, it remains a mobilising trope within a racial-protectionist agenda increasingly geared towards transnational alliance-building and the institutionalisation of far-right alternatives to liberal democracy.

The result is a three-part argument about the early 1920s as a formative moment in the genealogy of European far-right politics. The counterrevolutionary right, as these studies show, was not merely a consequence of wartime brutalisation nor a set of local epilogues to the revolutionary wave of 1918–1919. It was a creative—and dangerous—attempt to build new orders of meaning and power. Its actors imagined a new Central European architecture, experimented with the fusion of nationalism and racial biopolitics, and cultivated organisational structures capable of moving between domestic consolidation and international networking. By reading Munich, Vienna, and Budapest together; by connecting paramilitary violence to legal transformation; and by tracking ÉME's journey from terror hub to an activist organisation, the three papers demonstrate that the conservative revolution's 'ideological climate' was not a metaphorical atmosphere but a historically operative force—one that shaped the far right's sense of modernity, its enemies, and its plausible futures. The reverse is also true: paramilitary violence was not the necessary and quasi-automatic outcome of the experiences of defeat and revolution, but an ambitious undertaking to create a new politics and ultimately a new society framed in terms hammered out in the intellectual smelters of the conservative revolution.

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