

Chapter 7

The Mission in Nazi Germany

In 1942, when invited with other journalists to tour the Third Reich and admire its greatness, the French journalist Jacques Chardonne (1884–1968) was overcome by religious awe:

The feeling I experience when I observe the German people as a whole is a feeling of...moral aesthetics: mass meetings full of dignity and taste, ardour and fervour, the solemn mood, the tone of religiousness, the scrupulousness, the deep thankfulness. This [country]...has again found itself and clothed itself in a holiness that is beyond the ordinary.1

A soprano boys’ choir somewhere along the journey, performing a Bach motet on the occasion of the harvest festival, made him exclaim: ‘National Socialism enlarges our notion of the holy without distorting it; this country is pervaded by religion.’2

Millions of people greeted the war that engulfed Europe in misery and destruction, a war in which Germany occupied the West, colonized Eastern Europe and murdered more than twenty million people, with semi-religious awe. The overwhelming majority of Germans felt convinced that it was morally ‘right’ not only to ‘cleanse’ their own country of all the elements that could dilute their precious ‘Nordic blood’ – Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, the psychologically disturbed and socially unwanted – but also forcibly to take control of other European countries, wipe out European Jewry and murder Slavs merely to create space for German colonists. Even beyond this, it was felt that they, of all people, had been chosen by history to perform these deeds as the very consequence of modernity. The result of this operation would be, or so they thought, the establishment of a long-lasting reign and enduring peace. Accordingly, the public mood was pompous and solemn.


2 Chardonne, ‘Der Himmel von Nieflheim,’ 321.
This sentiment pervaded the schoolbooks, the public propaganda machinery, novels, academic texts and journalists’ impressions. At stake was an interpretation of modernity that, at the time, Germany shared with many of its European neighbours. In his prescient 1938 essay, ‘The Age of the World Picture,’ the philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) ambivalently analysed this modernity as characterized by competing yet basically similar ideologies rushing into a confrontation. ‘For what is happening now is the melting down of the self-completing essence of modernity into the obvious.’\(^3\) Seen from this angle, modernity was ideological conquest: ‘The fundamental event of modernity is...that man fights for the position in which he can be that being who gives to every being the measure and draws up the guidelines.’\(^4\) A battle was imminent in which humanity would shortly reach a new level: ‘With a speed unrecognized to those who are involved, modernity races towards the fulfilment of its essence. With this battle of worldviews, modernity first enters the decisive period of its history, and probably the one most capable of enduring.’\(^5\)

Heidegger’s observations were of a general nature, that is, he did not speak of Germany alone. Nonetheless, the feeling of speed and urgency in the nation, of Germany standing on the crossroads of history and of Germans bringing about its fulfilment, is evident in the words of Alfred-Ingemar Berndt (1902–1945), writer in the service of propaganda minister Goebbels:

Never before was a period in the development of the history of our people for every German so rich in experiment as is our time. Never before was the fullness of history so abundant, and never before was the individual so deeply involved in the multitude of daily happenings. Today there is no person in Germany who could stand aside indifferent and untouched, without at least noticing what happens in our country on a daily basis.\(^6\)

This passage was published in 1942 when the murder of the European Jewry was underway and German armies were still victorious on the battlefield, thus

\(^5\) Ibid.